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Sweet Nothings

Presentation of Women Musicians in Pop Journalism

Brenda Johnson-Grau

Rock 'n' roll is for men. Real rock 'n' roll is a man's job. . . . I don't want to see no chick's tit banging against a bass.

—Patti Smith

Even though Patti Smith's own career in rock brought her critical acclaim soon after she made the rather uncharitable remark quoted in the epigraph, it shows us that women in rock have had some trouble gaining—or holding onto—respect.[1] The history of rock 'n' roll shows us that the presence of women has been continual and constant, yet the pop press routinely eliminates or underplays the contributions of women musicians. Their presence on the charts or in the clubs is deemed unusual because rock 'n' roll has come to be routinely defined as a naturally male-dominated art form. When female artists' success makes their presence undeniable, their achievements are undermined by reference to their sexual attractiveness and home life or to their (tawdry or passive) means of gaining success. The representation of women musicians continues to focus on their gender.

History of Women in Rock

Here is a list by decade of female artists and groups with female members. Many had careers that spanned several decades; others had one big hit. All these women had a presence in the national media at one time or another.

1950s: Big Mama Thornton, LaVern Baker, Ruth Brown, Etta James, Janis Martin, Georgia Gibbs, Wanda Jackson, Mickey & Sylvia, Chordettes, Estelle Phillips, Shirley and Lee, Teddy Bears, Dodie Stevens, Cordell Jackson, Dee Clark, Annette, Mary Ford, Platters.

1960s: Brenda Lee, Chantels, Little Peggy March, Shangri-Las, Carla Thomas, Mary Wells, Dee Dee Sharp, Marcie Blaine, Doris Troy, Ruby & the Romantics, Barbara Lewis, Angels, Inez Foxx, New Christy Minstrels, Brenda Holloway, Cilla Black, Dixie Cups, We Five, Fontella Bass, Barbara Mason, Shirley Ellis, the Jaynetts, Velvet Underground.

1970s: Carpenters, Freda Payne, Melanie, Delaney & Bonnie & Friends, New Seekers, Honey Cone, Heart, Staples Singers, Betty Wright, Dawn, Climax, Pointer Sisters, Gladys Knight & the Pips, Girlschool, Donna Summer, the Runaways, Deneice Williams, Joan Armatrading, Brides of Funkenstein, X-Ray Spex.

1980s: Jody Watley, the Au Pairs, Area, the Divinyls, Deee-Lite, Eurythmics, Tiffany, Donna Summer, Delta 5, Sheila E., Bow Wow Wow, Siouxsie and the Banshees, Whitney Houston, Grace Jones, Suzanne Vega, Lita Ford, Sheena Easton, Tanita Tikaram, Salt-n-Pepa, Roxanne Shanté, Indigo Girls, Rosie Flores, Sonic Youth, Victoria Williams, Lydia Lunch, Aimee Mann, Sally Timms.

1990s: Amy Grant, the Lunachicks, Vanessa Williams, Elastica, Babes in Toyland, Me'shell Ndege'ocello, Björk, Sheryl Crow, Brandy, L7, Shawn Colvin, Erykah Badu, Meredith Brooks, Monica, Sleater-Kinney, Fiona Apple, the Muffs, Liz Phair, Queen Latifah, Roxanne Shanté, MC Lyte, Yo Yo, Lauryn Hill, Foxy Brown, Da Brat.

2000s: Alicia Keys, Jessica Simpson, Jennifer Lopez, Fluffy, Eve, Poe, Republica, Britney Spears, Sneaker Pimps, Nobby, Three Hour Tour, the Donnas, Dolores O'Riordan, Mystic, Pink, Dido.

By no means exhaustive, the list simply indicates a pattern. During the rock era, there have been lots of women making music and selling lots of records (Dickerson, 1998). Women musicians are not an anomaly or a fluke. They are part of the picture. In most histories of rock and pop, however, they get short shrift. Rock critics and historians of pop music have a tendency to forget things that they dislike or that do not fit their peculiar version of rock 'n' roll authenticity. In a typical example of rewritten history, selective amnesia, and idiosyncratic taste making, *Rock & Roll: An*

Unruly History presents itself as authoritative but finds little room for women. Longtime rock critic and author Robert Palmer has the decency when narrating the early history of rock to mention women, including Janis Martin, LaVern Baker, and Sylvia (of Mickey and). The Supremes, however, do not rate even a picture (the Temptations get six pictures and a heck of a lot more respect) or any copy. The "girl groups" are given a couple of pages but only as an expression of the triumphs of Phil Spector. Pictured with Bill Graham, Janis Joplin is rapidly dismissed: "The media soon singled out [Big Brother and the Holding Company's] vocalist, Janis Joplin, for praise, with predictable results: band splits, chanteuse goes out on her own. As has often been the case throughout rock's history, several less-hyped 'second tier' San Francisco bands have proved especially influential" (1995, 169). (Ask Robert Plant or Ellen Willis about the importance of Janis Joplin and you will get another version of the story.)

While no one would deny the influence and artistry of the Muscle Shoals musicians, Palmer manages to imply, in a brief list of her hits, that Aretha Franklin's own musicianship was negligible in her success. Because Palmer's is a "boy's life with guitar" version of rock history, Patti Smith is lionized, but Linda Ronstadt doesn't even appear (although the Eagles do). Rather than continue this litany of petty offenses, I will just assert that such a history distorts the record by substituting boosterism for scholarship. In such histories, the parameters of rock are frequently redefined—after the fact—to exclude the achievements of women musicians.

Articles from the 1960s in such magazines as *Ebony, Look,* and *Time* document the success of such musicians as the Ronettes, Martha and the Vandellas, and the Supremes. In the June 1965 issue of *Ebony,* an article titled "Supremes Make It Big" describes the Supremes in this way: "Sweet-sounding Detroiters push to top as new rulers of 'rock'; first girl vocal trio to make million-seller record list with three consecutive hits" (80). In another article from *Ebony,* "Ronettes" (November 1966), the success of the Ronettes is celebrated with "Rock 'n' roll girls trio teams up with the Beatles on a whirlwind, 14-city, U.S. entertainment tour" (184). The aspirations of women in rock 'n' roll were also touted in other articles in national magazines. In a *Look* magazine article, "Luvs Story," 2 May 1967, for example, an all-female band called the Luvs is profiled in this way: "Two summers ago, in a car bursting with radio rock, four Greenwich, Conn., high-school juniors decided to get into the band bag. The same decision, with different names and settings but always the same background music, has been made by thousands of teen-agers since the Beatles first plugged into American current" (M14).

Girls and women have always had rock 'n' roll aspirations and rock 'n' roll success. Yet, "of 122 total [Rock and Roll] Hall of Fame members,

just 14 are women or groups that include female members. Similarly, just over 10 percent of the Hall of Fame's list of the 500 most influential rock songs feature women or bands that include women" (Deggans 1996). Why? The answer seems to lie in a curious mythological history that has developed parallel to actual events in the history of rock.

History of the History of Women in Rock

In the late 1960s, as the first generation of rockers saw their children reach the age of consent, "rock 'n' roll" was redefined as "rock" to accommodate a new generation's need to trash the past and define itself. In the process, many successful and influential female artists were derided and marginalized as "girl groups" or simply expunged from the record. Much was made of groupies and the prowess of rock guitarists, and women were excised from the mix. Trouble is, women were continually present—both as aspirants and as successful artists. In the mythology being created, however, they did not belong. Over the years, "women in rock" articles have relentlessly pigeonholed all the many aspiring and successful female musicians (see table 12.1).

In "The Queen Bees," an article in *Newsweek*'s 15 January 1968 issue, no fewer than ten women are listed as singers in current rock bands. Although some of the names will be unfamiliar to even the most knowledgeable archivist, the article establishes that women were a presence in the rock arena. "In the beginning, the rock world was all Adams and no Eves. The Beatles, Rolling Stones, Animals, Dave Clark Five, all as exclusively male as the Viennese Choir Boys. But, today, all that has changed. Ever since that volcano of sound named Mama Cass Elliot erupted, an extraordinary collection of hot and cool contraltos has poured onto the rock stage until, now, the typical rock group resembles a beehive, three or four drones humming about a queen bee" (77). Just eighteen months later, we get this version of rock history in the same magazine:

> Largely, [rock music] has been a world of male groups, of pounding, thunderous music that drowns out the words, which are rarely of moment.
>
> It needed the feminine touch and now it has got it. Lately, spawned in the river of folk and rock music, there has surfaced a new school of talented female troubadours, who not only sing but write their own songs. (Saal 1969, 68)

This article and one entitled "Female Rock" from 1971 repeat the myth that rock has been somehow inhospitable to women:

> Until lately, notable female rock groups have been about as numerous as girl goalies in the National Hockey League.

Table 12.1 Articles/Books on Women in Rock, 1968–1999

Date	Publisher	Title	Artists Included
15 Jan. 1968	*Newsweek*	Queen bees	Cass Elliot, Janis Joplin, Spanky McFarlane. Grace Slick, Linda Ronstadt, Sandi Robinson, Mama Cowsill
14 July 1969	*Newsweek*	The girls—letting go	Joni Mitchell, Lotti Golden, Laura Nyro, Melanie, Elyse Weinberg
12 April 1971	*Time*	Female rock	Joy of Cooking, Pride of Women, Goldflower, Fanny
12 July 1971	*Time*	King as queen?	Carole King, Linda Ronstadt, Rita Coolidge, Carly Simon
1974	Nash Publishing	*Rock 'n roll woman*	Nicole Barclay, Toni Brown, Terry Garthwaite, Claudia Lennear, Maria Muldaur, Bonnie Raitt, Linda Ronstadt, Carly Simon, Grace Slick, Alice Stuart, Wendy Waldman
1978	Tempo Books	*Superwomen of rock*	Debby Boone, Rita Coolidge, Olivia Newton-John, Linda Ronstadt, Stevie Nicks, Carly Simon
21 Jan. 1980	*Time*	Chick singers need not apply	Pat Benatar, Carolyne Mas, Ellen Foley, Ellen Shipley
29 March 1980	*New Musical Express*	Women in rock: Cute, cute, cutesy goodbye	The Passions, the Raincoats, Au Pairs, the Slits
15 April 1982	*Washington Post*	New roles in rock: Girl groups are back & they've got the beat	Go-Go's, Joan Jett, the Waitresses, Girlschool, Angels, Dynettes
1 June 1982	*Mother Jones*	Girls! Live! On stage!	Go-Go's, Siouxsie Sioux, Chrissie Hynde, Patti Smith, Marianne Grace Slick, Debora Iyall, Leslie Woods, Pat Benatar, Joan Armatrading, Viv Albertine, Stevie Nicks, Deborah Harry, Yoko Ono, and others
15 April 1982	*Washington Post*	New roles in rock	Go-Go's
1982	Putnam Press	New women in rock	68 musicians, including Gaye Advert, Pauline Black, Carlene Carter, Sheena Easton, Ellen Foley, Grace Jones, Lene Lovich, Kirsty MacColl, the Raincoats, Wendy Wu
4 March 1985	*Time*	These big girls don't cry	Madonna, Cyndi Lauper

Table 12.1 (continued)

Date	Publisher	Title	Artists Included
4 March 1985	*Newsweek*	Rock and roll: Woman power	Cyndi Lauper, Madonna, Tina Turner, Chrissie Hynde, Sheila E, Joan Jett, Caka Khan, Pointer Sisters, Pat Benatar, Go-Go's, Annie Lennox
28 Aug. 1988	*Los Angeles Times*	Popline	Sam Phillips, Toni Childs, Betsy
April 1988	*Musician*	Anima rising	Toni Childs, Tracy Chapman, Sinéad O'Connor, Michelle Shocked
21 Sep. 1989	*Rolling Stone*	The women's movement	Natalie Merchant, Tracy Chapman, Björk Gudmundsdottir, Edie Brickell, Neneh Cherry, Sinéad O'Connor, Michelle Shocked, Margo Timmins, Paula Abdul, Mica Paris
17 May 1992	*Calgary Herald*	Women rockers do it all	L7, Hole, Babes in Toyland.
Oct. 1992	Seal Press Feminist	*She's a rebel: The history of women in rock & roll*	Willie Mae "Big Mama" Thornton, the Supremes, Joan Baez, Chris Williamson, the Runaways, Go-Go's, Pat Benatar, 10,000 Maniacs, Natalie Merchant, Tracy Chapman
10 Dec. 1993	CNN	Women rockers on a roll	Juliana Hatfield, Bangles, Go-Go's, L7, P. J. Harvey, Luscious Jackson, Babes in Toyland
10 April 1994	*Los Angeles Times*	Women rockers —the sound and the fury	Breeders, PJ Harvey, Luscious Jackson, 7 Year Bitch, Hole, Stereolab, Liz Phair, and others
9 Oct. 1994	*New York Times*	When women venture forth	Liz Phair, Me'Shell Ngegéocello, Breeders, Hole, Belly, Veruca Salt, Echobelly, and others
16 July 1995	*Calgary Herald*	Rewriting the rock rule: Power is the new word for women in rock	Melissa Etheridge, Veruca Salt, PJ Harvey, Elastica, Belly, L7, and others
28 Jan. 1996	*New York Times*	The angry young woman: The labels take notice	Tracy Bonham, Poe, Alanis Morrissette
14 Jan. 1996	*USA Weekend*	Angry young women	Alanis Morrissette, Ani Difranco, Liz Phair

(continued on next page)

Table 12.1 (continued)

Date	Publisher	Title	Artists Included
14 Jan. 1996	*New York Times*	Three women and their journeys in song: Too feminine for rock? Or is rock too macho?	Joni Mitchell, Carly Simon, Linda Ronstadt
May 1996	Juno Books	*Angry women in rock*	Joan Jett,, Kathleen Hanna (Bikini Kill), Valerie Agnew (7 Year Bitch), Lois Maffeo, Naomi Yang (Galaxie 500), Kendra Smith, Phranc, Candice Pederson (K Records), Bettina Richards, Chrissie Hynde, June Millington (Fanny)
Feb. 1996	St. Martin's	*Grrrls: Viva rock divas*	Courtney Love, Liz Phair, Kim Gordon, Pam Hogg, Sonya Aurora
21 July 1997	*Time*	Galapalooza!	Lilith Fair, Cassandra Wilson, Tracy Chapman, Fiona Apple, Paula Cole, Jewel, Sarah McLachlan
13 Nov. 1997	*Rolling Stone*	Women of rock	Madonna, Ruth Brown, Tori Amos, Chrissie Hynde, Sheryl Crow, Liz Phair, Bette Midler, Yoko Ono, Tina Turner, Queen Latifah, Fiona Apple, Sinéad O'Connor, k. d. lang, Diana Ross, Natalie Merchant, Shirley Manson, Ronnie Spector, Kim Gordon, Joan Jett, Mary J. Blige, Ani DiFranco, Etta James, Joan Baez, Bonnie Raitt, Melissa Etheridge, Me'Shell Ndegéocello, Jewel, Courtney Love
Nov. 1997	*Spin*	The girl issue	Sarah McLachlan, Alanis Morissette, Liz Phair, Spice Girls, and others
5 July 1998	*London Times*	Are sisters really doing it for themselves?	Spice Girls, Honeys, Juice, Soap, Made in London, and others
10 Jan. 1999	*Milwaukee Journal*	Singers embody both strength and sexuality	Sinéad O'Connor, Tori Amos, Ani DiFranco, Shirley Manson
18 Feb. 1999	*Boston Herald*	Whine of the times	Alanis Morissette, Fiona Apple, Sheryl Crow, Meredith Brooks, Tori Amos, Shawn Colvin, Paula Cole, Liz Phair
19 Feb. 1999	*Gannett News Service*	Women rock music world	Lauryn Hill, Sheryl Crow, Alanis Morissette, Shania Twain, Spice Girls, Jewel, Celine Dion

> Which is understandable. . . . There is nothing particularly feminine about strumming a deafening electric guitar, flailing with feet and hands at an electric keyboard, or stomping the stage shouting overamplified sex lyrics. (Female rock 1971, 68)

Reasons—mainly "women's lib"—are given for the "recent" entry of women into the rock arena. Pride of Women is "leggy but irate girls." Fanny and Goldflower are not good enough to compete with "top-level" male bands, but Joy of Cooking is. With "pretty" Toni Brown and "tough" Terry Garthwaite, the band produces "a reasonably rich mixture of blues, wailing gospel and riffs of pure country, folk and hard rock, all curiously overlaid with Latin conga rhythms."

In the 21 January 1980 issue of *Time* magazine, Jay Cocks writes about a new group of "women rockers" in "Chick Singers Need Not Apply." Pat Benatar, Ellen Foley, Ellen Shipley, and Carolyne Mas are all applauded for their "mainline, rock-bottom rock 'n' roll." As usual there is a problem: "Rock is still a kind of music—a life-style—in which women are frequently called 'chicks' and are, as performers or presences, expected to behave accordingly." Cocks champions the talent and style of these artists as powerful but notes that "the rock business will not let you forget how you look" (81). In 1980, Deanne Pearson of the *New Musical Express* gets together a group of women musicians to discuss the new role of women in rock: "For the last 25 years men have dominated and controlled rock music. . . . Until recently rock 'n' roll has been a male domain. . . . With the emergence of punk three years ago, there was a sudden influx of women into rock." The article specifically downgrades the achievements of some women artists in this way: "Not that there has ever been a shortage of women in music. The image of the coy, pretty but brainless sweet-girl vocalist is well known; a decorative visual in front of the real grafters" (1980, 27).

In *Mother Jones* in 1982, Ariel Swartley invites you to "meet the women who are reviving rock & roll." *Newsweek* touts "Rock and Roll: Woman Power" in 1985; *Musician* tells us "Why the Best New Artists of 1988 Are Women" (Flanagan 1988), and so on. These stories, seemingly magnanimous (and inevitably self-congratulatory) in their tributes to female rock 'n' rollers, rob women of their historical presence in rock 'n' roll. Each female musician, in effect, must start from scratch. Each generation (girls and boys) believes that women in rock are somehow "new." As a hegemonizing action, it works well. Women artists get defined more by their gender and less by their music. Therefore, they (as well as their music and their ideas) are continually marginalized.

Time asks: "Madonna and Cyndi Lauper are the hottest women in rock. Why?" Cyndi Lauper is presented as an artist with a goofy sense of style. Madonna's style is "sluttish"; her "voice has the whispered assurance of one of those phone-for-sex girls (These big girls 1985, 72)." In a

Newsweek cover story that appeared the same day, Lauper and Madonna are said to be "reinventing pop's feminine mystique with hot videos and wild styles" (Rock 1985, 48).

And the articles continue as the decades roll on. In 1992, it is riot grrls and women's punk rock: "Women Rockers Do It All," headlines J. Farber's article in the *Calgary Herald* on 17 May 1992. In 1996, it is a whole different set of "angry young women" (Esselman 1996). "Galapalooza" is 1997's model (Farley and Thigpen 1997). In 1999, "women rock [the] music world" (Puckett 1999). The lineups change but the song remains the same. "Today's *female* rocker resists labels," according to P. Howell in "Rewriting the Rock Rule" in the *Calgary Herald* on 16 July 1995 (my emphasis), but they cannot escape one. "It's ghetto-izing," says L7's Jennifer Finch; "we want to be seen as bands first, not just women who play," Farber reports. For applause or excoriation, the adjective "female" is always primary.

Girls Together Only

Not only portrayed as unusual and antipathetic to rock and roll's essence, women musicians who do make it to the front of the stage are undermined and made extraordinary by being compared only to other women, as if the history of rock and pop has been played out in different rooms with all participants wearing gender-specific headphones. Natalie Imbruglia is the "pretty girl [who] comes out of nowhere with radio-friendly, professionally administered beats, and a face that knows it way around a camera. . . . And a new video queen is crowned. From Lisa Loeb to Jewel, from Alanis to Fiona, even from the Spice Girls to All Saints" (France 1998). The lineage is always and only other females. In a review of a PJ Harvey performance, for example, under the head "PJ Harvey Tells Her 'Stories' with a Therapeutic Conviction," Robert Hilburn in the 22 September 2001 *Los Angeles Times* writes:

> Pop observers have spent decades trying to find artists worthy of the new Bob Dylan tag, but few have sought to proclaim a new Joni Mitchell, another landmark artist whose music examines social and sexual politics with uncommon literary flair and depth.
>
> While Patti Smith and Sinéad O'Connor have examined the human condition with enough originality and insight to be considered the Joni Mitchells of their generations, no one has deserved the comparison as fully as Harvey.

While ostensibly laudatory to both artists, such a statement is essentially insulting to both—and to Bob Dylan as well.

In assessing the putative ancestry of Destiny's Child, Ann Powers writes in "Destiny's Child" in the *New York Times,* 29 April 2001:

> As America's reigning girl group, Destiny's Child is in the thick of this post-feminine revolution. From the Shirelles to TLC, girl groups have helped women hash out the differences between good and bad, liberation and entrapment, love and dependency. Since hip-hop's rise, girl groups have grown even tougher. En Vogue's lethal deployment of old-fashioned dazzle and TLC's forceful reimagining of the streetwise, regular girl made the space for Beyoncé Knowles and her lieutenants in Destiny's Child, Kelly Rowland and Michelle Williams, to take on the predicaments of womanhood with the determination of warriors.

In a column called "The Pop Life" from the *New York Times,* 7 April 1982, Steve Holden links the Go-Go's with Joan Jett and suggests: "The success of the Go-Go's and Joan Jett signals not only a generational turnover in rock, but the strengthening of women's role in rock. Olivia Newton-John, Stevie Nicks, and the woman-led sextet Quarterflash, from Portland, Ore., also have albums high on the charts." He then goes on to favorably contrast their style and that of Joan Jett with the "glamorous, pampered regality" of Joni Mitchell and Linda Ronstadt. "Both the Go-Go's and Joan Jett make simple, aggressive rock-and-roll that doesn't go out of its way to imitate the macho posturing of most male hard-rock acts. But in no way could their music be described as passive."

As the first—depending on how you define it—all-female rock group to have a number one album on the *Billboard* pop charts, the Go-Go's gained a range of accolades and opportunities. In a *Rolling Stone* cover story, they are acknowledged in this way: "The group's hit music is conceived, written, arranged, and performed almost entirely by women; peer behind the full skirts and teased hairdos, and you will not see the lurking presence of a guru like Phil Spector or Kim Fowley, or even a Mike Chapman, Peter Asher, or Chris Stein. Look directly at those skirts and hairdos and you won't see them flaunting their sexiness à la the Runaways or ignoring it like Fanny did; they're simply comfortable being female and playing the rock & roll songs they write" (Pond 1982, 13).

Such a passage, while laudatory, adds some baggage to the trip up the rock ladder. In addition to being a band, the Go-Go's are expected to vindicate their gender. It is not about artistry. It is about what kind of woman the musician is. Frank Chickens are "ninja-girls. That means they're too stroppy to be geishas" (Quantick 1984). In *Newsweek,* Madonna is accused of taking the low road, while other women have taken the high road:

> What bothers Madonna's detractors, though, isn't that the singer deals with sex—it's that she exploits her own sexuality in a way that's trite. Fortu-

> nately, there are female singers who don't take the easy way out. In "Beat of the Heart," Scandal's Patty Smyth projects an aura of smarts and savvy—of a woman who controls her sexuality and not vice versa. And Pat Benatar has gone so far as to explicitly reject the theme of male domination: playing a street waif, she stands up to a vicious pimp in the "Love is a Battlefield" clip, a piece that ends with a jubilant street ballet celebrating sisterhood. (Rock 1985, 54)

(Hey, wasn't Benatar the bad girl who degraded all women with her song "Hit Me with Your Best Shot"? Oh, how the worm turns.)

In *Time*, the relative merits of the two artists are debated, and Cyndi Lauper wins. "Cyndi is more of an artist than Madonna," Irving Azoff is quoted as saying. "Madonna will be out of the business in six months" (These big girls 1985, 74). In *Newsweek* (Rock 1985), the virgin/whore dichotomy is employed to suggest that women like the good Cyndi Lauper (who "has successfully used the resources of rock to project the image of 'a new woman'") need to be encouraged and women like the bad Madonna (who "has managed to make shattered taboos into new foundations for old stereotypes") need to be stoned, um, discarded.

More recently, longtime rock critic Robert Hilburn, in "Jackson's 'All for You' Concert Misses the Beat" in the 1 October 2001 *Los Angeles Times*, uses comparisons with Madonna to critique Janet Jackson: "Jackson's limitations were magnified by another piece of bad timing: Her tour arrives on the heels of the far more satisfying and forward-thinking Madonna tour." In a review of Macy Gray in the *Los Angeles Times* (14 September 1999) titled "Second Chance at a Dream," Hilburn writes that "[Gray] also sings about sexual matters, in such tunes as 'Sex-o-matic Venus Freak,' with an aggression that is rare for a woman in pop." What a ridiculous remark! If you want to play the gender card, let's pull out LaBelle, Donna Summer, Wendy O Williams, and Madonna. Or, we can play the person card and note that Gray cites Prince among her influences. One way or another, it is uninformed and inappropriate to define an artist's choices and decisions by her gender.[2]

Dream Dates

"I've been really lucky. . . . No one has ever yelled 'Take off your top!' while I've been onstage," Margo Timmins told *Rolling Stone* for an article titled "The Women's Movement" (21 September 1989, 73). Timmins may have been spared such a special moment from fans, but reviews of the Cowboy Junkies still find space for discussions of her "maidenhood" (?!?), as in M. Boehm's "Waking Up Isn't Hard to Do for Cowboy Junkies" in the *Los Angeles Times* (8 May 1992): "There's no way that Timmins will ever be a stage-bounding, eardrum-blasting, eye-riveting firebrand

like Maria McKee. But maybe she has it in her to evolve from too-fragile maidenhood toward the wistful but nevertheless sturdy presence and vocal bearing of an Emmylou Harris."

Evaluating the attractiveness of female musicians is another way that pop journalism deflects attention away from their artistry. The sexual meaning of rock 'n' roll becomes defined by the sexual preferences of the rock critic. In a cover article on Jewel for *Rolling Stone,* Neil Strauss writes: "All interviews are a seduction process, on both sides, but this one is really working. . . . I am nervous, as if meeting a girlfriend's parents for the first time" (1999, 39). He cannot mask his glee when he is invited to spend a [chaste] night in bed with the singer/songwriter. (We cannot possibly hope, I suppose, that he will soon be organizing a slumber party with the members of Korn or Wu-Tang Clan.) In *The Observer* (December 1978), a writer had this to say about Kate Bush: "She is like some extravagantly exotic orchid . . . she has a face which houses giant eyes, and pouting lips which like to smile but can just as easily make a theatrical snarl. The hair is an auburn mane. She has a small, lithe body, dancer's legs, and a suggestion of fullness of breast" (Steward and Garratt 1984, 59). Bush's body type is apparently more interesting and important than the instrumentation of her compositions.

In 1966, a *Time* article titled "The New Troubadours" (28 October 93) profiles several groups: the Mamas and the Papas, the Lovin' Spoonful, and Simon and Garfunkel. Strange to say, however, only Cass Elliot ("a Big Bertha") and Michelle Philips ("a beauty") are described in terms of their looks and weight: "Phillips's wife Michelle is a willowy ex-model," and "anchor girl is rotund (200 lbs.) Cass Elliot." In a 28 June 1968 *Time* cover story, "Aretha Franklin," Franklin is described as "chunky" (62). *Newsweek*'s "Queen Bees" article describes Janis Joplin as having "earthy good looks" and provides the weight and height of Spanky McFarlane of Spanky and Our Gang (77). The Supremes are "attractive" in *Ebony*'s 1965 article (81). Natalie Merchant is "ravishing," according to the *Los Angeles Times*'s Chris Willman in "10,000 Maniacs Visit Southland" (15 August 1989). Britney Spears is a "teen dream" (Daly 1999, 60).

In a cover story on Edie Brickell and The New Bohemians in *Spin* magazine, Michael Corcoran writes, "The Edie who looks back from the pictures is pert and irresistible, a conspiracy of long, flowing brown hair, tight, faded jeans, and a white cotton t-shirt that conforms to the kind of smallish breasts that women fret over but men just accept as part of God's universe" (1989, 33). Smallish breasts?!? The woman is wearing jeans and a t-shirt, for goodness' sake.

In an otherwise straightforward story on the history of the Pretenders and their recent album, writer Scott Cohen of *Spin* finds it necessary to inject this Victoria's Secret–level insight: "Chrissie prefers stockings to

panty hose because she doesn't like to wear panties" (Cohen 1986, 50). A writer connects Gwen Stefani to the "easy" (read "sluttish") Madonna in an 11 May 1997 *Montreal Gazette* review titled "Bouncy Blonde; No Doubt Boils Down the Madonna Message ("Do Me") for a New Generation." For the *LA Weekly* of 1 September 1988, under the head "Sweethearts of the Radio," Kim Fowley writes about his version of the Bangles: "Susanna Hoffs is a tiny goddess, Debbi Peterson is the Blond Amazon Glacier Queen. . . . We men and boys who watch MTV and buy records, cassettes, and CDs are tired of hearing about crack, poverty, loneliness, boredom, lifestyles of the numb and dumb. Samantha Fox is too trashy; Kylie Minogue, too silly; Madonna, too conniving. The Bangles are the real thing: wife-candidates you can lust after, the women in the airplane who wear matching uniforms and sweet hellos" (15). A review of articles on Staind, Pearl Jam, Michael Jackson, Bruce Springsteen, REO Speedwagon, Duran Duran, and Gorillaz reveals no similar assessments.

Who's Your Boyfriend?

Once her physical appearance has been dissected, her home life (boyfriends or parents or both) is frequently the next topic for the profile of a female artist. The Supremes—but not the Four Tops or the Standells—had to contend with reporters asking about their boyfriends and their parents. So did the Go-Go's, reports R. Harrington in "The Go-Gos Go Get 'Em," in the 19 September 1982 *Washington Post*: "And then there's 'How do your parents feel?'" Carlisle adds, petulantly. "How would your parents feel? How would anybody's parents feel? They never ask the boys!" So do Britney Spears and Jewel and Monica and Brandy. Maybe part of the anger in Alanis Morissette's "Jagged Little Pill" was a response to that worldview. What does my boyfriend think, what does my ex think? Well, here is what I think . . .

Writer Karen Schoemer in her article/interview with Linda Ronstadt in *Trouble Girls: The* Rolling Stone *Book of Women in Rock* seems a tad more interested in finding out about Ronstadt's love life than in discussing her long and varied musical career (O'Dair 1997). When her first single was a success, Natalie Imbruglia was constantly asked about her putative dalliance with David Schwimmer (France 1998). In the September 1999 issue of *Select*, a timeline of Courtney Love's life includes details of her virginity loss and various boyfriends along with a sidebar of pictures and a few prime quotes from the disaffected (and the affected, for balance). Shirley Manson and Gwen Stefani—but not Tom DeLonge and Gary Grice—have to deal continually with the issue of current and past boyfriends.

An obsession with tracking boyfriends and lovers and husbands frequently leads to imputations of undue influence. Courtney Love has to contend with persistent rumors that her husband, Kurt Cobain, was responsible for the success of *Pretty on the Inside* and that ex-boyfriend Billy Corgan helped along *Celebrity Skin.* On the *Rolling Stone* web site, the entry for Hole includes this disparaging comment: "What finally broke Hole, however, was not their album or their live shows, but rather Courtney Love's relationship with Kurt Cobain, the enigmatic, disaffected frontman of Nirvana, who briefly became the most popular, influential rock band in the U.S. with the release of the 1991 album Nevermind. As Cobain became a rock star, Love tagged along, earning media attention thanks to her stormy relationship with Cobain" (Hindin 1999, 1). *Rolling Stone* also spent most of its first cover story on Madonna detailing the men she had used to get to the top.

Rapacious vampires sleeping their way to success are matched by passive automatons following their master's voice. When Janet Jackson's album *Control* arrived in 1986, it was a huge hit. Her musical career was in her own hands, according to the lyrics of the song: "I'm in control and I love it." For *Spin,* though, the issue in their cover article, "Damn It, Janet: The Battle for Control of Janet Jackson," was all about what man—her father or John McClain of A&M Records—would ultimately control her career (Stevenson 1987). Twelve years and a huge record contract with Virgin later, it turns out, it was Ms. Jackson herself. In 1999, Shania Twain had to deal with the same issue: Is her husband Mutt Lange her Svengali? She has to defend her own integrity: "The reality is, it's just all me. . . . I pick everything I wear, everything I do, every move I make. I am directing myself artistically, period, no ifs, ands or buts about it" (Shania 1998, 57). In an interview from 1978, Linda Ronstadt is faced with this statement: "People often assume that [producer/manager] Peter Asher picks all your songs, the musicians come in and tell you what to do, and you just get up there and sing." Her response: "I pick the tunes . . . I chose the band" (Herbst 1978, 57). No male artist of Ronstadt's stature would have to defend his musical integrity.

Can the Burden Be Lightened?

"I don't really think a lot of guys know what a burden it is to be a girl sometimes," Gwen Stefani once told a reporter (*Buffalo News,* 15 April 1997).

Spin magazine's second-anniversary issue featured Madonna on the cover with the tagline "Sex as a weapon: What did she start?" The point of the accompanying article is that "video made the video star. It made

most of them female. Sex is their calling card, but will it also be their downfall?" (Janowitz 1987). So, too, the success of Lilith Fair had opened the women to charges of exclusivity and anti-male bias. As all these examples have, I expect, shown, however, the armalite rifle of sex is being wielded at, not by, women musicians. Are things getting any better? Maybe. Certainly, women musicians are more likely to expect equity now and are more likely to be vocally peeved at not getting it: "Every interview I've done in America, I've been asked about the . . . political implications of the fact that I happen to be a girl," complained Justine Frischmann of Elastica. "They're asking me to marginalize myself. I've always been brought up to expect absolute equity. . . . It shouldn't even be something that particularly is talked about" (O'Dair 1997, 524).

Neneh Cherry says, "I suppose [sexism]'s there [in the music industry], but I'm going to step over anyone who tries that with me" (Rogers 1989, 73). Certainly, more women musicians are on the scene and selling records (witness their continued success at the Grammys). Concert and record reviews are less likely to focus specifically on gender issues. The rock 'n' roll establishment, as epitomized by *Rolling Stone, Spin,* and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame (Deggans 1996), however, has not changed much, as S. Holden reports in "Three Women and Their Journeys in Song" in the *New York Times,* 14 January 1996:

> How else to explain the dearth of women on the Rock-and-Roll Hall of Fame's recently published list of the 500 most influential songs? This bogus canon, selected by James Henke, the Hall of Fame's chief curator, with input from other rock critics and writers, does a conscientious job of recognizing early blues, rhythm-and-blues and country-music influences. But the short shrift it gives to the contributions of women is an embarrassment to the institution that promotes it.
>
> While the list recognizes minor British Invasion acts like Gerry and the Pacemakers and Peter and Gordon, artists who changed the way women expressed themselves in music are overlooked. Influential hits like Carly Simon's "You're So Vain," Rickie Lee Jones's "Chuck E.'s in Love" and Tracy Chapman's "Fast Car" are excluded. Linda Ronstadt, the queen of Los Angeles rock in the 1970's, is nowhere to be found. Nor are Laura Nyro (a significant formal innovator), Joan Baez, Judy Collins, Joan Armatrading, Rickie Lee Jones, Suzanne Vega, Heart and the solo Stevie Nicks. Even in the pop-soul area, the list is ungenerous to women. Dionne Warwick and the solo Tina Turner go unacknowledged.

In 1999, VH-1, the cable music channel, compiled a list of the "100 Greatest Women of Rock and Roll," featuring twenty influential musicians for each of five nights. Covered by S. Rodman in a *Boston Herald* article titled "These Women Rock" (26 July 1999), the series included video clips and interviews along with dozens of testimonials from people ranging from

Roberta Flack (no. 45) and Sheryl Crow (no. 44) to Elvis Costello (unlisted) and John Mellencamp (also unlisted), and from Kim Gordon (no. 91) of Sonic Youth to President and Mrs. Clinton. Wait for the punch line: "When asked, producer Lauren Zalaznick points out that doing a similar list exclusively for men would be redundant. She said less than 10 percent of the '100 Greatest Artists of Rock and Roll' list comprises women." Gender determines importance to rock orthodoxy; so, many important artists simply fail to rate a ticket to ride on the magic bus.

What then can we expect from the coming years? Women musicians will make records (some great, some good, some bad) and sell them (lots, some, not many), but the chalk line defining the sacred body of rock will be redrawn to exclude their contributions. Maybe things will suddenly change on some road to Cleveland—after all, Joni Mitchell made it into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1997—or maybe they will not. Magnanimity of spirit may be more than we can expect from journalists and critics, but so, unfortunately, is historical accuracy.

Notes

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1. The epigraph is from Janowitz 1987 (60).

2. The subtext of all these extracts is equally interesting: Joni Mitchell (or Madonna or Pat Benatar or . . .) is bad in one decade and good in another, as the permutations of reputations play out over time. Nonetheless, it is always woman against woman. Sisterhood is powerful, isn't it?

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