**Warrior Women**

**Hannah Snell – Episode 3 Transcript**

**Anna Ward:** This series was made possible with the National Lottery Heritage Fund. With thanks to National Lottery players.

Just a warning before we start, this episode contains references to child loss.

Welcome to Warrior Women. A Royal Armouries series, where we tell the stories of women throughout history and explore what it really means to be a ‘warrior.’ We delve into the lives of some complex characters, bust some myths and find out what weapons these women would have wielded.

I’m your host, Anna Ward, from the exhibitions team at the Royal Armouries.

Do you recognise any of these descriptions?

A brave and capable soldier.

A lower-class women turned common soldier, ... something of a ‘Brown Bess’.

'Young Amazon'.

One of Britain’s best known female soldiers

Amongst the first to face fire in the battle for Pondicherry...and endured several injuries.

‘Miss Molly Gray’, ‘Hearty Jimmy’.

An eighteenth-century rule breaker

One of the most intriguing female figures in military history – not least because she might be considered to be the first woman ever to join the Royal Marines.

In today’s episode we’re going to be talking about Hannah Snell.

If you don’t already know the story of Hannah Snell, it’s pretty easy to find. Snell was a woman who, in 1745, disguised herself as a man and joined the army, then the Royal Marines.

According to her biography, she fought the Jacobites and later fought in colonial conflicts in India. She was strapped to a gate and whipped, injured in her legs and groin, at sea and fighting with her Royal Marine regiment for around two years and through all this went undiscovered.

She received a pension for her service and was buried at the Royal Hospital in Chelsea – a place for veterans only.  It’s an amazing, shocking, fantastical, unbelievable story and....there’s probably a reason for that.

Now don't be too disappointed...she did exist, and she had an incredible life by any measure. She probably did serve as a Royal Marine, but maybe just maybe, there are a few bits of fabrication in her story here and there, a few exaggerations, possibly a bit of artistic license employed by her biographer for various reasons (it’s all about the money money money). We’re going to go through her story and see what’s what.

We have an amazing account of Snell’s adventures in the shape of a biography written when she was still alive and endorsed by her. What better source material could you get than a contemporary biography, right?

Well…. Robert Walker the man who committed Snell’s story to paper also happened to be a publisher trying to keep his business afloat. Walker needed his stories to sell, so it’s easy to understand his temptation to spice things up a bit.

Walker might have seen in Snell’s story a perfect recipe for success -she embodied a tale already well known from folk ballads - woman dresses as man and fights for her country – and she’d done it during a time when stories about female soldiers were especially popular, because they could be used as a way to shame elite men, who were being accused of unmanliness.

England had had a succession of aristocratic male prime ministers who hadn’t exactly covered themselves in glory in the military arena. Britain’s intervention into the War of Austrian Succession had been, in many people’s eyes, a bit lacklustre; and although the Jacobite Rebellion had been defeated, it had still shown up the English troops as tired and uninspiring compared to the heroic Bonnie Prince Charlie.

In response, many people in England started pointing to stories of warrior women as a way of saying, ‘Come on, lads! If a woman can do it, why can’t you?’

So, Robert Walker used Hannah Snell to create a little political commentary or mockery and come up with a best seller. Who cares if it’s all true, right?

So, what shall we talk about first?  The bits we believe or the bits we don’t…

Perhaps the inaccuracies…

When researching this episode, I consulted with the curators and collection of the Royal Armouries – what weapons would soldiers have carried during the Jacobite Rebellion? Guns?  Swords?

Well…turns out it doesn’t really matter, because Snell wasn’t there. Her biography goes into tantalising detail, naming the regiment she joined and their location – Captain Miller’s company, who marched from Coventry to Carlisle to join the rest of John Guise’s regiment, the 6th Regiment of Foot – but even Walker doesn’t claim she fought the Jacobites – according to the biography, the rebels had been chased back into Scotland by the time Snell arrived in Carlisle.

Matthew Stephens, who wrote a book on Snell, goes further to demonstrate that the early part of her story is almost certainly fiction by comparing historical records to the story spun by Walker. Stephens found an important document – the baptism record of Snell’s baby daughter, Susannah.

It shows that Snell was in fact pregnant at the time Walker claims she was in Carlisle. Other records show that John Guise’s regiment were not in England, but in Scotland when Snell supposedly joined.

Here’s Matthew Stephens to tell us more.

**Matthew Stephens:** There’s this whole section of the book, where she’s supposedly dressed as James Grey and then she was actually pressed into the army, it wasn’t even a choice and then she was involved in a whole load of shenanigans and crazy, extreme stories really and I basically discovered that she can’t have done any of it because she was back in London having a child.

She had a daughter who lived for six months and then she died, so the whole period she was supposed to be fighting…Bonnie Prince Charlie was really impossible. And even the story of where they were situated doesn’t hang together either, actually factually, there’s a whole load of stuff that doesn’t work, and what is very interesting if that when the story first was revealed in June 1750, they hardly ever mention the army, it mentioned very briefly but doesn’t really exist, it’s only the Marines they talk about.

So, yes, basically, it really undermined parts of her story, but much of her story is true, that’s what’s interesting.

**Anna Ward:** Thanks Matthew. And obviously this means she also didn’t maintain her disguise while being strapped to a gate and whipped either…sorry to burst that bubble. This was supposed to have happened in Carlisle, at Carlisle Castle no less, supposedly because Snell refused to help her Sergeant seduce a young woman.

How very romantic and not at all improbable. I mean, I for one was totally taken in by the claim that she hid her breasts during this incident because they were small…hmm….

This part of the biography has given many people reason to claim that Snell was a total fraud and not a Warrior Woman at all. Which is a shame, but I bet it helped to sell those books.

So maybe let’s talk about some of the bits of Snell’s story that we do believe…

We believe that a woman, by the name of Hannah Snell disguised herself as a man and assumed the name of James Gray. Records show that James Gray, a private in the marines, joined the Swallow – a Royal Navy sloop in October 1747.

Backed by records, we know that Snell’s baby had died by this time, she was buried in January 1747. According to the story, Snell’s husband had left her before the baby was even born, taking all of her possessions with him.

Now, noone really knows why Snell chose to join the marines. Her biographer, and the facts I just listed about losing her daughter, husband and all her possessions could imply that she simply had nothing to lose, but to a modern eye, this doesn’t really feel like reason enough.

Safe to say that both Matthew Stephens and I agree that the expanded reason provided by Walker is plain stupid – my words, not Stephens’, he goes with ‘less than convincing’…that is that Snell dressed as a man and joined up to ‘roam in quest of the Man who, without Reason, had injured her so much’ – her husband. He claims she joined up to chase down her lying cheating, thief of a husband…and show him that she could be a better man.

**Matthew Stephens:** The reason she says she dresses up as James Gray just doesn’t really hang very well, it’s a strange story that she says it was because had a, basically a horrible husband who dumped her when she was pregnant and she’s now chasing him – why would you do that?  Why would you risk your whole existence to do that?

**Anna Ward:** Hmm…. now Snell wasn’t the first woman to masquerade as a man – far from it – and there are several tales of women doing it in order to find their husband. Some are from folk songs, and some are documented as true stories.

For example, Christian Davies, who became known as Mother Ross, disguised herself in 1693 and joined the British Army in search of her husband who had been pressed into serving.

The folk song ‘The Female Lieutenant’ which is also sometimes called ‘Faithless Lover Rewarded’ tells of a woman, named in some versions as Sarah Gray (weird similarity…no?) who dresses as a man to find her lover who had enlisted.

Unfortunately, when she finds him, he’s about to marry someone else. So…she shoots him…sad times. The song was printed in 1811 so likely to have been sung much earlier.

Thank you to Alice Jones, who recorded a version of this song especially for this episode which we’ll play for you now.

[Music - Alice Jones sings ‘The Female Lieutenant’]

Another seventeenth century folk song tells the story of Polly Oliver:

One night as Polly Oliver lay musing in bed   
A comical fancy came into her head:   
Neither father nor mother shall make me false prove   
I’ll list for a valiant soldier and follow my true love.

So early next morning Polly Oliver arose   
And dressed herself up in a suit of men’s clothes.   
Short jacket and trousers and a sword by her side,   
On her father’s black gelding away she did ride.

Polly's story ends less violently than Sarah Gray’s - all involved are very amused by her actions and she finds and marries her Captain.

It’s hard to see what benefit Hannah Snell would gain from finding her husband, and signing up to fight seems a huge risk to take if her motivation was revenge.

So, if this was a story spun by Walker and Snell to make the biography more digestible, why else might she have gone? Perhaps she was very patriotic and wanted to fight for her country. England were at war with France at the time.

Perhaps it was a way to make money, perhaps she was gay and wanted a way to find a same sex partner, perhaps she just wanted to live somewhere other than her sister’s house, see the world, escape anyone she might owe money to…

I guess we’ll never know what drove her, but perhaps we can see now why Walker chose to spin the story towards her going after her husband – it was a simple, recognisable and acceptable tale – much easier for folk in the 1700s to accept than anything that might suggest that Snell was a feminist – for example, or gay.

So, we think she did join the marines and served on board the Swallow. The crew of the Swallow were sent to Pondicherry in India. This was where Snell, disguised as James Gray, more than likely actually saw action.

OK – brace yourself for a bit of complicated history - Pondicherry was a town on the west coast of India, it had been colonised and was under French control in 1748 when Snell arrived nearby.  In fact, it was the seat of the French government in India.

England saw an opportunity to take more of India as the neighbours became the enemy. And, no, before you say it neither the French nor the English stopped to ask what the Indian people thought about all this.

They lay siege to Pondicherry in an attempt to control the Madras region. Snell was part of the end game of this particular conflict. She formed part of the reinforcements that were sent after the French had secured some significant victories over the English.

Although they made some progress, the English were forced to withdraw when the monsoon season set in. Soon after, the Austrian Wars of Succession were ended with a peace agreement, so the conflicts in India also stopped.  Madras went to the British, but further wars would follow.

Phew - Back to Snell.

Matthew Stephens paints a picture of Pondicherry in his book about Snell, taken from an account by James Miller – one of Snell’s fellow soldiers,

…the Rains have been so great that our Trenches is filled with water and mud, being almost impassable, being so deep that it takes us to the waist, and we are obliged to stand in them twenty-four hours…

Snell and Walker back this up by saying ‘she stood so deep in water… and go on to say she fired ‘no less than thirty-seven rounds of shot and... received six shot in her right leg and five in the left and...one so dangerous in the groin.’

What is it with Walker and his tendency to take the plausible and make it implausible?

Not only does he claim she was shot but shot 12 times and then he goes on to tell us about Snell removing the musket ball from her own groin in excruciating - and quite sexualised - detail. There’s no evidence at all to suggest this happened.

So, what do we know?

We have historic record to show that the battle of Pondicherry happened, and that Snell’s unit was involved. We know – because we are the National Museum of Arms and Armour - that she would have been armed with a Land Service Musket, nicknamed ‘Brown Bess’.

Brown Bess is a flintlock smoothbore musket. It would have weighed around five kilograms, that’s about the same as bowling ball, it had a barrel that was over a metre long – 46 inches in old money.

It fired lead balls, or shot, about 17 millimetres in diameter, at a rate of about three rounds per minute with a complicated reloading process between each shot.

For each of her 37 shots, Hannah would have had to stand up, tear open a paper cartridge, pour gunpowder into the pan and the barrel of her musket, remove the ram rod, ram a bullet and the paper cartridge down the barrel, replace the ram rod, cock and fire – and repeat. 37 times....

She would have been trained to carry out this series of actions until she could do it without thinking and later in life, she would demonstrate this particular skill as part of her stage show. The full military drill of the period actually included nearly 60 different movements. This would have been what Snell demonstrated in the theatres, but it’s unlikely she went through ALL 60 motions when under fire.

It’s safe to assume that not many women of the time could demonstrate military drill – so it was a great way of authenticating her story, although we know it only proved she was trained to load and fire her weapon – we only have her word, and Walker’s, to say she actually did.

She may well have fired it, she may well have fired it 37 times (although it’s a very specific figure...) but to claim she was wounded by shot in 12 different places, including her groin and not only survived but managed to conceal her gender throughout – oh come on...

I asked an expert – Jonathan, our Keeper of Firearms and Artillery if it was likely that Snell could have survived such injuries.  His take was no. No, she couldn’t.

**Jonathan Ferguson:** If as it appears, Snell is shot six times and these are presumably going to be musket balls, you're looking at a .69 of an inch great big chunky bits of lead smacking into your body. One of those is enough to put just about everybody out of the fight. Maybe if it was a shot in a limb, you'd be able to fight on. It depended very much on whether it was a hit in bone. Actually, if it if it's soft tissue, it would be very, very painful and potentially fatal, but you might be able to carry on fighting.

If a musket ball struck say a leg bone. It's going to shatter. We've, we've, we've, demonstrated that, in a, in a documentary with Sean Bean years ago. The bone just shatters. If it's a shot in the head, you all, it's lights out. You're done. And. Yeah, it's six shots, assuming they’re musket balls.

That's. I mean, I'm sure people sustained that many injuries, but they would not have been very capable of fighting afterwards and they would almost certainly be dead. And we're looking at other wounds on top of that, presumably edged weapons, maybe explosive. We don't know what they are, but we're… yeah, she would be in in an extremely bad way. I think she would struggle to recover.

Infection is a huge problem. So, any broken bone, limb bone is probably an amputation. So, then you've got the infection of the bullet dragging dirt and dirty uniform, and into the God knows what else into the wound, which has to be properly cleaned, which wasn't, wasn't possible on a battlefield.

And then you've got to if it's amputation, obviously you're making a much bigger wound in order to save the person's life, potentially. And it's another sort of dice roll as to whether you survive the infection that might well set in from that. So yeah, one musket ball injury is serious business, six is almost, almost unbelievable. I never say never.

 I've read and heard some stories of people surviving absolutely horrific injuries. But whether you would be on your feet fighting, I don't think so.

**Anna Ward:** Thanks Jonathan. We also have the records. The official ships’ musters show that after the siege of Pondicherry, James Gray, fit and well, was transferred to another ship, the Eltham and set sail for Bombay. This is in direct contrast to Walker and Snell’s account which claims she lay in hospital for three months at this time recovering from her wounds.

So, we think she was there – but not that she was injured – certainly not in the way Walker claims. This fib is an important one however, and it was very important to Snell that it was believed – according to Matthew Stephens - Snell would not have been entitled to a military pension without wounds.

**Matthew Stephens:** The wounds are a really big part of the story...I guess they’re spectacular, they’re exciting, you know, the story is that she survived severe wounds by being shot in battle, and that she then went to hospital and had to have these wounds, you know, she had to conceal the wounds.

I mean they highlight obviously her bravery, both on the battlefield but also, I guess in surviving them and recovery. They’re titillating because one of the bullets supposedly hit her groin and I guess everyone thought oh that’s exciting, that’s funny. The real reason I think is that she needs the wounds to get the pension, or they thought that’s what she needed – so you did have to be wounded if you were going to get any sort of pension when you got back.

So that, I think other than a good story, I think it seems to be strategic, now I don’t know whether that’s her, or whether it’s whoever wrote the biography…

**Anna Ward:** Makes you question the whole thing, hey?

Well, let’s not forget that we’re here to tell the truth (as far as we can figure it) and to explore an amazing warrior woman, so what else can we tell you?

How about this? Hannah Snell is credited with popularising the nickname ‘Brown Bess’ for the British Soldiers’ musket. The term started to be used in around 1730 and remained in use right up until around the late 1840s.

Snell’s biography is one of the earliest written references to the nickname – she says, ‘if you are afraid of the sea, take Brown Bess on your shoulders and march through Germany as I have done.’

Although she didn’t invent the nickname, she certainly helped spread its use.

Here’s Jonathan Ferguson to tell you more.

**Jonathan Ferguson:** Hannah Snell is credited with, using and popularising the name Brown Bess. By me, largely…. She used it in a big speech that was recorded in the newspapers, which is how I came across her, as a as a historical figure. I was, shamefully unaware of her existence prior to that. And it was this, I came to this sort of conclusion that she is she is a brown Bess carrying a brown Bess.

And that might sound weird, but so this term, Brown Bess is this generic, it is potentially quite insulting, really, but it's… brown used to mean ordinary work a day, probably from, the tanning of white skin in the sun. People who work for a living, would get tanned skin. So you were brown. You were ordinary.

And then Bess is, a bit like, kind of out of fashion now, but Australians would call women Sheila. It's that kind of, sort of. Oh, Bess. Queen Bess, you know, that was a sort of diminutive name for someone very powerful. But it was a very common nickname for, that much less powerful women.

So, the two together are kind of absolutely ordinary, not worth bothering with almost, or at least something very common and in a more positive way, something that you can depend upon, I think is, is the idea.

And so, the nickname springs up at some point in the early eighteenth century of the musket being brown like, literally brown. Wood is brown and ordinary and mass-produced and standard issue, bog standard and Bess, because we like to feminise technology for some reason especially weapons and then this whole tradition carries on.

So Brown Bess is used all the way through to the 1840s and then falls away because it's replaced by this new technology, the infantry rifle or the minie rifle.

But the idea that we call weapons by women's names or refer to them as euphemistic women carries on. And there's a there's a phrase in Dutch, my, my gun is my wife.

**Anna Ward:** The Royal Armouries has several examples of Brown Bess. If you’d like to come and see them, they are displayed in Leeds in the War Gallery, Self Defence Gallery and Hall of Steel. We also have examples at the Tower of London, on the second floor and we even have some out on loan to Cornwall’s Regimental Museum, in Bodmin Keep, and the Brigade of Guards Museum, in London.

So, what happened after Snell was released from hospital? In short, she begins her journey home. There are no more tales of conflict, just service aboard the Eltham. Well, I say just…the journey took around eight months, leaving India in October 1749 and arriving in London in May 1750.  For all this time - and for all the time aboard before she reached India - we are asked to believe that Snell remained undiscovered as a woman.

Walker didn’t go into details about how Snell got away with it. He mentions her being taunted at one stage, being called Miss Molly Gray, because she didn’t have a beard. Apparently, Snell’s reaction was to ‘return the compliment not only with a smile and an oath but with a challenge of the best sailor of them all’ - whatever that means - He was sure the taunts were ‘only thrown out in jest’.

Walker basically claims that every time Snell was challenged, she manned up and everybody stopped asking, she ‘played the part of the boon companion so naturally and so far distant from what bore the least appearance to effeminacy ... that the name of Miss Molly was ... perfectly buried in oblivion.’

Ironically, he also claims, with a completely straight face, that Snell ‘became a favourite amongst them all ... by her knack in cookery and her care in washing their linen and mending their shirts.’

Very manly.

He’s not so crude as to go into details about how she went to the toilet, or washed, or dealt with her periods, so we can only guess.

Suzanne Stark who wrote ‘Female Tars: Women aboard ship in the age of sail’ claims it would have been possible for Snell to blend into the crowd on board. According to Stark, although everyone was living in cramped conditions, they avoided paying too much attention to someone who might, for example, be bleeding. After all, it might be a disease, that could be catching.

Urgh – stay away!

Stark also claims that Snell could have just not washed (ok...?), maybe her periods had stopped due to conditions on board... (ok...) and maybe she just waited until no one was about to use the toilet – hmm, perhaps that’s a bit simplistic.

Matthew Stephens found evidence of a woman who maintained her disguise as a man by peeing through a leather-covered horn strapped to her body – an early she-wee perhaps. More believable?

There are lots of examples of women remaining on board ships undiscovered for long periods of time – we won’t go into them here, but I really liked these examples of how some of them were caught, they’re taken from a paper about Body and Gender written by Yoriko Ishida in 2018:

“Watched by a boatswain” in the case of Anne Jans; “seen sleeping nude in her bunk by the cook’s mate” in the case of Annetje Barents; “detected by a sailor while pissing, drunk” in the case of Claus Bernsen.

Stay away from the booze, kids.

So, Hannah Snell returns home, and we get to the big reveal – James Gray was in fact a woman.

The story goes that in May 1750 Snell and her shipmates landed in Portsmouth, they took some time to celebrate their return, then travelled to London to collect their wages. With money in their pockets, on payday, the 9 June, they gathered in a local Tavern, and it was here that Snell made her announcement.

Snell was keen to have as many witnesses as possible, she was already thinking of how she could make the most of her situation, as in, how could she make a profit? Perhaps this takes us right back to her reasons for the whole charade, perhaps it was always all about the money.

Within weeks of her coming out, Snell became news. The Whitehall Evening Post broke a version of the story after Snell had approached the Captain-General of the British Army, the Duke of Cumberland, asking for financial recompense for the injuries she had suffered while serving.

Soon after that, Snell had signed a deal with Walker. We don’t know who approached who, but the document they both signed was used to advertise the upcoming book which was released on the 3 July. A longer, serialised version of the story was released a couple of weeks later, and the legend of Snell was created.

For a while, Snell was also, made. Four portraits of her were being sold on the streets, advertisements for her book appeared in newspapers and magazines across England and if this wasn’t enough, Snell herself began to make live appearances at the New Wells theatre.

According to Walker, she negotiated a weekly salary ‘which is such a stipend that not one woman in ten thousand of her low extraction and want of literature could, by any act of industry (how laborious soever) with any possibility procure.’

Snell was one of several acts that made up an evening’s entertainment. She sang (not well) and performed military drill.

It seems after having the courage to take control of her life and forging her fortune by donning a disguise and setting off for adventure, Hannah Snell and her story were now up for grabs. Some people wanted to use her to shame English men into military bravado; some wanted to sexualise her; some wanted to use her to make money.

Did she mind? Maybe, or maybe since she couldn’t beat them, she chose to join them, and on the stage of the New Wells Theatre she gave the people of London what they wanted: not a real warrior woman, but a performance of one.

Although still talked about today, Snell’s fame in her lifetime was short lived. With the exception of a few more performances, it seems she never dressed as a man or soldiered again. We know she married twice and had two children, she still has living decedents, and we were lucky enough to interview one of them.

**Amanda:** I am Amanda and Hannah was my sixth-generation Grandmother.

Well at first, I was really surprised, being related to Hannah, it’s not often you’re lucky enough to find somebody famous sitting in your family tree, so yeah surprised, then for it to be someone like Hannah who’s clearly this amazing, brave strong woman, then yeah, I guess, it was, you start to feel quite proud, it’s quite an inspiring story.

Sometimes in life when you’re presented with something and you think, ooh you know, I can’t do that, or I won’t be able to do this, I think it throws at you this ability to be braver, when life throws stuff at you. I mean just reading and being part of her continuing journey really, this continuing story.

I was asked to unveil a plaque in Worcester commemorating her birthplace, I was initially like, ohh I can’t do that, I was like, yes you can!  Hannah did this, this and this, you can go and do things like that – and I think that becomes part of the inspiration of her life too.

And I know it was the same for my late Mum, you know when she was researching and she got involved with the research with Matthew Stephens on his biography of Hannah and as it was published she was asked to go on Woman’s Hour and I know that was such a nerve wracking experience but again I think she sort of looked at the story and thought I can be brave, I can do this, I can continue this journey too, so she kind of smoothed our paths a little bit as well, she’s become part of who we are I guess.

**Anna Ward:** Hannah Snell died in February 1792 and became the second woman ever to be buried at the Royal Chelsea Hospital.

If you’ve enjoyed this episode of Warrior Women, there are more available in the series.

The Hannah Snell Episode was written using the following sources:

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Jonathan Ferguson, ‘Trusty Bess’: the Definitive Origins and History of the term 'Brown Bess', Arms & Armour, 14:1, 49-69, 2017

### Julie Wheelwright, ‘Snell, Hannah [alias James Gray] (1723–1792)’, Oxford Dictionary National Biography <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/25975>

### Scarlet Bowen, ‘“The Real Soul of a Man in her Breast”: Popular Opposition and British Nationalism in Memoirs of Female Soldiers, 1740 – 1750’, Eighteenth-Century Life Volume 28, Number 3, Fall 2004 (20-44)

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### Yoriko Ishida, ‘Body and Gender Expressed by the Cross-Dressing of Hannah Snell in Eighteenth-century Naval Culture in The Female Soldier; Or, the Surprising Life and Adventures of Hannah Snell’, IAFOR Journal of Literature & Librarianship 7. 1 (2018), pp. 77-92

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Georgina Lock and David Worrall, ‘Cross-Dressed Performance at the Theatrical Margins: Hannah Snell, the Manual Exercise, and the New Wells Spa Theater, 1750’, Huntington Library Quarterly, Vol. 77, No. 1 (Spring 2014), pp. 17-36

With special thanks to Alice Jones, folk singer and instrumentalist