

Women "Under the Thumb" of Rock Music, Some Notes on How Rock Exploits Us

I. Does Rock Degrade Women by Marion Meade
(New York Times, Sunday March 14, 1971)

Last spring I sat through three hours of the film Woodstock alternating between feelings of enchantment and repulsion. Sure, there was all that magnificent music, along with the generous helpings of peace and love and grass. And yet, I found something persistently disturbing about the idyllic spectacle on the screen.

For one thing, with the exception of a pregnant Joan Baez who couldn't seem to stop talking about her husband, all the musicians were men. Sweaty, bearded men were busy building the stage, directing traffic, shooting the film, and running the festival. Brotherhood was repeatedly proclaimed, both on stage and off. Woodstock Nation was beginning to look ominously like a fantasyland which only welcomed men. How about the women? Barefooted and sometimes barebreasted, they sprawled erotically in the grass, looked after their babies, or dished up hot meals. If this was supposed to be the Aquarian Utopia, it reminded me more of a Shriners picnic at which the wife and kiddies are invited to participate once a year.

Looking back, I think the movie confirmed an uneasiness I'd felt for some time but had refused to admit: Rock music, in fact the entire rock "culture", is tremendously degrading to women. I reached this conclusion reluctantly and with a good deal of sadness because rock has been important to me. And while I still dig ~~XXX~~ the vitality of the sound, I find myself increasingly turned off in nearly every other respect.

Stokely Carmichael recalls that as a child he loved Westerns and always cheered wildly for the cowboys to triumph over the Indians

until one day he realized he was an Indian. All along he'd been rooting for the wrong side. More and more, women rock fans are discovering themselves in the same curiously surprised position. For those who have taken the trouble to listen carefully, rock's message couldn't be clearer. It's a man's world, baby, and women have only one place in it. Between the sheets or, if they're talented like Arlo Guthrie's Alice, in the kitchen.

The paradox is that rock would appear to be an unlikely supporter of such old-fashioned sex-role stereotypes. In fact, its rebellion against middle-class values, its championing of the unisex fashions and long hair styles for men seem to suggest a blurring of the distinctions between male and female. But for all the hip camouflage sexism flourishes.

The clearest indication of how rock music views women is in its lyrics. Women certainly can't complain that the image presented there is one-dimensional. On/ the contrary, the put-downs are remarkably multifaceted, ranging from open contempt to sugar-coated condescension. Above all, however, women are always-available sexual objects whose chief function is to happily accommodate any man who comes along. This wasn't always the case. Elvis's pelvis notwithstanding, the popular songs of the Fifties and early Sixties explored such innocuous adolescent pastimes as dancing around the clock, the beach, going steady, and blue suede shoes. In those days before the so-called sexual revolution, the typical woman portrayed in rock was the nice girl next door with whom the Beatles

only wanted to hold hands. Then suddenly came the nice girl's metamorphosis into "groovy chick", the difference being that a groovy chick is expected to perform sexually. In rock songs she never fails. Jim Morrison brags to his fellow studs:

She lives on love street
Lingers long on love street...
She has wisdom, and she knows what to do
She has me and she has you.

The worst picture of women appears in the music of the Rolling Stones, where sexual exploitation reaches unique heights. Woman is usually seen as the "Stupid Girl" who should be kept "Under My Thumb". Then, of course, there is also the "Honky Tonk Woman" fantasy (perhaps a woman who has succeeded thus far in eluding the Juggernaut "Thumb")--but it is doubtful if even she can provide sufficient "Satisfaction" to placate the super-hungers that seem to plague the super-rock-star. In the song "Yesterday's Papers", where women are equated with newspapers, the dehumanization is made even more explicit. Who wants yesterday's papers, the song arrogantly demands, who wants yesterday's girl? The answer: nobody. Once used, a woman is as valuable as an old newspaper, presumably in the way, and only waiting around for a casual toss into the trash.

But the Stones' album "Let It Bleed" is surely unrivaled when it comes to contempt for women, as well as chauvinistic imperialism in general. One cut in particular, "Live With Me", is clear about woman's place:

Come now, honey, doncha'
want to live with me?
Doncha' think there's a place
for you in between the sheets?

And only an extraordinarily masochistic woman could listen to the album's title song with any sense of pleasure whatsoever. There a woman is represented as a drive-in bordello, a one-stop sexual shopping center offering all the standard services plus a few bonus specials.

The Stones' next album has been tentatively titled "Bitch". It figures.

Misogyny is only slightly more disguised in the music of Bob Dylan who in his early work at least, tended to regard nearly every female as some variety of bitch. For example, in "Like a Rolling Stone" Dylan apparently feels so threatened by Miss Lonely (whose chief fault is probably only that she has a rather shallow lifestyle) that he feels compelled to destroy her. First he takes away her identity, then he puts her out on the street without shelter or food, and in the end--obliteration, as he makes her invisible. "How does it feel?" he asks.

In his song "She Belongs to Me" we find one of those rare women who is actually identified as an autonomous person--shes an "artist" says Bob. The message is clearly that such women are to be avoided at all costs:

Shes got everything she needs
Shes an artist she don't look back
She can take the dark out of the nighttime
And paint the daytime black
You will start out standing --proud to steal her anything she
But you will wind up peeking through a keyhole
down upon your knees

Besides the Miss Lonelys (whose heads are crammed full of "useless and pointless knowledge"--presumably useless because it doesn't come out of the Joy of Cooking), and emasculating types who have the nerve to pull the old independence trick on big Bobby--there is the ever-present "Evil Woman". Many of the women in this category would seem to be prostitutes of some kind, and there is absolutely no understanding registered in Bob's lyrics (which are at times delightfully insightful about some aspects of America's social/political dilemma) in the case of prostitution--this last example of caste-slavery in America. In "Tom Thumb's Blues" he says:

Sweet Malenda, the peasants call her the goddess of gloom
She speaks good English and she invites you up into her room
And you're so kind and careful not to go to her too soon
And she takes your voice and leaves you howling at the moon

In some cases Bob's fear of the "Evil Woman" is even more Medieval, besides being heterae, they may also be witches, sorceresses, lamias or some variety of demoness. One such is perfectly described in "As I went walking one morning":

As I went out one morning to breath the air around Tom Paines'
I spied the fairest damsel that ever did walk in chains
I offered her my hand she took me by the arm
I knew that very instant she meant to do me harm

These days a seemingly mellowed Dylan has been writing about women with a little less overt misogyny. Now he calls his females "ladies" and invites them to "lay across his big brass bed". In short, he has more or less caught up with Jim Morrison's request to "Light my Fire".

Again and again throughout rock lyrics women emerge either as insatiable, sex-crazed animals or as all-American emasculators.

Although one might think these images indicate a certain degree of aggressiveness in women, oddly enough they still wind up in a servile position where they exist only to enhance the lives of men.

As for romance, rock hasn't rejected it entirely. Rock love songs exhibit a regular gallery of passive, spiritless women, "sad-eyed ladies" propped on velvet thrones as the private property of a "Sunshine Superman". From the Beatles we get motherly madonnas whispering words of wisdom ("let it be, let it be") or pathetic spinsters like Eleanor Rigby who hang around churches after weddings to collect the rice. Leonard Cohen's romantic ideal is the mystical Suzanne who wears rags from the Salvation Army and acts, the composer asserts, "half crazy". Seldom does one run across a mature, intelligent woman who is capable enough to hold a job at all (with a very few exceptions such as the Beatles' meter maid Rita--and even she is taunted for looking a bit masculine). Only the Stone's Ruby Tuesday insists on an independent life of her own.

Since rock is written almost entirely by men, it's hardly surprising to find this frenzied celebration of masculine supremacy. But it's also understandable in terms of the roots from which rock evolved. In both blues and country music, attitudes toward women reflected a rabid machismo: men always dominated and women were fickle bitches who ran off with other men. Canned Heat sang about its version of "Evil Woman":

Offer to you my soul
You want it over hot coals
Woman you ain't got no feeling

Apart from the myths of female inferiority proclaimed by rock lyricists, the exploitation and dehumanization of women also extends into the off-stage rock scene. How else can one account for a phenomenon like the groupies? That these aggressive teen-age camp followers could possibly be regarded as healthy examples of sexual liberation is certainly a cruel joke. In fact, groupies service the needs of the male musicians and further symbolize rock's impersonal view of women as cheap commodities which can be conveniently disposed of like "Yesterday's paper".

Finally, rock is a field from which women have been virtually excluded as musicians. Not only is it rare to find an integrated band, but the few all-female groups have been notably unsuccessful in the popular and/or financial sense. The very idea of a women's rock band is looked on as weird, in the same category as Phil Spitalny's all-girl orchestra, a freak show good for a few giggles. And so it is against incredible odds that groups like the Chicago All-Women's Rock Band Collective struggle to maintain the excellence of their performances of Rock music for and by women.

One problem is that women have been intimidated from even attempting a career in rock. Women, the myths say, aren't smart enough to understand the complexities of electronics or tough enough to compose music of sufficient intensity or physically strong enough to play drums. The guitar is acceptable but the electric guitar is unfeminine. Most women musicians will tell you about how they have encountered the discrimination based on the stereotyping of music as an all-male field, and groups like the Chicago Women's

Rock Band Collective encounter it over and over again whenever they perform, because they make it perfectly clear that they are women & proud. As for female rock singers, you can count them on a few fingers. We did have Janis Joplin, a blueswoman in the tradition of Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday. When Janis wailed about love as a ball and chain and women being losers, now there were ideas with which women could identify. At least they knew what she meant:

Didn't I make you feel like you are the only man
Didn't I give you everything that a woman possibly can

It is hard to imagine that an independent woman would want to be identified with the sad plight of the ladies in the lyrics of either Tina Turner or Laura Nyro. Although some may regard Grace Slick's private life as liberated in that she generally appears to care little for society's conventions--her work with the Jefferson Airplane is hardly oriented toward women.

Which leaves us with Joan Baez, Judy Collins and Joni Mitchell, who specialize in the bland folk-rock deemed appropriate for a delicate sex.

At this point, what does rock offer women: Mighty little. Recently however, rock bands have reported strange happenings at concerts. Instead of the usual adoring screams from the women, every so often they've been hearing boos and unladylike shouts of "male chauvinist pigs". Because the bands tend to regard these disturbances as a puzzling but passing phenomenon, they've made little effort so far to understand the changes taking place in their audience. What they fail to recognize is that the condescending swaggering which worked for Elvis, and the sadistic, anti-woman sneers of Mick Jagger right up through the 50's and 60's aren't going to make it with the women of the 70's. For the times they are a-changin'.