

We crunched the numbers on ten recent 'world's best guitarist' lists. Where are the women?

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Who is currently regarded as the greatest guitarist of all time? It's a hard question to answer but plenty have tried. In the last decade, a plethora of lists have sought to rank our guitar greats, drawing variously on panels of experts, lone "specialists", and public opinion polls.

My [colleagues and I](#) recently [analysed ten such lists](#), which were published on the websites of music journals such as [Rolling Stone](#), [Louder](#) and [Guitar World](#), industry groups such as [WatchMojo](#) and [UDiscover Music](#) and online [guitar](#) communities including [Guitar Habits](#)

Overwhelmingly, we found Jimi Hendrix in the number one spot with Eric Clapton and Jimmy Page often locked in a wrestling match for second ranking. Remarkably, among the 33 guitarists mentioned in the top ten places across these lists, not one was a woman.

By giving each guitarist a score from one to ten for their positions across the lists, we created an assimilated meta-list showing the top ten guitarists of all time (as inferred by industry and popular media discourse). This list contained from one to ten: Hendrix, Page, Clapton, Eddie Van Halen, Robert Johnson, B.B. King, Stevie Ray Vaughan, Chuck Berry, Keith Richards and Dave Gilmour.

Other guitarists mentioned in the lists included Jeff Beck, Queen's Brian May, Carlos Santana, Dimebag Darryl from Pantera, Slash from Guns N' Roses, and Duane Allman.

	GUITARIST	TOTAL SCORE	LISTS COUNT
1	Jimi Hendrix	99	10
2	Jimmy Page	72	9
3	Eric Clapton	62	8
4	Eddie Van Halen	51	8
5	Robert Johnson	31	5
6	B.B. King	26	6
7	Stevie Ray Vaughan	24	5
8	Chuck Berry	23	6
9	Keith Richards	22	5
10	David Gilmour	22	5

Total score is calculated by giving each guitarist a score from 1 to 10 for their position in a list, and then summing across all lists (ie. if the guitarist was ranked 1st in one list, they would be given a score of 10 for that list). List count is the number of top ten lists the guitarist is featured in (out of 10). Credit: The Conversation

Joni Mitchell was the highest ranking female in any of the lists at twelfth spot on the [PurpleClover](#) ranking. But where were female blues legends Bonnie Raitt (who scraped in at 89 on the Rolling Stone list) or multiple Grammy nominee [Susan Tedeschi](#)? Where is [Orianthi](#), a young Australian guitarist who shared a stage with Michael Jackson and continues to tour the world with other major artists? Why are women

being written out of the canon in this way?

The author of the [UDiscoverMusic article](#) wrote: "Believe us when we say, women guitar players are in short supply on these lists, and as much as we love Susan Tedeschi, Bonnie Raitt and [Chantel McGregor](#), to name just three, they just did not make the grade."

But are talented women guitarists really in such short supply?

Guitar wielding female rock legends certainly exist. Think of Joan Jett, Melissa Etheridge, Tracy Chapman and the genre defying St. Vincent. Consider the American virtuosos [Nita Strauss](#) and [Jennifer Batten](#), renowned freelance guitarists who have performed respectively with Alice Cooper and Michael Jackson. (Batten played lead guitar on Michael Jackson's Bad, Dangerous and HIStory world tours).

Young female guitarists are out there in large numbers around the world, some having developed impressive on-line followings, including Swiss fingerstyle artist Gabriella Quevedo and French rock virtuoso [Tina S.](#)

A recent [study by Fender](#) suggested that 50% of new guitar players are women; Guitar World magazine [cited the influence of Taylor Swift](#) as the reason young girls are taking up the instrument.

Is part of the problem here the age and gender of the people who compile these canonical lists? There is also a bias towards certain musical genres. All the guitarists in the top ten positions on the lists are rock or blues players: there are no jazz, classical or world music guitarists. There is also an Anglo-American monopoly – no Australian made it to any of the top tens, not even AC DC's Angus Young – and the youngest guitarist on the meta-list is baby boomer Eddie Van Halen.

Is the guitar hero a creation of the 1960s and 70s and therefore

outdated? Do we need a new perspective on guitar godliness? Do these lists perpetuate the idea that only men of a certain age can be "greats" in these genres?

Our study suggests online guitar community discourse is simply granting more exposure to already venerated guitar heroes. What role music education has had, or will have, on this is unclear. When I called for students of contemporary guitar to participate in my research project, currently in progress at the University of Tasmania, on the influence of tertiary music education in Australia, 95% of respondents were male. (Of course this may say more about who responds to surveys than the gender balance of university contemporary music courses.)

But given that plenty of young people are learning guitar, one wonders if music teachers are teaching their favourite music to the next generation—and thus replicating old ideas of the canon.

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