Women push for equality, and quality, in country music

By Kristin M. Hall, Associated Press
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NASHVILLE — Leslie Fram started seeing the problems that women were facing in country music when she came to Nashville four years ago to lead CMT's music strategy division.

A former rock radio programmer, she immersed herself in the songwriter community and was blown away when she heard Brandy Clark performing at the tiny Bluebird Cafe. Grammy-nominated Clark, an artist who has penned hits for Miranda Lambert and Kacey Musgraves, was not being played on country radio.

"That was an eye opener for me," Fram said. "There were artists that were too country for country radio."

Frustrated by a decline in the number of female artists and tired of the party song cycle on radio, women are trying to take back the microphone and pushing for quality — and equality — in country music.

While country music radio has historically been male-dominated, the issue about the lack of women getting air time picked up steam this spring when radio consultant Keith Hill said country stations that want better ratings should play fewer female artists.
Hill also referred to women as the "tomatoes" of country radio's salad, with male artists like Luke Bryan and Blake Shelton being the leafy greens. That analogy solidified fears that female artists were getting systematically shut out of commercial radio, but Hill defends his argument by saying he is simply giving listeners what they want to hear.

"You're not going to get equality until the behavior of the audience changes," Hill said by phone Monday.

The industry publication, Country Aircheck, reported that the percentage of female-voiced singles, which includes bands and solo artists, in the annual top 100 country songs fell from a high of 38 percent in 1998 to just 18 percent in 2014.

Only three songs with female voices are in this week's Top 25 of Billboard's Hot country songs chart, with Little Big Town's "Girl Crush," Cam's "Burning House" and Maddie & Tae's "Fly."

"Girl Crush" and Carrie Underwood's "Something In the Water" are the only women-led songs to hit No. 1 this year.

"My worry is, is there a place for something like 'The House That Built Me'?" Fram said of Lambert's Grammy Award-winning hit song. "Would that see the light of day now?"

Luke Bryan, the reigning entertainer of the year at the CMA and ACM Awards, said that the country music community needs to take a deeper look at why there's a lack on women on the radio.

"The music industry can get real, real busy and fast-paced and you look up, and you realize, 'Man, there isn't a female artist per se in the Top 10 or even in the Top 20 right now, and there was only one or two that broke in the mix,'" he said. "I think it's about the ACMs and CMAs even forming some maybe committees to talk about it and see what's going on in the radio community — it's a whole industry situation to sit down and determine what can be done better to promote women in the format."

Those conversations are starting to happen.
CMT's Fram, along with Rounder Records Vice President Tracy Gershon and music columnist Beverly Keel, created a collective of women in the music industry called Change The Conversation that works to mentor and educate each other.

"Change The Conversation is not that you need to play every female artist that is out there ... for us, it's about the best song wins," Fram said.

Last month Lambert held a charity show that featured her singing with the genre's best songwriters, male and female, to raise funds for a new scholarship for women musicians and artists. But for female artists who are still waiting for their opportunity, the only thing they can do is focus on the music.

Rising duo Maddie & Tae came out swinging when they skewered male country artists' portrayal of women on "Girl In A Country Song," which hit gold status and peaked at No. 3 on the country charts. Now on tour with Dierks Bentley, the pair said they have had to prove to the fans that they belong on that stage with the men.

"We are new to the scene and we are females, but I feel like we can live up to the expectations," said 19-year-old Tae Dye. "We can hang with the guys."

Ashley Monroe, whose new album debuted at No. 2 for country albums behind Alan Jackson, has not been able to get a top radio hit on her own, unless she's singing with Blake Shelton, as she's done twice with "Lonely Tonight" and "Boys 'Round Here."

"I make sure everything I sing I believe in ... If it gets on radio, that's amazing. That's millions of people that are hearing it," she said. "And if it doesn't, then I am just going to work extra hard to find other ways to get heard."

Country music veteran Vince Gill, who co-produced Monroe's album and has seen trends come and go in the format for decades, said the real problem is the lack of diversity as the overall music industry has shrunk with declining record sales.

"They feel like there's such a glut of male artists and that's true, but they play about a fourth as many records as they used to," Gill said. "And so if there's only two or three females, there's only 15 or 20 slots available on radio. And there used to be 60."