

Creating Positive Change for Women in Music

An Interview with Michelle Arkuski, Executive Director, She Is The Music

EDITORS' NOTE Michelle Arkuski is Executive Director for She Is The Music (SITM), a global nonprofit that is increasing the number of women working in music – songwriters, engineers, producers, artists and industry professionals. She oversees the entirety of SITM's strategy, growth, global initiatives, community development and chapter/committee operations. Over the past year, she has led SITM in making historic strides: executing a groundbreaking all-



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women writing camp in Asia with UMP China – SITM's first non-U.S. writing camp; launching its first U.K. camp to mentor women producers, "Next Up Producer", with Fred and Kamille; launching its first virtual mentorship program called "Connect Together"; launching SITM's first-ever scholarship program in partnership with Blackbird Academy Studios for women studying live/studio sound; launching *She Is The Producer*, a tutorial series focused on women in engineering/producing; helping spearhead SITM's first virtual songwriting camp ever – during quarantine – with Shakira, Flo Milli, Normani; and countless other major efforts. Arkuski began her career in philanthropy working at Stand Up To Cancer with the Digital Marketing team where she worked on campaigns with high-profile celebrities such as Bradley Cooper, Chris Evans, and Katie Couric, creating social copy and media for major events and TV integrations. She later went on to support Communications and Fund Development at Entertainment Industry Foundation where she worked with celebrity-led outreach projects including the Charlize Theron Africa Outreach Project, Panic At The Disco's Highest Hopes Foundation, Jennifer Hudson's Julian D. King Gift Foundation, and more. Co-founded in 2018, SITM is comprised of three key pillars: all-women songwriting camps, the largest global database of women working in music, and mentorship programs to foster rising generations of women. The global nonprofit's Board of Directors includes superstar Alicia Keys, Universal Music Publishing Group Chairman and CEO Jody Gerson, Grammy Award-winning producer and engineer Ann Mincieli, Co-Head of UTA Music Samantha Kirby Yoh, founder of the USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative Dr. Stacy Smith, and Lionfish Entertainment cofounder and CEO Rebeca Leon.

ORGANIZATION BRIEF *She Is The Music* (sheisthemusic.org) is a nonprofit organization increasing the number of women working in music – songwriters, engineers, producers, artists and industry professionals. It is an independent, global network that operates as a unifying organization for women from across the industry, creating strength and impact on a global scale. As an umbrella nonprofit, it also provides resources and support for women-focused initiatives that are working to create meaningful change – both through its own programs, as well as with external efforts around the world. *She Is The Music* is a fund of the Entertainment Industry Foundation (EIF), a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization. EIF is a Charity Navigator 4 Star Charity that meets all 20 BBB Charity Standards and carries the Candid Platinum Seal of Transparency.

What was the vision for creating She Is The Music and how do you define its mission?

After Dr. Stacy Smith released the USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative study on the gender disparity of women in music, Alicia Keys, Jody Gerson, Sam Kirby Yoh, and Ann Mincieli decided it was time to create change in the music industry. They founded She Is The Music with the vision of creating inclusivity, opportunity and equality for women in music. She Is The Music's mission is to increase the number of women in music – songwriters, producers/engineers, artists, industry professionals – and to develop the next generation of women in music.

Will you provide an overview of She Is The Music's programs?

She Is The Music focuses on three key pillars to create impact. These three pillars include the largest global database of women in music (both creatives and executives), mentorship programs, and our global all-female songwriting camps that connect female engineers, writers, and producers allowing them to collaborate in the studio. We're getting ready to launch our third annual virtual mentorship program, Connect TogetHER, which pairs industry professionals with women in our community for a

10 week, one on one program that covers 11 different categories of the music industry. We also have other programs including a virtual production tutorial series called *She Is The Producer* and *She Is U*, a college ambassador program in our chapter cities – Los Angeles, New York, Nashville, Chicago, Miami, and Atlanta.

What are the keys to driving impact in the effort to increase the number of women working in music?

Education and hiring are key components of driving impact in the effort to increase the number of women working in music. You can't be what you can't see. There are still women who aren't aware of all the different opportunities and possibilities in the industry that are available to them. Our mentorship programs, panels, workshops, and tutorials are really geared to equipping women with the knowledge to pursue and succeed in these different facets of the business. Our database is also a great resource for companies and women to find other like-minded women to hire and engage with. We always hear the famous line, "but I don't know any female producers and engineers." Our database and our *She Is The Music* community really puts that excuse to rest.

How is She Is The Music focused on providing mentorship to the next generation of women leaders in music?

I briefly touched on this earlier, but mentorship is itself one of our three key pillars to create lasting impact. Our mentorship committee has developed an array of programming that is free and available to anyone of interest. In addition to our virtual mentorship program, Connect TogetHER, we have partnered with Blackbird Academy Studios to provide full-ride scholarships to four women for Live Sound and Studio Engineering over a six-month period in Nashville. We have a YouTube series called *Music Business Basics* that breaks down the fundamentals of different parts of the industry with leaders in those key areas. We also have our College Ambassadors that have full access to SITM resources on their campuses to encourage more awareness about the inequity in music and to drive internal panels, speaking engagements and events with other women interested in music.

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How did She Is The Music adapt the way it works to address the challenges caused by the global pandemic?

The pandemic really allowed us to expand our reach outside of in-person events and it’s actually the reason why our virtual mentorship program, Connect TogetHER, was born. One of the hardest things about this time was the lack of opportunity. Internships didn’t exist at all, or they existed in very few numbers. The job market obviously wasn’t ideal. We looked at all of these students and recent graduates and thought, “What opportunities are they getting right now?” The pandemic really allowed us to connect people from all over the world. We had artists like Syd, Big Freedia and Mickey Guyton

paired with mentees from Guatemala, the United Kingdom, Mexico, and Australia. We also did our first virtual songwriting camp, in partnership with RCA Records and Unknown Music Publishing, in 12 different time zones over a span of four days. We received text messages from writers saying, “Never would we have had the chance to work together if we didn’t do something virtually.” It was pretty incredible.

How critical are metrics to measure the impact of She Is The Music’s initiatives?

We began to measure the percentage of women songwriters working on songs in the Billboard Hot 100 Year End Charts, and we have seen slight progress for women.

From 2017 to 2019, the percentage increased from 11.6 percent to 14.4 percent. While not significant, this is a sign that there may be greater opportunities for women songwriters of popular music. The percentage fell to 12.9 percent in 2020 which indicates that these gains are difficult to sustain. We did, however, see growth for women songwriting nominees at the Grammy Awards. In 2017, women comprised 14.3 percent of nominees whereas in 2021 it was 44.8 percent. Additional research is still needed to understand whether women songwriters have made progress in specific genres, or in working with both major and independent publishers, but we’re also seeing more women in leading executive positions which is another positive sign.

How do you define success for She Is The Music’s work?

At the very minimum, She Is The Music is already succeeding by creating awareness about the gender gap in music. More specifically, we’re able to point to more and more women who have gone through our programs, found their first job in music through She Is The Music initiatives, landed their first song placement, or produced in a studio full of other women for the first time. Those are the successes that define us. We are so proud of the work we’re doing to create positive change for women in music.

Did you always know that you were attracted to the nonprofit arena and what excited you about the opportunity to lead She Is The Music?

I have always been passionate about philanthropy, but it wasn’t until my first job as a Digital Marketing Assistant at Stand Up To Cancer that I realized it was a career path I loved and could actually pursue. I was particularly excited about leading She Is The Music because at its inception and earliest days, I saw the support and enthusiasm of so many women with important and demanding full-time jobs in music who were donating their time and effort to creating change in the industry. To be honest, I think that is still one of the most powerful and separating factors of She Is The Music and other women’s organizations – our community and breadth of women in the industry is unstoppable. ●



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.@ShelsTheMusic kicked off the year with a songwriting camp hosted by Cyndi Lauper. Then COVID-19 hit, forcing exec. dir. Michelle Arkuski to shift strategy.



How She Is The Music Persisted Through 2020
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