

REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN
IN THE POPULAR MUSIC PRESS

**FROM GIRL NEXT DOOR TO SEX SYMBOL:
REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN
IN THE POPULAR MUSIC PRESS**

By

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~ ABSTRACT ~

As popular music publications have the potential to shape the public's perception of stars, the continual belittlement of women's efforts, both musically and socially, will, in turn, affect how people position women within Western society. This thesis explores the problematic definitions of popular music and the complicated ways in which women are relegated to specific genres, such as top-40 pop, while systematically being written out of rock history, to ensure that authenticity and credibility remain male-coded.

Through an examination of the publications of *Rolling Stone*, *Blender* and *Spin*, what emerges is a view that the industry remains male-dominated, not only in regards to the number of women writers within in these publications, but also in the style of writing used. Critics, in order to be successful, must utilize a masculinized approach in their journalistic style, which belittles women's efforts and judges them on their appearance, rather than musicianship. Women are relegated to hegemonic labels, such as "Women in Rock," in order to compare their music to other women, without regard to different genres and the different definitions of credibility inherent within those genres.

In order to showcase the problematic discourse created within popular music publications, case studies are presented on Gwen Stefani, Beyoncé Knowles and Britney Spears. Each of these women presents differing definitions of femininity, but *Rolling Stone*, *Blender* and *Spin* all undermine their efforts by representing them as sex symbols, or as male-dependant. In general, Gwen Stefani represents a woman in rock music, but the publications have difficulty affording her credibility because of her overt girliness. Beyoncé Knowles is a black pop star, who distances herself from negative black stereotypes, while the press seems unclear on how to deal with her race. Britney Spears challenges female sexual repression, but is represented as a sex symbol.

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~ INTRODUCTION ~

The efforts of women in music have, and continue to be, belittled and obscured by the press and music historians. This is particularly evident in contemporary popular music. Women are rarely accepted as rock musicians while top-40 pop stars are judged more on their appearance than artistry. In the creation of a documented account of the history of popular music, the homogenous ways in which women are judged, and written on, will determine how an artist is remembered. In this thesis, I problematize the ways in which women musicians are represented in the contemporary popular music press (i.e., 1999 – 2006). Women's representations in music publications reflect the industry's perception, and in turn, this shapes the audience's opinion of women musicians and their roles in popular music.

I chose to compare and contrast *Rolling Stone*, *Spin* and *Blender* because they are the most widely distributed popular music magazines in North America, and consequently, have the most impact in the popular music industry. They impact the industry financially through the promotion of increased sales by the advertisement of a product (the artists), and these publications also impact a large amount of readers by shaping their perceptions of artists, and the popular music industry as a whole. I attempted to contact each publication, in order to receive information about their demographics and ratebases, but only *Blender* responded with an extensive press kit and a few back-issues. Fortunately, *Spin* publishes much of its demographic information on its website, but *Rolling Stone* has remained unreachable and unavailable. Each of these

magazines focuses on different genres within the popular music industry: *Rolling Stone* is a general interest publication; *Blender* focuses on pop and hip-hop and *Spin* is oriented toward rock and indie music.

Historically, *Rolling Stone* has been regarded as the “bible,” or the “end-all,” for popular music entertainment.¹ It has been in publication since 1967, by Wenner Media Publications, under the direction of Jann Wenner. At its inception, *Rolling Stone* focused on the music of the counterculture, but it has since crossed over into more mainstream markets. For a period in early 2000, it was thought to be losing its younger audience, but their ratebase and the products advertisements within the magazine show that *Rolling Stone* is steadily regaining a younger demographic. It promises its advertisers an average ratebase of 1.25 million readers, and as with most magazines, relies heavily on subscription sales to make up the majority of its readers.

Spin magazine has been in publication since 1985, by Miller Entertainment, and has traditionally focused on the music that *Rolling Stone* does not cover. It has branched out from grunge and indie rock to include all forms of rock music, some hip-hop and some pop music. It still focuses on emerging rock artists, but it is willing to include artists from other pop genres, whom it considers/deems “credible.” Notions of rock authenticity are important to *Spin*. The *Spin* audience, as noted on Spin.com, is split, with 61% male readers and 39% female readers, with a median age of twenty-five. In 2003, the last year of statistical information available on their website, *Spin* reported a rate base of 550,000 and noted that its audience had increased 17% from the previous

¹ “More Descriptions for Rolling Stone,” from *Magazine Price Search*,
<http://www.magazinepricesearch.com/detail/rollingstone.html> (accessed January 9, 2005).

year. *Spin* also prides itself on having more editorial content devoted to music than its competitors. It claims to devote 62%, as compared to 53% in *Rolling Stone*.² In 2001, *Spin* became the first North American popular music magazine to have a woman senior editor, Sia Michel.

Blender magazine, published by Dennis Miller Publishing, was founded in 2001 as a music magazine with the same feel as its sister-publication, *Maxim*³, a men's magazine. Because of this association, *Blender's* writing, like *Maxim's*, is gendered overtly and focuses on men as its primary audience. Unlike other popular music publications, *Blender* does not try to project a neutral front in respect to gender. This is apparent, not only in the type and subject of articles, but also in the photos and covers. Of all the major North American popular music magazines, *Blender*, by far, features the most women on its covers, but the way in which they are portrayed and photographed is problematic. Many of the female cover photos present images of the women available for the male gaze, as opposed to strong women in control of their situation. The clothing tends to be provocative and overtly sexual. Fundamentally, though, *Blender* is known for providing a smart, edgy look at popular culture with a focus on all forms of popular music. From its inception in 2001 to the year 2005, *Blender's* guaranteed rate base has increased from 250,000 to 630,000, with an average total readership for 2005 of 3,150,000 readers. Its sales are split between 81% subscriptions and 19% newsstand

² "Spin: Magazine," from *Spin Magazine Online*, <http://www.spin.com/index.php?module=htmlpages&func=display&pid=6>. (accessed January 9, 2005).

³ *Maxim* is a men's magazine that has evolved out of more pornographic publications such as *Playboy* in order to be more focused on humour, men's health issues, and relationship issues. *Maxim* is better compared to a publication like *Cosmopolitan*, but aimed at male instead of a female audience.

sales, and the median age of its readers is twenty-seven. The readership is 74% male and 26% female, and, for interest's sake, apparently 64% of the readers are single.⁴

My first chapter outlines the criteria needed in order for an artist to be deemed credible in rock music, a male-coded genre of popular music. In this chapter, I explore the dichotomies present between rock and pop music, especially as they correlate to masculine and feminine codings. This chapter is important for providing the elements required to be an authentic pop or rock artist; to show how difficult it is to define these genres; and in turn, it will be shown how these complicated definitions are reflected in the popular music press. Through a dialectical relationship, the press influences how genres are defined, while the accepted definitions shape how critics will represent an artist. The two are forever entangled within the gatekeeping process. The critic cannot function independently of the overlying industry.

Chapter two examines the space accorded to women in popular music and how it pertains to popular music criticism, in particular. Although the readership of *Rolling Stone*, *Spin*, and *Blender* generally divides near to a 60/40, male to female ratio, women are highly underrepresented as writers. Many obstacles face women's acquisition into this industry: the lack of special knowledge, hiring practices, and socialization through acceptance into male-dominated groups or music critics. This chapter also maps out the problematic ways in which women are written about: their contributions are belittled; their appearance and personal lives are discussed more than their music; and they are compared to other women as one homogenous group, regardless of genre.

⁴ Blender, "The New Musical Reference Point," 2005.

Having situated the broader context, I then examine how Britney Spears, Gwen Stefani and Beyoncé Knowles are represented in the musical press. My three case studies are of current female artists who have had a significant impact in the popular music industry, have achieved a certain amount of credibility in their respective genres, and because of their impact, have been widely covered in music magazines. Gwen Stefani, who is discussed in chapter three, represents a woman who performs in a rock band, without being apologetic for her performance of traditional femininity, i.e., girliness. She challenges hegemonic notions of the white, male rock singer and therefore, the press has difficulty affording her rock credibility and struggles to place her within the rock label. Beyoncé Knowles, discussed in chapter four, first sang in the girl group, Destiny's Child, before going solo. Knowles is a black woman whose music and music videos are blatantly sexual, but representations of her in the press do not focus on this sexuality and tend to downplay her race. In contrast, the music and videos of Britney Spears display the same level of overt sexuality as (or perhaps less than) Knowles, but, as argued in chapter five, press representations forefront Spears' sexuality.

I have organized the case studies chapters according to how each of these women is represented in "reviews," "feature articles" and "random notes." I chose to separate the chapters in this way, rather than by publication, in order to show how the representation changed within individual publications. My study also reflects how the publications are organized. The following describes the significance of each section, in the order that they appear in each chapter:

Reviews: Reviews only occur when an artist has released a new album or is on a new tour. Of course, in order to be reviewed by popular publications, the artist has to have already achieved a certain degree of success or be considered an up-and-coming star. Music reviewers function as gatekeepers within the process of music sales. A good review may generate an increase in sales while a negative one may either result in fewer sales, or, counter-intuitively, more sales. The saying “any news is good news” is a key factor within the music industry. One may be tempted to purchase an album that received an unfavourable review merely to judge for oneself, or if one trusts the reviewer, the negative review could ultimately sway them from purchase. The review sections of *Rolling Stone*, *Blender* and *Spin* appear at the end of the issue.

Feature Articles: Feature articles tend to be published after an artist has released a new album or is in the media spotlight for other various reasons. In order to be granted a feature article, he/she must already have generated an enormous amount of interest and popularity.

Random Notes: Random notes are especially important because they are used to sustain interest in an artist, while also functioning as a marker of popularity. Whereas reviews and cover stories usually only appear after an artist has released a new album, random notes help to maintain interest by means of constant coverage. They tend to have accompanying photos, especially in *Blender*, and appear near the front of the magazine. Often, in *Blender*, random notes consist of a photo and caption. The visual nature of these publications favours the inclusion of many glossy, colour photos of the

stars who are being covered. The random notes section of magazines is a prime opportunity to present the audience with various photos of a wide variety of stars.

There currently exists a serious lack of research on female representation in the musical press; the research that has been undertaken tends to be general and rarely focuses on recent popular music. I hope to increase awareness of contemporary representations of women musicians and how they remain problematic by reflecting and reinforcing traditional and outdated models of femininity in which women are positioned as submissive, emotional, and motherly figures. Gatekeeping theory contends that publications such as *Rolling Stone*, *Spin* and *Blender* help to shape social reality, and as such, by providing readers with problematic representations of women, these representations will continue to be normalized. This process reinforces ideologies that women are not competent, authentic musicians, particularly in genres like rock. Awareness is the first step towards change, and I hope to bring awareness about these issues in the following chapters.

~ CHAPTER ONE ~

Girls Can't Rock: Questioning Genre and Gender within Popular Music

Western thought is based on dichotomies that separate and divide: day and night, male and female, feminine and masculine. If we look at the mind/body dichotomy, women are represented by the feminized body, a construct evident throughout society. In the popular music industry, women are represented as young, sexual beings while the mind/body split is mirrored by the pop/rock dichotomy. Rock music has been legitimized and authenticated through association with the mind/intellect and the masculine, whereas pop music is characterized as being a fabrication, of the body, and feminine. Women and people of colour who enter the realm of rock music challenge traditional notions of rock authenticity, which is often defined as white, male and heterosexual, and can create unease among its fans and other rock musicians.

Considering how notions of race shape definitions of rock authenticity also denaturalizes our beliefs that rock music is the realm of white men and then raises the question: where do black artists fit in the popular music field, especially black, female artists? Although it can be argued that popular music is an appropriation of black styles, both rock and pop are now seen as quintessentially white enterprises. Black musicians are relegated to genres coded as black, such as hip-hop, rap, and R&B – genres which are increasingly being used in “white pop” by white musicians. This chapter will examine how the pop/rock dichotomy mirrors the mind/body split and will problematize the

“naturalness” of the ways in which rock music and pop music are authenticated and defined.

Defining Popular and Pop Music

Few definitions of popular music include markers for gender or race. For example, Peter Manuel and Richard Middleton, in *Grove Music*, define “popular music” as

a term used widely in everyday discourse, generally to refer to types of music that are considered to be of lower value, and complexity than art music, and to be readily accessible to large numbers of musically uneducated listeners than to an elite.⁵

According to this definition, popular music is linked to the uneducated public masses and to the working class: it is defined in terms of social class, not gender or race. As will be shown, however, gender and race are two problematic areas within the definition of popular music that are implicit and inherent, and so, often dismissed.

Middleton and Manuel go on to provide four ways in which popular music is defined, each posing its own problems and none satisfactorily addressing questions of gender or race. Definitions highlighted by them include: (1) normative definitions – defining popular music as music that is inferior to art music; (2) negative definitions – popular music defined by what it is not, such as art music; (3) sociological definitions – popular music defined by the social group that is associated with it, and (4) technological-economic definitions – defining popular music as music that is

⁵ Peter Manuel and Richard Middleton, “Popular Music,” grovemusic.com (2002)
<<http://www.grovemusic.com>>

disseminated through mass media in a mass market.⁶ In his book, *Studying Popular Music*, Middleton provides alternate strategies for defining music which he feels have more currency in everyday discourse and academic scholarship. These include positivist and sociological essentialist definitions. However, these too, have their problems. The positivist approach, which is based on a cause and effect perspective, defines popular music as the most widely disseminated music and focuses on sales, as opposed to popularity. Sociological essentialism defines popular music as the music of the people and music that is mass produced and commercial.⁷ These approaches do not allow for markers of gender or race, or acknowledge which genres of music are included under the umbrella of “popular” as a whole. While these approaches are adequate for general definitions of popular music, the issues of gender and race still need to be considered.

Although general definitions of popular music do not often address gender or race, the definitions of specific genres within popular music, such as pop and rock, are rooted in gender difference, even though it is not always stated explicitly. It must be noted that pop functions as a genre within popular music. As Simon Frith notes in his article, “Pop Music”:

Defined in these terms, “pop music” includes all contemporary popular forms – rock, country, reggae, rap, and so on. But there are problems with such an inclusive definition, as has become apparent when states have attempted to define pop as law. When in 1990 British legislators (concerned to regulate the content of music radio) defined “pop music” as “all kinds of music characterized by a strong rhythmic element and a reliance on electronic amplification for their performance,” this led to strong objection from the music industry that such a musical definition failed to grasp the sociological difference between pop (“instant singles-

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Richard Middleton, *Studying Popular Music*, (Philadelphia: Open UP, 1990), 4-5.

based music aimed at teenagers”) and rock (“album-based music for adults”).⁸

Part of the reason that popular music is hard to define is that there is often no distinction made between pop and popular. Frith acknowledges these differences and shows them to be sociologically based. His definitions for pop and rock are debatable, yet commonly perceived by the public. Like Frith, Sara Cohen, by correlating music with patterns of appropriate behaviour for males and females, shows that the definitions are sociologically, and gender, based. As Cohen notes, “Rock and pop music are closely associated with gender – with patterns and conventions of male and female behaviour and with ideas about how men and women should or should not behave.”⁹

Within the definitions of pop and rock music, it becomes evident that pop music is viewed as inherently feminine and therefore appropriate for females to listen to, while rock music is inherently masculine and appropriate for males to listen to and act upon. As a result, this is further reinforcing normative definitions of femininity and masculinity. This is seen particularly in the writings of Mavis Bayton, in which she argues for the inherent masculinity of the electric guitar and describes the social pressures against women who want to enter into the rock world. Pop music, unlike rock, is associated more with *young* females, than with adult women. It is a genre that provides models through which young girls can explore their freedom before “joining the real world” and participating in traditionally feminine roles, such as marriage and motherhood. Diane Railton comments on this when she states

⁸ Simon Frith, “Pop Music” in *Pop and Rock*, eds. Simon Frith and Will Straw, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001), 94-95.

⁹ Sara Cohen, “Popular music, gender, and sexuality,” in *Pop and Rock*, eds. Simon Frith and Will Straw, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001), 226.

Pop music provides a brief taste of freedom for young women – a time when they are placed at center stage, when the world is turned upside down. It is a time when they can let themselves go, enjoy the bodily pleasures of music and experience the *jouissance* of pop. It is the commercial nature of pop music that means that those who produce the music must take young women's pleasures seriously, and must give them what they want. As the target audience, for both the music itself and the magazines that support it, young women's needs and desires are of prime importance. This is something, however, that does not last: they must put it behind them as they grow up.¹⁰

This exploration of what it means to be a young woman is akin to the carnivalesque nature of pop music.¹¹

Railton notes that the carnival is a place where traditional order is overturned and is a time of legitimate illegitimacy, where sex and the body are central and status is undermined.¹² Pop music ties into this definition because, like the carnival, it is linked to the body, whether sexualized or not, because the performing bodies are exposed and not hidden behind instruments. The main role of pop is to entertain, most often with a feminine body, but like the carnival, there is a return to conventional life afterwards. Railton argues that "it is not only the music that must be left behind, but the physical and the sexual in the music. The feminine in music must be abandoned as women grow up. It is only permissible for girls and young women."¹³ A prime example, as will be shown in chapter five is Britney Spears. Spears does not play an instrument, and uses her body to its fullest extent during her stage shows for entertainment purposes. Like many pop

¹⁰ Diane Railton, "The Gendered Carnival of Pop," *Popular Music* 20, no.3 (2001): 330.

¹¹ But where does this leave women after adolescents? Which musical genres are appropriate for adult women? Must they conform not only to traditional representations of the mother and wife, but also take on the "elite" musical styles of art music, or abandon music altogether as a adult male enterprise, not suitable for women?

¹² Diane Railton, "The Gendered Carnival of Pop," 328.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 330.

stars, it is not merely the music which attracts Spears' fans, but the whole spectacle surrounding her body and the way it is clothed, and used for dancing. It will also be shown that Spears is a *young* girl, therefore tying into notions of pop music as appropriate for young girls exploring their sexuality. As Spears is maturing, though, her personal choices have been criticized, and her music has been negatively received in the press. Her representation has almost become a warning to those who do not "grow out" of pop music as adolescents: a refusal to join society will ultimately require you to join the margins, or face harsh criticism from all those that feel they have the right to give parental advice.

It is because of this association with the female body that pop music is associated with a definition of the feminine which contains issues such as: woman as submissive, weaker than man, sympathetic and compassionate, and soft and emotional. Relating back to the mind/body split, the body represents the feminine, while the mind represents the masculine. Pop is meant to be fun. It is seen as a fabricated commodity without social purpose, except as a form of exploration for young girls. This mind/body split, where the feminine commodity of pop music is seen as inferior, mirrors women's lower position within society as a given.

Michelle Rosaldo, in her 1974 article, "Women, Culture, and Society: a theoretical overview," argues that the natural male/female split, in which women are the inferior beings, is based on the domestic/public dichotomy, where males represent the public and females the domestic. The underlying principle is that, whereas girls grow up socialized by emulating their mothers, boys must break free from their mothers and claim

their status separate from their mother, and within their peers. Because males achieve their statuses in society through experience and achievements, as opposed to most female statuses, which are based on relationships, such as wife, mother, sister, their achieved status is seen as more powerful and credible than women's ascribed status.¹⁴ This, as will be shown in Chapter two, is mirrored in the popular music press. In articles and interviews with women artists, there is a focus on the private sphere and their personal relationships. This results in the private sphere being privileged, and perceived as more important than aspects of their musicianship.

According to Rosaldo and Sherry Ortner, another key factor in the subordination of women and, in turn, feminine commodities such as pop music, is the association of women with nature and men with culture. Ortner asserts that female subordination is universal and is based on a nature/culture binary. Woman is recognized as being closer to nature (which is seen as inferior to culture) because of her body and its functions.¹⁵ This is similar to Rosaldo's affirmation that, in order for men to achieve status, they must step apart from the natural (woman/nature) in order to stand on their own and shape society for themselves (culture). Ortner asserts that:

Every culture implicitly recognizes and asserts a distinction between the operation of nature and the operation of culture (human consciousness and its products); and further, that the distinctiveness of culture rests precisely on the fact that it can under most circumstances transcend natural conditions and turn them to its purposes. Thus culture... at some level of awareness asserts itself to be not only distinct from but superior to nature, and that sense of distinctiveness and superiority rests precisely on the ability to transform—to “socialize” and “culturalize”—nature.¹⁶

¹⁴ Ibid., 26 – 29.

¹⁵ Sherry Ortner, “Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?” in *Women, Culture, and Society* ed. Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, (California: Stanford UP, 1974), 74.

¹⁶ Ibid., 72-73.

Rosaldo and Ortner try to show that women's roles and values are inherently subordinate to males and, therefore, commodities associated with the feminine, such as pop music, would also fit "naturally" into this inferior position. While the emotions and expressions displayed in pop music may seem universal, or ubiquitous, they are generally implied to be for the feminine and the female psyche, under a mask of appeal to the general public.

Simon Frith often dwells on the ubiquitous nature of pop music. In his article, "Pop Music," he notes that, just as anything can be rocked, anything can also be "popped."¹⁷ Pop seems to absorb musical sounds from everywhere and anywhere to create a fusion of styles that will appeal to the masses. Frith often focuses on the idea that pop music is designed to appeal to everyone, not only feminized audiences. While scholars such as Railton emphasize this feminine-coding, here we see that pop music is also related to the universal, or the ubiquitous.¹⁸ Ubiquity in this sense refers to much more than omnipresence; the emotional content of the music reflects what are thought to be universal emotions. Also, by incorporating sounds from numerous sources, it appears to reflect and appeal to the largest amount of people, i.e., the masses. Here, the masses refer not to a specific race, gender, or class of people, but "the people" as a complex whole. For the purposes of this study, the masses/people are North Americans who have generally conformed to a Western style of living within a patriarchal, capitalist society.

¹⁷ Simon Frith, "Pop Music," 93.

¹⁸ In this context universal/ubiquitous refers to the emotions that pop music portrays. Pop music tends to focus on emotions and themes that are considered "generic" and portrayed by everyone. It pertains to the way pop music attempts to be directed at everyone as a whole, but effect people on a personal level. It uses emotions and themes which can easily resound with the majority.

In this society, where male experience is taken as the norm, it is interesting to note that a feminine commodity could be seen as universal.

Frith's definition of popular music focuses on how it relates sociologically to the public. Instead of focusing on what pop music is not, Frith locates pop authenticity in its emotional appeal. For example, according to Frith, Elton John plays on, and to, the emotions of the masses; in other words, he moves the personal to the public, resulting in increased sales and what consumers believe to be an emotional connection to the artist.

Elton John is a pop, not a rock star, because his authenticity – the authenticity of his expressed emotions – is not an issue. “Candle in the Wind” is not a song of self-exposure; it was not written to mark off John's difference, his unique artistic sensibility. It was, rather, a pop song, designed for public use. It is a song infused with Elton John's personality and, for its emotional effect, infused too with a kind of collective sigh.¹⁹

Entertainment is related to ubiquity, which in turn is related to pop music. Whereas pop music has tended to be defined as feminine, here is a definition that considers the emotions it invokes. It is interesting to note, however, that this example is complicated by the fact that Elton John is a gay man, and the song was originally written about Marilyn Monroe. Granted, there are numerous definitions of both pop and rock music, so where does Frith's definition of ubiquity fit?

Western society often takes male experiences as the norm, so defining popular music in terms of emotional appeal, one would assume that these emotions would be those stereotypically expressed by men. As we have seen, however, pop music is supposedly meant for girls exploring their sexuality and freedom before admittance into the real world.

¹⁹ Ibid., 94.

These are difficult issues to make sense of because they ingrained within Western society. When we are looking critically at ourselves and societal institutions and structures, we are still looking through the worldview of our up-bringing. Holly Kruse articulates this when she notes that maleness is normative and our experiences define our observations:

Writers and researchers cannot step outside society's power relations when engaged in projects. In anything, researching and writing about socioeconomic contexts historically coded, in this case, as male make women quite palpably aware of their still-relative powerlessness within patriarchy... A truly critical perspective on discourses of rock and pop music thus require that its authors, both male and female, analyze their own relationships to structures.²⁰

More so than for the general public, it may be possible for scholars to step back and critically examine the taken-for-granted quality of defining pop music as feminine, but the question then becomes, would a critical examination at the scholarly level have an effect on the public, or is it even necessary? Once again, these are difficult questions to answer, but ones that should be considered. The deconstruction of genres, in attempt to move beyond problematic labels, has to begin somewhere, as it has in scholarly writing and with artists who push the boundaries of genres.

After considering the problems inherent with the definition of popular music in regards to gender, this leaves us the question: where do non-white artists fit into traditional definitions of pop music? Often they are not present at all. Whereas femaleness can be openly acknowledged within pop music, whiteness is assumed to be inherent and normative. As previously stated, when black artists try to become pop stars,

²⁰ Holly Kruse, "Abandoning the absolute: transcendence and gender in popular music discourse," in *Pop Music and the Press*, ed. Steve Jones, (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2002), 147.

they are often relegated to popular genres coded as black, such as R&B, soul, and hip-hop, though there is little difference between pop and R&B beyond how they are coded racially. It is also very difficult for black artists to cross over from R&B charts to top-40 pop charts. For example, Britney Spears and Beyoncé Knowles are relatively the same age and create similar music, with Knowles recognized as possessing a better singing voice, yet they are categorized differently. Talent aside, because Knowles is black, her music is relegated to the R&B charts, and Spears, even though many of her songs are produced by black producers, such as Pharell Williams, using techniques that were once coded as black, is located on the top-40 pop charts. While Knowles has been fortunate enough to cross over into the pop charts with some songs, her music is still more often labelled as R&B. Her cross-over experience is not representative among young black singers.

Also interesting in the comparison of Spears and Knowles is the way in which sexuality is defined. Because Knowles is black and relegated to “black” genres such as R&B, it is generally more accepted that she portray a very sexual image. Her sexy music videos have not caused nearly as much controversy as those by Spears, even though they are arguable more overtly sexual. Spears’ sexuality, within the definitions of pop music, does not allow for overt sexuality because of Victorian feminist influences which deem white female sexuality to be shameful and dirty. On the other hand, because Knowles is black and defined within black styles, society is more accepting of her highly sexualized nature.

While pop is coded as white, it was, and continues to be, influenced by black styles and techniques. As Eric Lott outlines in his book, *Love and Theft*, white people have taken on styles coded as black since the nineteenth century with blackface and minstrelsy. Lott outlines ways in which minstrelsy was both a signifier of racial attitudes and an exchange of power. The following shows how minstrelsy was a simultaneous drawing on and crossing of racial boundaries:

What the minstrel show did was capture an antebellum structure of racial feeling... Minstrelsy brought to the public forum racialized elements of thought and feeling, tone and impulse, residing at the very edge of semantic availability, which Americans only dimly realized they felt, let alone understood. The minstrel show was less the incarnation of an age-old racism than an emergent social semantic figure highly responsive to the emotional demands and troubled fantasies of its audiences.²¹

Minstrelsy was also shown to be an exchange of ideas:

The minstrel show worked for over a hundred years to facilitate a safe exchange of energies between two otherwise rigidly bounded policed cultures, a shape-shifting middle term in racial conflict which began to disappear... once its historical function has been performed.²²

Although Lott may describe it as an exchange of energies, it is hard to overlook the fact that it was, in reality, an appropriation by whites of a perspective or style of music of a group of people with less power than themselves. Black people received nothing in return for their “exchange,” except the knowledge that their musical styles were entertaining for white people. Lott acknowledges this by referring to blackface as a *signifier* of power relations, as opposed to a *repetition* of them.²³

²¹ Eric Lott, *Love and Theft* (New York: Oxford UP, 1993), 5.

²² *Ibid.*, 5.

²³ *Ibid.*, 8.

This continues today with white artists incorporating music coded as black into pop music. As Lott continues, “every time you hear an expansive white man drop into his version of Black English, you are in the presence of blackface’s unconscious return.”²⁴ This can be seen in countless examples in contemporary pop music, including Britney Spears, with an obvious example being Eminem, a white artist who performs in the traditionally black style of rap. Eminem has become wildly successful as a rap artist, in part because of his non-stereotypical racial identity, and has managed to cross over into top-40 pop charts with his particular rap style. Although this is not the case for all white rappers, Eminem has achieved credibility within both the worlds of black rap music and white pop music. Fewer white female artists, however, have gained respect within both pop genres coded as black and white. This may be surprising considering the female nature of pop music, but at the same time, not surprising at all because of the patriarchal structure of society, which allows males to diversify, as long as they remain within the confines of what it means to be masculine. In other words, because of the power accorded to white males, they are allowed to venture, and be considered authentic, in more genres of popular music than females. White men in particular, because of their universality, have the advantage of being able to be seen as credible across genres. Currently, the best example of a white female R&B/pop artist is Joss Stone, a 17-year old singer rooted in the tradition of soul music, with a very pop, and “black”-sounding voice.

Although few white female artists cross over into genres coded as black, they still infuse their music with many elements of black music, including sampled beats, sing-

²⁴ Ibid., 5.

song lyrics (adapted from early rap) and dance movements in their shows and videos. This is a theme that pervades the writing of Eric Lott, as well as Barry Shanks. Although Shanks shares many of Lott's views on the role of minstrelsy and racial identity, he takes a different stance on the actual music. For Shanks, music itself is not racially coded but is reflective of the racial makeup of the artists. Shanks argues that, "in every case, within every popular musical genre, crossover exceptions to the typical racial identification exist, for in the very vibrations of its being, music doesn't know race."²⁵ Shanks' views are optimistic because even if music is formally neutral, society has made it so that racial identity *is* a factor and often a signifier of where an artist is located within popular music genres. As has been noted previously, little separates the genres of R&B and pop, except racial identity.

Defining Rock Music and its Authenticity

As with pop music, there is no singular definition of rock music, and acknowledged definitions continue to shift and be re-written. One fact that remains the same, however, is that in attempts to legitimize rock music and differentiate it from pop, it has become associated with the mind and, therefore, the masculine side on the continuum of sexual identity. Diane Railton notes

The advent of rock music changed all this [the association of music the body]. It changed it by introducing a mind to the music as well as a body. The lyrics to songs became less and less the love songs or the novelty songs of the earlier era... Music was to have meaning. It had to deal with

²⁵ Barry Shanks, "From Rice to Ice: the face of race in rock and pop," in *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock*, ed. Simon Frith, Will Straw, and John Street, (New York: Cambridge UP, 2001), 257.

issues more serious than young love. It was to be about “ultimate things.”²⁶

Railton’s arguments resonate with Frith’s notions of the emotional ubiquity of pop music. Not only did rock distance itself from pop music, by its association with the mind, it also rejected universal emotions for those that “mean something,” with meaning and intellectual thought as synonymous with masculinity.

In conjunction with emotions, rock and pop were further separated through notions of authenticity and credibility. Because pop music is seen to be slick, prefabricated and utilized for feminine recreations, it is not viewed as a credible art form in the rock world. Rock, on the other hand, has an intangible authenticity which relies on emotional honesty, liveness, unstaged performances and musical straightforwardness. Norma Coates outlines this wonderfully when she remarks:

Consider, for example, the discursive and stylistic segregation of “rock” and “pop.” In this schema, rock is metonymic with “authenticity,” while “pop” is metonymic with “artifice.” Sliding even further down the metonymic slope, “authentic” becomes “masculine,” while “artificial” becomes “feminine.” Rock, therefore, is “masculine,” pop is “feminine,” and the two are set in binary relation to each other, with the masculine, of course, on top. The common-sense meaning of rock becomes “male,” while “pop” is naturalized as “female.” Real men aren’t pop, and women, real or otherwise, don’t rock.²⁷

Another good definition of rock music comes from Keir Keightley. He explains how rock is difficult to define and how authenticity is integral in attempts to characterize it, commenting that although rock has come to mean loud guitars, aggressiveness, and rebellion, the definition has changed over time. Very diverse sounds have previously

²⁶ Diane Railton, “The Gendered Carnival of Pop,” 324.

²⁷ Norma Coates, “(R)evolution Now? – Rock and the political potential of gender,” in *Sexing the Groove*, ed. Sheila Whiteley, (London; New York: Routledge, 1997), 52-53.

been deemed rock, such as Motown, early Bob Dylan, salsa music, and even some of Garth Brooks' songs. Knightley notes that these dissimilar styles are no longer regarded as rock because of the way in which rock is defined by a process of exclusion.²⁸ This is because of the idea that rock involves "a rejection of those aspects of mass-distributed music which are believed to be soft, safe or trivial, those things which may be dismissed as worthless 'pop' – the very opposite of rock. Instead, the styles, genres and performers that are thought to merit the name 'rock' music are seen as serious, significant and legitimate in some way."²⁹ So, in order to be considered rock, one must reject pop, and in turn, reject the feminine side of the sexual continuum. Artists such as Gwen Stefani further complicate these definitions. While her music with her band No Doubt is typically rock, and ska, Stefani does not reject her femininity in order to be deemed credible. This is reflected in the press; critics have difficulty defining her as either a pop or a rock artist.

As Helen Davies argues, the ways in which credibility are defined are also exclusionary of women. Primarily, credibility relies on authenticity, which, as we have seen, relies on a form of masculinity derived from typical conventions of rock music discourse. Davies highlights the main ways in which rock views credibility and authenticity and shows how women are excluded. These can be summed up in the following points:

²⁸ Keir Knightley, "Reconsidering Rock," in *Pop Music and the Press*, ed. Steve Jones, (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2002), 109.

²⁹ Ibid.

1. Music must be intelligent to be considered serious. Femininity has not been traditionally associated with intelligence.
2. Credibility comes from being rebellious and differentiated from mainstream culture. Women have traditionally been associated with the mainstream and have generally not been accepted into subcultures.
3. Credibility can come from being seen as angry. Women who portray anger are often seen as unreasonable or insane.
4. Credibility is commonly seen as being a male trait in the musical press. Some women attempt to gain credibility by associating themselves with credible men, which often backfires. They can also try to gain credibility by becoming masculinized, but this often results in a distancing from other female musicians.
5. Women can be credible when they are no longer a threat. When women do become credible and successful, they rarely want to make any associations with feminism for fear of losing their place.³⁰

Whether they receive the status of credibility or not, women have consistently been involved in rock music, even though ignored by the press or having their music style re-defined, after-the-fact, to exclude them from the rock genre.

Like Davies, Simon Reynolds outlines ways in which women can enter into the rock world. These include (1) the straightforward, whatever a man can do, a woman can do approach where women take on a masculine persona. (2) Infusing rock with feminine

³⁰ Helen Davies, "The Great Rock and Roll Swindle: The Representation of Women in the British Rock Music Press," in *Critical Readings: Media and Gender*, ed. Cynthia Carter and Linda Steiner, (England: Open UP, 2004), 167-173.

qualities; (3) celebrating female imagery and iconography in which women use feminine clichés but are not reduced to them. And (4) an approach that is concerned with the consolidation of female subjectivity, but with the trauma of identity formation, in which gender is neither an essence nor a strategic series of personae, but a painful tension between the two. In other words, in this last approach, women keep their identity in constant flux: challenging normative female roles, without remaining confined to any particular new form of self-definition.³¹

Although Reynolds' views are mirrored in society, most of them focus on the *image* of the woman, rather than the music. As in the debate over pop and R&B, it is not the music that is inherently male or female, but rather, it is the images and sociological signifiers that determine in which genre the music should be placed. Is it the music that makes a song a rock song, or is it the fact that a white, heterosexual man is performing the song?

Women are not only barred from rock and roll because of the exclusionary definitions of rock music: Mavis Bayton argues that the technology and instrumentation of rock are also problematic for women. She notes that as girls grow up, they are socialized to be feminine and play instruments which are coded as feminine, such as the violin and piano. The masculine nature of the electric guitar is not considered appropriate for young girls, especially since "the very first steps in learning to play the electric guitar force a young woman to break with one of the norms of traditional

³¹ Simon Reynolds, *The Sex Revolts: Gender, Rebellion and Rock 'n' Roll* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1995), 233.

‘femininity’; long, manicured, polished fingernails must be cut down.”³² Bayton’s views have a propensity to essentialize femininity, which she continues to do with the following:

The minority of girls who are not discouraged from playing the electric guitar by its traditionally masculine connotations face a series of further obstacles. Compared to boys, girls lack money, time, space, transport and access to equipment. They are pressurized (by commercial teen culture and their school friends) to get a boyfriend. The search for romance can devour their time, better preparing them for the role of the fan than for that of musician and, even in this role, young women behave differently from young men.³³

In addition to arguing that women cannot play the electric guitar because of social pressures, Bayton notes that the technology associated with the electric guitar is not appropriate for women. She argues that technological competence is associated with masculinity, whereas femininity involves a socially manufactured physical, mechanical and technical helplessness.³⁴ Although there has been a traditional view that women academically follow the arts, while men enter into maths and sciences, Bayton’s views here seem essentialist. She notes that the technological language of the guitar world works to exclude women, implying that women are incapable of technological, intellectual thought. Susan McClary echoes some of these views in her book, *Feminine Endings*, but unlike Bayton, she acknowledges that women have the *ability* to learn to play the guitar, although social pressures work against this.³⁵

³² Mavis Bayton, “Women and the Electric Guitar,” in *Sexing the Groove*, ed. Sheila Whiteley, (London; New York: Routledge, 1997), 39.

³³ *Ibid.*, 40.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 150.

It has often been commented by scholars such as Sara Cohen that when women do enter the rock world, they are relegated to the position of fan or groupie.³⁶ They can consume rock music, but not be a part of making it. Bayton and Kruse argue that young women engage more with lyrics than with the music. Kruse tries to show that girls and young women participate in pop and rock culture on a number of levels, and can be as emotionally invested in it as males, but that the ways in which they participate differ. Whereas young boys talk about the music, instruments and equipment, young girls talk about the lyrics and the song's danceability.³⁷ It is interesting to see how Kruse associates women with universal lyrics and the body, through dance. This aligns with the mind/body split of the pop/rock world and justifies the perceptions that pop music is feminine.

Women in Rock: The Naturalness of the Singer

When women do become rock musicians, they commonly become singers. Relating back to how in pop music the body is displayed without being hidden by instruments, it follows unsurprisingly that women would become singers in a "male" genre. Certainly, some female rock musicians play instruments, guitar in particular, but a significantly greater number are singers, including Gwen Stefani. Suzanne Cusick, in her article, "On Musical Performances of Gender and Sex," outlines how singing is more natural for females, but she also notes, through reference to Judith Butler, that gender is

³⁶ Sara Cohen, "Popular Music, Gender and Sexuality," in *Pop and Rock*, ed. Simon Frith and Will Straw (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001).

³⁷ Holly Kruse, "Abandoning the Absolute," 149.

performative and, therefore, singing is only natural for women in the performance of themselves. Cusick argues that not only the image of gender, but also the quality of voice is performative; or, in other words, the way in which we speak or sing is a choice we make, whether intentionally or not. The voice in which we speak is ingrained through socialization just as with the way in which we act out genders physically. She remarks

I would like to propose that voices stand for the imperative of sex, because, unlike behaviors we might agree are performances of gender (clothes, gestures, ways of walking), voices originate inside the body's borders and not on the body's surfaces. We assume that physical behaviors originating within the body's borders (in the body's cavities) are determined by their site of origin, by the body itself. Thus, they cannot be "performances," in that they seem not to be choices. In our common sense, we believe the voice *is* the body, its very breath and interior shapes projected outward into the world as a way others might know us, even know us intimately.³⁸

Cusick continues with an argument that voices, like our bodies, are socially constructed. She explains that when we are babies, first learning to talk, we are socialized to speak in a certain manner and pitch that help determine our fundamental concept of self, which becomes fixed. In other words, we are impelled toward certain performances of gender and sex as compulsive behaviours because that is what we have learned through modelling and reinforcement.³⁹ Therefore, speech becomes another primary marker in the performance of gender.

In puberty, males' voices change, although as Cusick notes, it is a change that comes from personal choice in order to portray a certain gender, not a compulsory change. She argues that there is nothing in the physical chain of events that requires a

³⁸ Suzanne Cusick, "On Musical Performances of Sex and Gender," in *audible traces: gender, identity and music*, ed. Elaine Barkin and Lydia Hamessley, (Zurich; Los Angeles: Carciofoli, 1999), 29.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.

boy to lower his voice during puberty, although the vocal chords do change to allow for access to lower registers. Cusick believes that the changing of the male voice is an example of behaviour that is “compulsive without being compulsory.”⁴⁰ Male’s deepening of their voice is not compulsory, but gender expectations tend to ensure that this shall occur during puberty. Because the female voice does not change significantly during puberty, females determine their biological sex and gender as the absence of “change.”⁴¹ Both males and females learn Speech and Song before puberty, but with the onset of change, males often choose not to re-learn Song in their new voice register, whereas females continue to perform Song as they have since infancy.⁴²

This naturalness of the feminine Song is reflected in the sheer number of female singers, not only in rock genres, but also in pop. Interestingly, all of the women included in this study are primarily singers. There are very few women who play instruments besides the acoustic guitar and the piano (which are not inherently male-coded). While there are women who play the electric guitar, they have yet to make significant impacts on the popular music industry beyond novelty status. Cusick argues that rock singers, who sing with added distortion, are demonstrating their refusal to re-learn Song; this distortion could be seen alternatively as a signifier of the genre, or a re-definition of Song. Then again, because of rock’s masculinity, it could also be seen, once again, as a demonstration of their refusal to re-learn Song.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 33.

⁴² Ibid., 35.

The genre of rock music has been gendered male, and it is also implied that to be a rocker, one must be white. The normative definition of rock music as a white, heterosexual male enterprise does not acknowledge its roots in the African styles of blues and R&B, as well as the white-coded styles of country music. Barry Shanks refers to this when he writes, “There should be no argument that the transformations in popular music that we associate with the rise and development of rock were the result of white fascination with black music.”⁴³ Although the genre of rock has been taken over by white artists and coded as white, black music continues to hold a fascination for white artists, as seen in the realm of pop music. Almost every significant change in popular music in the last 40 years has occurred from white musicians appropriating styles coded as black. Women and racial minorities end up being classified as the “others” in the definitions of pop and rock, yet they have always been present and have continued to contribute to its development.

The mind/body split employed throughout our society is reflected continuously in our daily actions, choices, and even performances of gender. The way in which the mind is related to the masculine, the body to the feminine, and the types of behaviour socially designated to each have become internalized and normalized ways of behaviour and thought. Those who act against these norms of feminine and masculine become the “others” in our society. This is especially evident in the music industry, and perhaps more problematized in this area than others because of the omnipresent nature of popular

⁴³ Barry Shanks, “From Rice to Ice,” 256.

music. It is easier for people to question the naturalness of the codification of the guitar as masculine, than the feminization of more private activities, such as sewing. Within the popular music industry, this is seen with the feminine coding of pop music and the masculine coding of rock music. Similarly, popular music genres can also be seen as defined through their coding of race. For example, pop music, or the sub-genre of top-40 pop music, is generally seen as white, whereas R&B is coded as black. The evolution of the popular music industry has resulted in looser genre boundaries with respect to the sound of the music, but signifiers such as race and gender could be argued to have become more important in determining how to label music. The naturalization of the ways in which we, often subconsciously, label music with respect to gender and race is problematic, and it becomes more evident when artists break out of these definitions to become the “others” in a foreign genre. The presences of these “others” force society to examine why it is that they are considered “others,” which, in turn, contributes to breaking down these normative definitions.

~ CHAPTER TWO ~

The Popular Music Press: Women Representing Women?

As normative forces within pop and rock music shape our understanding of gender and genre, the popular music critic enforces these notions through the written press. For example, the credibility accorded to rock musicians as discussed in the previous chapter would be moot if not for the reinforcing discourse present in popular music publications. Through the theory of gatekeeping we find that both the artists themselves and the music critics operate within a process that shapes the public's consciousness. While rock music may be coded as masculine, and pop as feminine, these codings would not be as normative if not for music critics.

As was shown in the previous chapter, the music industry is male-dominated and will remain so because of how credibility and authenticity have been defined within patriarchal discourses. As a means of maintaining these normative definitions of authenticity, women have faced difficulties breaking into publications, such as those which are rock-focused, which do not allow for female markers of credibility. Granted, there are publications, such as smaller indies, which employ a greater number of female staff members, but for the mainstream popular music magazines with high circulation in North America, such as *Rolling Stone*, *Spin* and *Blender*, this is not the case. Men dominate the industry in representation by holding positions of power. Further, many scholars have argued that they have also created and maintained a "masculinist" approach to writing about music, which has left many women feeling the need to write in this

manner in order to be accepted in the industry. This masculinist approach is evident in the ways in which men's contributions are consistently praised as more significant than women's. It reinforces stereotypical gender representation for their readers, reinforcing patriarchal gender ideologies. Unless there is a shift in the musical discourse, women musicians will continue to be judged on their appearance, valued predominantly as sexualized beings and discussed in relation to their personal lives, rather than understood through musicianship.

Also fundamental to the masculinist writing approach is that there are general underlying trends that are common to the way in which most women are written about. This is not to say that absolutely all women become subject to these issues, but there appears to be more of a hegemonic discourse used to write about women, which tends to disregard genre labelling. There are, of course, also problematic ways in which men are written about, but the issue here is that, whereas there are many different styles accorded to writing about men in relation to different popular music genres, women are contained within one category.

This chapter will explore the problematic ways in which women are written about in the press: how their efforts are belittled; the focus on the personal sphere over musicianship; and a highlighting of their appearance. These issues directly correlate to how women are deemed inauthentic and un-credible in rock music. The male dominated arena of rock music, coupled with the male-dominated popular music press, effects how women are perceived in the music industry, while shaping the consciousness of their audiences by creating normative gender representations.

The Women of the Old Boys' Club

Within the popular music industry, women have generally been relegated to the roles of consumer and/or fan, positions that are diametrically opposite to that of critic on the popular music continuum. The irony is that, with women relegated to the role of fan, male musicians and record company owners are dependent upon the female population for their success. More often than not, as will be seen in the examination of how women are represented in the music press, women may be ignored or subordinated because of their gender. On a positive note, the industry is now less bleak than it was in 1998, as described by Mavis Bayton. Most women are now credited with writing their own music.

In contrast, Bayton states in her book, *Frock Rock*,

[Women] have sometimes written their own lyrics, rarely their own music, and there are very few women playing instruments. Currently, women's lives are accompanied by a *male* soundtrack. This has important implications, for popular music permeates modern life and helps to make us the people we are, both reflecting existing gender differences and also actively helping to construct them.⁴⁴

While the focus on female singers is still the case in rock-focused publications such as *Spin*, *Blender* this year named Kelly Clarkson as the number one artist for 2005. Clarkson is a woman who may not play an instrument, but does write many of her songs, while a few were written by other prominent female artists, such as Avril Lavigne and Chantal Kreviasuk. In the same issue, *Blender* also put a woman at the top of its best CDs of 2005 list: M.I.A., a woman who writes all of her own songs and is considered a major innovator in the world of pop/hip hop.

⁴⁴ Mavis Bayton. *Frock Rock: Women Performing Popular Music* (Oxford; New York: Oxford UP, 1998), 1.

Significantly, Bayton observes that, although women may enter into the sanctums of the popular music industry, they inevitably come under the control of male gatekeepers at some point in their career. Since the majority of higher level, management positions are occupied by men, women are dependent on men in order to succeed in the industry and to break through the glass ceiling. Inevitably, women have to play by male rules and codes of conduct. In the words of Bayton, “Thus the careers of female musicians are dependent on the decisions of a series of men in key positions, who filter out the vast majority of bands (whether male or female) as unworthy of attention.”⁴⁵

In this system, women’s rock acts tend to be filtered out or accorded “cult or novelty status.”⁴⁶ The novelty status of female rock acts is also crucial to the ways that they are written about, an issue that will be explored later in this chapter. Whereas male rock acts are divided into multiple genres, each with specific definitions and means of determining credibility, female rock groups are amalgamated under, and defined by, their femininity.

The same holds true for popular music criticism, where only about 15% of critics are women and the stories they are relegated to write tend to be quite different from those of men.⁴⁷ For example, women generally write fewer cover story articles, and the cover stories that they do write tend to be about women artists. Mark Fenster describes the typical, popular music journalist as

almost exclusively white males on the other side of thirty, folks like Dave March, Robert Christgau, and Ed Ward, and the book contracts. Given the

⁴⁵ Ibid., 2.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Kembrew McLeod, “Between rock and a hard place: gender and rock criticism,” in *Pop Music and the Press*, ed. Steve Jones, (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2002), 94.

very limited number of people who can make a living as music journalists and critics – if not a zero-sum game, it is certainly no booming source of new jobs – there is something of a logjam in the professional ranks. And those who have made it are generally older and less diverse (in age, gender, race and ethnicity) than the popular-music audience, not to mention the talent pool itself.⁴⁸

In publications such as *Rolling Stone*, *Spin* and *Blender*, this is still true, but some women are emerging as prolific critics in these magazines. While the major critics are still the “old white males,” many of the female critics are very young: a marker of how long it has taken before they could be accepted in the field. Perhaps these younger women are commanding more respect in their field but, as has been noted and will be further explored, they are still required to write in the traditionally masculinist style of popular music criticism, which is problematic and can be repressive towards women.

According to Lucy O’Brien,

In 1994...the senior editorial team of *Rolling Stone* consisted of two men and two women, while among their contributing editors (including Kurt Loder, Greil Marcus and Robert Palmer) there were three women and twenty-seven men. *Spin* did marginally better with six female and twenty-seven male writers on the masthead, plus one woman among their six top editors.⁴⁹

Today, a glance at these publications’ mastheads reveals little improvement. In *Rolling Stone*, the editor/publisher, two managing editors, two deputy managing editors and three senior editors are all male. Under the next heading, associate editors, one of the seven is female; two of seven assistant editors are female; the assistant to the editor/publisher is female, and three of the five editorial staff are female. There are more women

⁴⁸ Mark Fenster. “Consumer Guides: the political economy of the music press and the democracy of critical discourse,” in *Pop Music and the Press*, ed. Steve Jones, (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2002), 85.

⁴⁹ Lucy O’Brien. *She-Bop II* (London; New York: Continuum, 2002), 441-442.

represented the further down the masthead's hierarchy we look. As for contributing editors, omitting the two labelled as sports and gardening, we are confronted with an alarming statistic – three of the twenty-nine listed are female.⁵⁰ In the twelve years since O'Brien's observations, *Rolling Stone* has not improved whatsoever in the addition of women to their editorial staff.

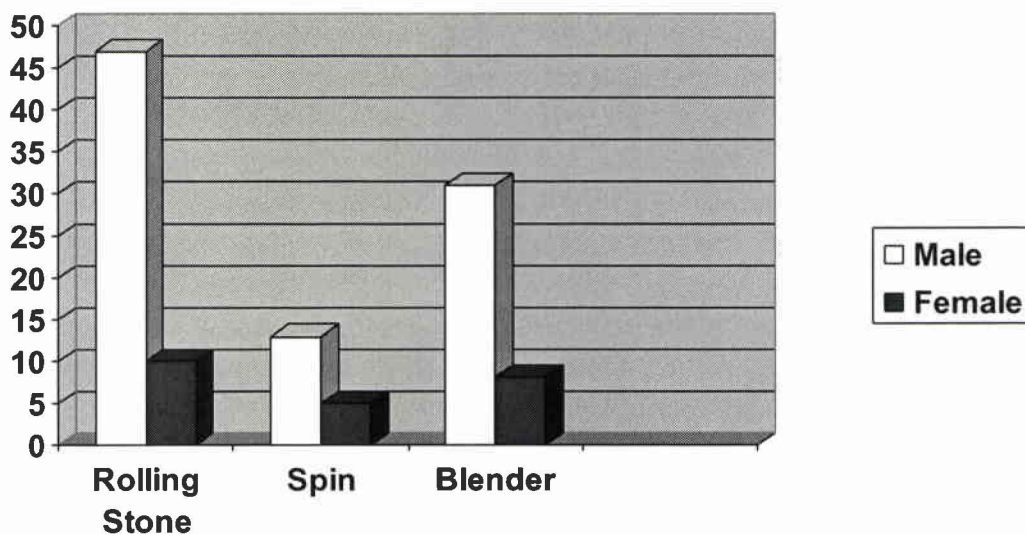
Spin has made a definite improvement in its gender ratio by hiring Sia Michel as the first female editor-in-chief of a major mainstream music magazine. Women are still underrepresented on the masthead, however: the executive editor is male; the managing editor is female; the music editor is male; the two senior associate editors are male; the two associate editors are female; two senior contributors are male; and one of the eight senior contributing writers is female.⁵¹ In *Blender*, currently, the editor-in-chief is male and the managing editor is female, the music editor and senior writer are male, one of the two senior editors is female, the associate editor is male, the editorial assistant is female, and the senior critic is female.⁵² In the list of contributors, four of the thirty mentioned are female. Unfortunately, though, the list includes both writers and photographers without distinction; thus, there is no way to determine how many of the writers are actually male or female. Even so, the list is very heavy on the male side.

⁵⁰ *Rolling Stone* 990/991 (December 29, 2005 – January 12, 2006).

⁵¹ *Spin* 22, no.1 (January 2006).

⁵² *Blender* 44 (January – February 2006).

Table 1: Total of males and females credited on the mastheads of *Rolling Stone*, *Spin*, and *Blender*.



These statistics beg the question: why are there so few female popular music critics/journalists? The most obvious answer would be that the old boys club in this industry simply prevents women from entering the field by not hiring them. This would ultimately discourage other women from applying or seeking out such occupations. As Lewis notes about this hiring practice, “The oft-heard cry among male editors is either ‘Women don’t cut it’ or ‘Our readership is mostly boys anyway, so we have to reflect that.’”⁵³ While the majority of the readers are male, the generally 40/60 female/male gender split of top publications is not reflected at all in the gender ratio of high-end magazine jobs, and when women do break into the industry, they are often relegated to shorter, less serious articles.⁵⁴

In looking the same issues of *Spin*, *Rolling Stone* and *Blender* that were examined for their mastheads, one finds that few women actually publish in the magazine. In

⁵³ Lucy O’Brien, *She Bop II*, 442.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 441.

Blender, for example, of the seventy-two names credited (many of which are repeated), eleven are decidedly female, while four are ambiguous (the four were two people, one credited three times and the other once). In the “Burner” section⁵⁵ two of the fifteen credits were for women. Here, the women’s credits were for short blurbs on Jack White and Phil Spector. In the “Inside” section⁵⁶, none of the eleven credited names were female. In the “Reviews,” eight of the forty-five credits were for females, with the women being credited for both of the concert reviews, a Gwen Stefani and My Morning Jacket concert, and six CD reviews, Ray Davies, Nellie McKay, Scott Stapp, Isaac Hayes, LimpBizkit, and Rickey Nelson.⁵⁷ These figures correlate directly to O’Brien’s assumption that women are relegated to shorter, less serious articles. There is a general lack of women contributors throughout the whole issue, but more importantly, no women contributed to the Inside section, the main, most important section of the magazine, in which the longer and cover-story articles appear.

As for *Spin*, seven out of the fifty-seven names credited were women contributors. Unfortunately, the article titled “40 Best Albums” was credited by initials only, obscuring the gender of the writer. In the opening sections, where the small articles are contained, four of the thirteen credited are female. In the main article section, one of the twenty-one writers is female, and she wrote on the Arcade Fire. In the reviews, two out of twenty-two writers are female: women reviewed Talib Kweli, a respected hip-hop artist, and a

⁵⁵ The “Burner” section occurs at the beginning of the magazine, and is composed of random notes. The subtitle for the “Burner” section in this issue is: “Everything you need to know... and plenty you don’t!”

⁵⁶ The “Inside” section occurs after the “Burner” section. Here is where you will find the main articles. The articles are all at least a page long, and the cover story is included in this section. Following the “Inside” section are the reviews.

⁵⁷ *Blender* 44 (January – February 2006).

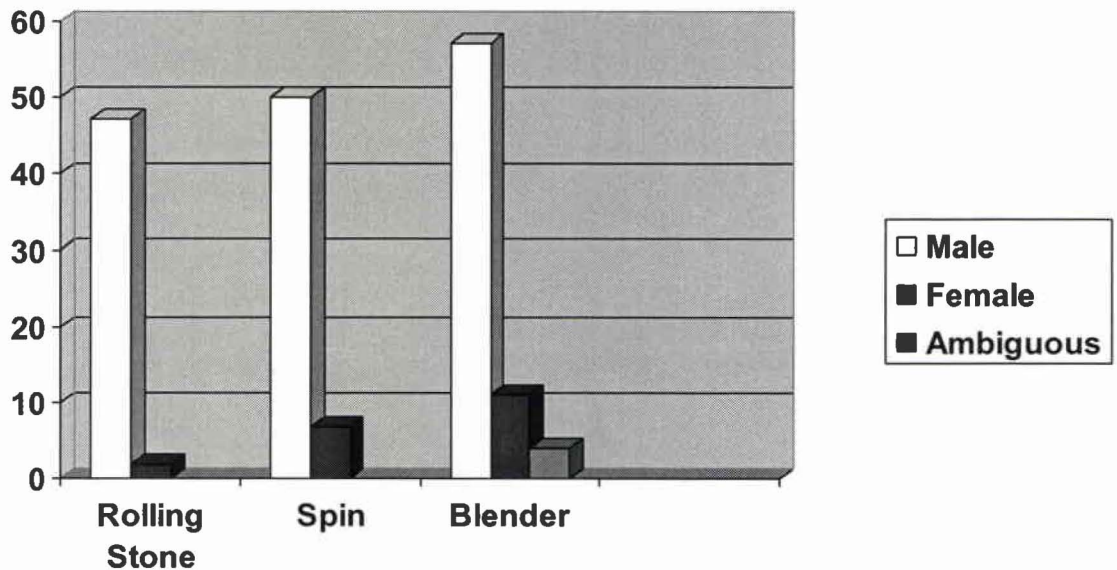
book on Michael Jackson.⁵⁸ Overall, fewer women contribute to *Spin* than *Blender*, though in *Spin* a woman authored a cover story.

This particular *Rolling Stone* is a special double issue and, like the others previously mentioned, it focuses on a summary of the music for the year 2005. In this issue, two of the forty-nine credited contributors are women. In the beginning sections, one of sixteen is female, writing in the Random Notes with two male writers. None of the contributors to the Year in Reviews articles were female. There was one woman, who wrote on Cindy Sheehan, out of the nineteen contributors to the “Mavericks, Renegades and Troublemakers” article.⁵⁹ Comparing the total contribution of women writers, *Rolling Stone* comes in an embarrassing last place, with barely 4% of the writers being female, compared to about 15% for *Blender*, and 12% for *Spin*.

⁵⁸ *Spin* 22, no.1 (January 2006)

⁵⁹ *Rolling Stone* 990/991 (December 29, 2005 – January 12, 2006).

Table 2: Total male- and female-credited articles in *Rolling Stone*, *Spin*, and *Blender*.



There is a vicious cycle within this industry that continually sets up obstacles for women who desire to enter it. In addition to surmounting discriminatory hiring practices, being a successful critic involves becoming acculturated and assimilated into the mores of the specific publication. The old boys club, perhaps in an attempt to maintain their credibility and authenticity in order to retain control and power, may not always allow women to enter into this sphere. Without entrance into this arena, however, it is difficult to learn the appropriate discourse needed for success. As Kembrew McLeod observes:

Perhaps the most significant aspect of rock criticism is its role in maintaining the circulation of particular discourses, and the content of those discourses helps determine who feels comfortable enough to participate and socialize with those in music communities. Engaging in rock criticism often requires one to employ particular cultural references and be aware of certain aesthetic hierarchies; the lack of knowledge can put an aspiring rock critic at a decided disadvantage or dissuade one from even considering that career option.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Kembrew McLeod, "Between rock and a hard place," 95.

Lacking the appropriate discourse, or knowledge, prevents one from gaining access to the true meaning of works and, in turn, gaining access into the correlating social spheres and cognition areas. Because of the fact that, from the start, it has been men in control of the industry of rock music criticism, females have had a difficult time unlocking and opening the door into the old boys club in order to acquire the most important jobs (those higher up on the masthead). Anyone can potentially acquire the in-depth knowledge required to be a music critic, but without the social connections of those already in the industry to provide that added edge, it is a very difficult field to break into.

To further complicate this, the knowledge required to be a successful rock critic can be likened to the masculine form of knowledge necessary in record collecting, something which Will Straw has written extensively on. He illustrates the difference between this type of knowledge and book knowledge and notes that it is important to repress any evidence that this knowledge was easy to acquire.⁶¹ The “collecting” of knowledge by critics is seen as “cool” and “hip,” according to Straw, as opposed to the feminine collecting of personal and ahistorical goods. This knowledge is related to canon formation, since canons are an important aspect of a popular music critic’s knowledge.⁶² Although Straw argues that most forms of collecting, whether male or female, are seen as “uncool” and “nerdish,” the collecting of records, and consequently the collecting of popular music knowledge, is always seen as cool by other men. Straw argues that the difference between the knowledge acquired by cool critics and nerdish book people is the

⁶¹ Ibid., 9.

⁶² Ibid., 7-10.

way in which critics can acquire immense knowledge, but still function well in social situations. In Straw's words:

Males police themselves, not only in terms of the looseness or control which mark bodily gesture, but in the way they "wear" and release the knowledges that they have cultivated. While the dandy, for example, manifests a mastery of the most social of codes, reducible to the surface on which this mastery is displayed, is the frequent basis of his denigration. Conversely, the nerd is noted for a mastery of knowledges whose common trait is that they are of little use in navigating the terrain of social intercourse.⁶³

In the field of journalistic music criticism, critics' acquired knowledge accords them power within their arena and subsequently more recognition and prestige.

In chapter one it was demonstrated that women face difficulties in acquiring credibility and authenticity within male-coded genres such as rock music. The same is true for the male-dominated arena of music criticism. Authenticity is crucial to the music criticism process, and in an attempt to legitimize genres, women tend to be excluded as performers and critics. In rock music, a genre which blurs the boundaries of gender, while still remaining overtly masculine, the presence of a woman could disrupt its authenticity by presenting conflicting presentations of gender. In order to authenticate the musician's performances, male music critics are employed to enhance the masculinity, while maintaining the careful balance between masculinity and the effeminate glamour of the industry. Could a female critic authenticate rock music? According to the old boys club that is the music industry, the answer is an explicit no.

Coupled with being a gender minority, women are at a decided disadvantage. Hopefully, this will change as more women are represented in the publications' reader

⁶³ Ibid., 7-8.

demographics, something that has begun to happen, but, so far, these publications seem to have their male audience as the primary demographic target group.

Female Representation in the Pop Music Press

It is important to look at the ways in which women musicians are represented in the popular media because these representations play an integral role in the normalization of societal roles and expectations. Pamela Shoemaker argues that critics, within the process of gatekeeping, work to *shape* social reality.⁶⁴ This is mirrored by Holly Kruse when she reflects that “the ubiquity of popular criticism means that the ways in which it articulates gender can have a significant impact on how people are socialized into pop and rock music.”⁶⁵ In addition to Kruse, feminist scholars such as Mavis Bayton, Sara Cohen, Diane Railton, Helen Davies and Charlotte Grieg maintain that women, in the popular music press, are represented in problematic ways. They are judged, not by their musicianship, but by their appearance. Women are portrayed as highly sexualized beings, with a focus on their private life, rather than their professional accomplishments.⁶⁶

Drawing on the above-mentioned scholars, four distinct points encapsulate the ways in which women are represented in the popular press. Women are: (1) ignored or

⁶⁴ Pamela Shoemaker, *Gatekeeping*, (Newbury Park, California; London, UK; New Delhi, India: Sage Publications, Inc., 1991), 11.

⁶⁵ Holly Kruse, “Abandoning the Absolute: transcendence and gender in popular music discourse,” in *Pop Music and the Press*, ed. Steve Jones, (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2002), 135.

⁶⁶ It should be noted that there are exceptions in the most widely disseminated publications, but much of the coverage reinforces traditional gender stereotypes in problematic ways. Many of the studies by the above-mentioned scholars present extracts from the music press to support their opinions. I understand that this chapter could be seen as falling into this trap as well, but I have made every attempt to provide a fair presentation of each publication. Even as such, the following examples are obviously selected to support a specific point, and it is not necessarily true that they present a definitive observation of the music press.

their contributions to the industry are belittled, especially in the case of rock music; (2) discussed as a homogenous group; (3) judged on their appearance and sexuality, and (4) there is a focus on their private versus public lives.

On the issue of the belittling of women's contributions to popular music history, Brenda Johnson-Grau contends that women's presence has been continual and constant, but heavily underrepresented in the press.⁶⁷ She also notes that, because the industry is controlled by men, critics have the opportunity to re-define genres, such as rock, in order to exclude women after the fact. For example, many girl groups in the 1960s were defined as rock acts by their advertisements and managers, but when discussed in the press by male critics, their rock status was diminished to the point that no one now would consider them to be rock groups.⁶⁸ There is no doubt that genres evolve over time, but it can be argued that music critics have a significant impact on how they are defined. Because most critics are male, they can define rock in ways that exclude or obscure the presence of females, thereby ensuring and perpetuating masculinist understandings of authenticity and credibility. As Helen Davies observes, "the vast majority of music journalists are male, and it is unsurprising that they should tend to admire most the artists with whom they can most identify, i.e. other men."⁶⁹

In the realm of pop music, especially top-40 or bubblegum pop, women dominate as performers, for in these genres, it is acceptable for women to be present because of the

⁶⁷ Brenda Johnson-Grau, "Sweet Nothings: Presentations of Women Musicians in Pop Journalism," *Pop Music and the Press*, ed. Steve Jones, (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2002), 202.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 204.

⁶⁹ Helen Davies, "The Great Rock and Roll Swindle: The Representations of Women in the British Music Press," *Critical Readings: Media and Gender*, ed. Cynthia Carter and Linda Steiner, (England, Open UP, 2004), 163.

focus on the body and the prominence of singers over instrumentalists. The classification of women as a homogenous group, i.e., “women in rock,” further belittles their contributions, as rock tends to view their participation as a novelty lacking the inherent respect afforded men. In the words of Helen Davies

Any threat posed by female artists is neutralized by their unfavorable comparison with men. At the same time, female artists, even those performing completely different styles of music, are treated as a homogenous group. Their femaleness is deemed to give them something in common; an assumption reinforced by feminist rewritings of rock history.⁷⁰

And Brenda Johnson-Grau:

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 the participants wearing gender-specific headphones.⁷¹

The way in which women are only compared to other women makes it difficult for women to be respected and afforded the credibility that they deserve. When women are only compared to other women, they may be praised as great, but in being deemed great, it is implied that they are great, *for a woman*. Though women’s voices are somewhat different than men’s, they can perform the same *style* of music and even obtain similar timbral qualities with their voices. The only reasonable explanation, as has been mentioned numerous times already, is the male dominance of the industry and the apparent desire to maintain male credibility, authenticity and control. Certainly, some men in the industry are quick to challenge these views. In a telephone conversation with

⁷⁰ Helen Davies, “The Great Rock and Roll Swindle,” 164.

⁷¹ Brenda Johnson-Grau, “Sweet Nothings,” 210.

Jason Phillips of *Spin* magazine, I asked how women were represented in the publication and alluded to the difficulty of women obtaining credibility within the rock genre. Phillips stressed the importance of women in the industry, but he could only mention one female artist, Karen O of the Yeah Yeah Yeahs, in order to make his point.⁷² Karen O has often been defined as a rock star in *Spin* magazine, but the problem remains: she is always noted as being a *woman* within this genre. Why is it necessary to make the point that she is a woman? Again, we come back to the point that women are often compared to other women, but when compared to men, the point is subtly made that it is almost impossible for a female to be on par with a male rock star.

Although *Blender* and *Spin* are very much at fault in reinforcing the notion that “women in rock” are exceptional, a prime example comes from *Rolling Stone*’s October 31, 2002, issue entitled “Women in Rock: Special Issue.” True, it is wonderful, and a step forward, that these women are honoured for their talents, but the way they are all encapsulated into this “women in rock” title is problematic. While the publication itself, with its focus on female talents, is encouraging, it is the way in which it is titled that promotes female otherness in the popular music industry. Employing the phrase “women in rock” in the title already implies how extraordinary it is that women could gain respect in this business. The fold-out cover of this issue names thirty women, divided into the categories of “Starring”⁷³ and “Featuring,”⁷⁴ who are all incredibly talented and have made tremendous contributions to popular music. They range through all genres of

⁷² Jason Phillips, Advertising Co-ordinator, *Spin* phone interview, November 21, 2005.

⁷³ Britney, Shakira, Mary J. Blige, Avril Lavigne, Ashanti, Norah Jones, Cher, Lil’ Kim, Alanis Morissette, Joni Mitchell, Pink, Sharon Osbourne, Michelle Branch, Tori Amos, Nikka Costa, Sleater-Kinney.

⁷⁴ The Supremes, Janis Joplin, P.J. Harvey, Dusty Springfield, Deborah Harry, Irma Thomas, Patti Smith, Patsy Cline, Dionne Warwick, Madonna, Aretha Franklin, Carole King, Tina Turner, Joan Jett.

popular music, but few are actually defined as rock. In fact, the issue ignores differences of genre. Instead of being recognized for their talents within their respective genres, the featured musicians are compared as women, to other women, regardless of genre.

Despite the tokenism of the issue, when one actually reads the interviews with the artists, it reveals a very different story. The interviews expose the artists for their importance to their respective genres, and the questions open up a space for them to talk freely about the double standards in the music industry, the problematic way in which the focus on female artists is their bodies and how their history has virtually been ignored. When asked what effect being a female has had on her career, Jewel reflected on the fact that she

always felt like there were so many women before us – it wasn't like we were doing anything new or anything better than Etta James and Joni Mitchell. I think right now it's harder to get played on the air as a girl. I think you have to be young and cute and sexy for MTV to want to play you. Whereas men definitely don't have that problem – they can be fat and hairy. And that's great, but it isn't that way for women. As much as Madonna liberated women in music, I think she also set the standard for sex selling in music...I never felt like I had to do a T&A video.⁷⁵

Although her comments about the industry are well put, on her next CD, she adopted a sexy image, accompanied by a "T&A video." The music video created controversy because of its explicit sexuality, again reinforcing the need for women in the music industry to employ image, rather than musical talent, to gain success – sex sells.

The problematic focus on the body is also raised when Sheryl Crow remarks in her interview, "Music has become generic, and now it's all about the images. It's made it virtually impossible to be ugly and popular. And it's really manipulating how young

⁷⁵ Jancee Dunn, "Women in Rock: Jewel," *Rolling Stone* 908 (October 21, 2002): 78. (78-79)

girls see themselves, how they define beauty.”⁷⁶ In her interview, Mary J. Blige notes that “now you got to be drop-dead gorgeous, you got to be a toothpick, you got to be willing to show your butt crack. It’s kind of like, ‘Damn.’ We all like to be sexy and cute and show our workout off. But there’s some of us out there with talent who don’t want to show all that.”⁷⁷

Because genre definitions work to exclude women musicians, who are then treated as a homogenous group, women have become the “other” of popular music.

Holly Kruse notes

Traditionally, popular male-generated criticism has tended to view women from a few different angles, all of which seem to assume at some level that women involved in rock and roll are anomalies, “others,” and therefore can be talked about in ways that would be unthinkable for speaking of male artists and fans. For instance, it remains permissible for male critics to review female musicians’ bodies, attire, and sexual desirability as well as (and sometimes in lieu of) their songs.⁷⁸

Women are judged more by their appearance and sexuality than by their musicianship.

Helen Davies argues that the highly sexualized representation of women occurs because “individual male journalists are unable to view women as anything other than sex objects,” and that, in order to be accepted into the field, women critics feel the need to write in a similarly sexist way.⁷⁹

Opening up almost any issue of *Blender*, *Spin* or *Rolling Stone* will reveal examples of the focus on women’s appearances and personal lives. Interviews often begin with a short blurb about what the artist is wearing, something that is usually

⁷⁶ David Wild, “Women in Rock: Sheryl Crow,” *Rolling Stone* 908 (October 21, 2002): 69. (66-69)

⁷⁷ Jancee Dunn, “Women in Rock: Mary J. Blige,” *Rolling Stone* 908 (October 21, 2002): 62. (62-63).

⁷⁸ Holly Kruse, “Abandoning the Absolute,” 135.

⁷⁹ Helen Davies, “The Great Rock and Roll Swindle,” 166.

ignored or underplayed during interviews with male artists. For example, in the cover-story article/interview with Pink, in *Spin*'s May 2002 issue, the first paragraph outlines how she is on the phone with her boyfriend, how her asthma has affected her career and the fact that she has ulcers. After noting her private-life troubles, it goes into how she appears:

Standing in Santa Monica, with the Pacific Ocean at her back, Pink, 22, is looking sort of yellow this late-February afternoon – like a sickly skate rat in black hoodie, bedhead, and no makeup. She's got blue polish on stubby nails, a red thong peeking out of her baggy jeans, and, under her arm, a motorcycle helmet.⁸⁰

In contrast, a few pages after the Pink article, there is an interview with Nickelback. While the appearance of lead singer, Chad Kroeger, is noted, it is not until the second page and after Kroeger has recounted his band's formation, their drug use, what their music sounds like and the band members' names. When the lead singer's appearance is mentioned, the description is brief and vague:

Kroeger is a tall, leggy cat with streaked curly hair – he's working a sort of Frampton for-the-early-'90s look – and an arena-size ego to match. Like many lead singers, Chad likes to believe that any woman in any room is in love with him. And chances are, he's right.⁸¹

Kroeger's appearance is provided, but it is immediately related to a marker of heterosexual male rock authenticity – the ability to attract women with his enormous personality. Alternately, if a woman is known for her arena-size ego, she will most likely be portrayed as a diva, which is usually construed as unflattering. Interestingly, both the Nickelback and Pink articles were written by a female critic, Kate Sullivan. She has

⁸⁰ Kate Sullivan, "Bad Girl for Life," *Spin* 18, no.5 (May 2002): 70. (68-72)

⁸¹ Kate Sullivan, "We're a Canadian Band," *Spin* 18, no.5 (May 2002): 82. (80-84)

clearly adopted the critical practice of writing about males and females in different manners.

The final way in which women are written about in a way that minimizes their musicianship is that their private lives then take precedence in their representation. Brenda Johnson-Grau writes that “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.”⁸² Generally, male rock stars have the ability to keep their private life away from the public eye. There may be women and/or children in their lives, but they do not often come out in the press: the focus remains on the artist. For women musicians, the focus shifts to the males in their lives and subsequently, any children from that partnership, thereby subtly deflecting attention from the women as artists. In the case of males in top-40 pop music, it is becoming more evident that they have women in their lives, because like female pop stars, there is more of a focus on the body and their sexualized nature within that genre. In rap music, there can be a focus on who a male rapper is dating, but there are more compelling issues surrounding how women are represented in rap music (i.e. demeaning representations of submissiveness in music videos), regardless of whether they are rap artists themselves or associated with a male rap star.

As for women in rock, attention and interest revolve around their private lives. Returning to Karen O, although she is often considered one of the few females who can rock like a male, there is still a focus on the fact that her two band-mates are male and an

⁸² Brenda Johnson-Grau, “Sweet Nothings,” 214.

understanding of how their relationships function. Brody Dalle of the Distillers is another female who has managed to break into the male-dominated rock world, but lately, the media has focused on her relationship with Queens of the Stone Age front-man, Josh Homme, and the fact that she is about to have a child with him.

This chapter has shown that there is definitely a double-standard in regard to how males and females musicians are represented in the popular music press. Men tend to be represented differently according to which genre they belong, with each genre affording a different definition of credibility/authenticity. Females, on the other hand, tend to be placed in a homogenous group, ignoring genre difference. They are compared to each other *as women*, with the implication that women's acts are a novelty item and that, regardless of genre, they could never be as talented as their male counterparts. The following three chapters explore these issues in the contemporary popular music press through case studies on Gwen Stefani, Beyoncé Knowles, and Britney Spears. Each woman presents a different challenge for understanding representation, in which feminist interpretations and aims tend to be undermined in popular music criticism.

~ CHAPTER THREE ~

Gwen Stefani: “Cause I’m Just a Girl, Guess I’m Some Kinda Freak”

Gwen Stefani has achieved respect within both the male-dominated industry of rock music and the feminine-coded arena of top-40 pop music. She rose to fame with the ska/rock band, No Doubt, and in 2004 went solo with her album, *Long Angel Music Baby*. Although she has been labelled as, “the girl in the band,” her solo album, thus far, has sold far more records than any of No Doubt’s four releases. As the girl in the band, Stefani has maintained her “girlie” persona, while still commanding respect from rock audiences. This girliness, which has bloomed exponentially since the release of her solo album, has been reflected journalistically in the representation of her in the publications of *Spin*, *Blender*, and *Rolling Stone*.

Born on October 3, 1969, in Anaheim, California, to Dennis Stefani and Patti Flynn, Gwen Stefani was attending Loara High School when she was introduced to the band No Doubt.⁸³ Originally, the band consisted of her brother, Eric Stefani, along with Tony Kanal, Tom Dumont, John Spence and Adrian Young. While Stefani was dating Tony Kanal, John Spence, the band’s lead singer, committed suicide and Eric Stefani left to pursue a career in animation, paving the way for Gwen Stefani to fill in as lead vocalist. She had previously sung back-up for some of their concerts, but suddenly the entire lyric writing position was thrown into her lap. Songwriting turned out to be a

⁸³ “Gwen Stefani,” *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gwen_Stefani (accessed February 6, 2006).

calling for Stefani, and a positive, therapeutic way in which to deal with the emotions and turmoil caused by her break-up with Kanal. According to her official website:

We've all had that moment when we sense that things are about to change. For Gwen Stefani, that epiphany occurred as a high school senior in Orange County. "I remember being this 17 year-old girl, in love and really excited about my future with the boy that I though was going to be my husband and we'd have babies and that," she pauses, "was my passions. Then I learned that I could write songs and that is when my life changed. I went from being this really passive girl to "Oh my God. This makes me feel so powerful when I write these words." It was such a turning point to find that I had a talent and I had something to contribute, somewhere."⁸⁴

Stefani has never hidden her desire to be a wife and mother, and this has been reflected in her songs. The wording in the above quote suggests that writing songs has become a form of procreation for her.

As Stefani became an active member of No Doubt, by shaping lyrics around her personal experiences, songwriting seemed to fill the void of the children that she desired at the time. Her private life's translation into public songs is especially evident in the band's third album (but first internationally successful recording), *Tragic Kingdom* (1995), in which songs such as "Don't Speak," "Just a Girl" and "Excuse Me Mr." recount her break-up with Kanal. In 1995, Stefani met Bush front-man Gavin Rossdale at a No Doubt concert for the promotion of *Tragic Kingdom*.⁸⁵ Stefani and Rossdale were married in 2002 and announced in late 2005 that she was pregnant; after much speculation that she would never find the time to take a break from the music business and start a family, her childhood dream was finally becoming a reality.

⁸⁴ "Gwen Stefani," *Official Website*, http://www.gwenstefani.com/main/bios/bios_gwen.asp (accessed January 28, 2006).

⁸⁵ "Gwen Stefani," *Wikipedia*.

My examination of her representation in *Rolling Stone*, *Blender* and *Spin* reveals that Stefani has managed to break down music industry barriers enough to be appreciated by both pop and rock critics and fans. Because of Stefani's start in the rock industry, she was originally covered in both *Spin* and *Rolling Stone*. As she progressed into more pop-oriented music with her solo career, *Spin* continued to cover her because of the reputation and impact she had already made on the publication's readers. As explained in the introduction, magazine articles are organized into three sections: reviews, feature articles and random notes. Reviews include both CD and concert reviews, and feature articles are fairly self-explanatory. Often in feature articles, Stefani and/or No Doubt are present on the cover of that issue. Random notes include short mentions of Stefani, usually in the front sections of the magazines, such as upcoming shows and recording dates.

Reviews

Two main themes are highlighted in reviews of releases by both No Doubt and Stefani as a solo artist that have been published by *Rolling Stone*, *Spin* and *Blender*: a difficulty in locating the music within a specific genre and the increasing reference to Stefani's appearance and girliness. When No Doubt were first being reviewed, Stefani was judged more as an equal member of the band, but as the band achieved greater fame and Stefani ventured into increasingly pop-oriented music, her portrayal changed to reflect the feminine coding of top-40 pop music. For that reason, representations of Stefani's girliness began to affect her credibility as a rock artist/star.

Unfortunately, few reviews of Stefani in *Spin* were available for this study,⁸⁶ and Stefani's solo release, *Love Angel Music Baby* (2004), was not even reviewed. Although she maintains credibility with many rock audiences, her pop-inspired solo album was apparently not rock enough for *Spin* to review. Fortunately, there is a review by Steve Kandell, in *Spin*'s July 2002 issue, of her April 17, 2002, concert at the Roseland Ballroom in New York City. As will be noted later in this chapter, *Spin* does cover Stefani in its random notes sections and feature articles.

An ongoing theme in *Spin*, as well as *Blender* and *Rolling Stone*, is the difficulty critics have in defining, and therefore placing No Doubt within a single genre. In his July 2002 review, Kandell acknowledges the different influences that the band employs – dancehall rhythms, 80s music and new wave – but still argues in support of Stefani's credibility. As Kandell writes:

The trick...is to change for the times just enough while never straying too far from everything that makes them No Doubt. Lately, that's meant playing around with new musical accoutrements like dancehall rhythms, while indulging the 80s music of their Orange Country origins... As her bandmates executed the sleek, streamlined dance rhythms of "Hella Good," Gwen Stefani bounded onstage, looking just like the Stefani of seven years ago, right down to the exposed midriff. Adrian Young's drumming made the song sound harder than anything the band has done in before, but Stefani managed to put across the same sense of coy edginess that she's been perfecting since the mid-90s. The only time her act seemed contrived was when she engaged in some hackneyed and not quite geographically correct road banter.

Acknowledging Stefani's lack of contrivance is a first step in her being accorded any sense of rock credibility. Emotional honesty, which Stefani always employs, is critical to

⁸⁶ At the time, there was no public access to *Spin* magazine back-issues through any libraries in Ontario. My personal collection only extends back to 2001: much later than No Doubt first began releasing albums.

gaining credibility, as well as her ability to play diverse musical styles without seeming forced or motivated by monetary reasons. While Simon Reynolds' criteria, as outlined in chapter one, for how women can obtain rock credibility may be flawed, Stefani models many of the characteristics: the infusion of rock with feminine qualities; the celebration of feminine imagery, while not being reduced to clichés; and the use of an approach that is centered on female subjectivity and the trauma of identity formation, in which gender is neither an essence nor a strategic series of personae, but rather a painful tension between the two dominant genders.⁸⁷ Stefani exhibits some aspects of credibility, but the fact that she is a singer who cannot adequately play any instrument reinforces essentialist notions of femininity, as located through the “naturalness” of the female voice. This reinforces the societal norm that women can be in rock bands as long as they are relegated to positions that are seen as feminine – i.e. the singer, as opposed to the electric guitar, which is coded as masculine according Mavis Bayton.

It cannot be ignored that credibility and authenticity are complex terms. Richard Dyer, in theorizing about the phenomenon that is the “star,” notes that film stars, in the same sense as music stars, play characters. The more true they are to the character they are portraying, the higher the positive correlation will be with their perceived authenticity. Following from Dyer, then, although Stefani's authenticity is put into question by the press because of her emphasis on femininity, the way in which her onstage persona is highly reflective of who she is offstage defines her as a more authentic

⁸⁷ Simon Reynolds, *The Sex Revolts: Gender, Rebellion and Rock 'n' Roll* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1995), 233.

star.⁸⁸ When examining how Stefani's authenticity becomes problematic within genre-labelling, Dyer's formulations provide valuable insight into why she is still accorded a certain degree of authenticity within rock music, without fully conforming to its definitions of credibility.

This problematic genre labelling of Stefani and No Doubt's music has plagued them from their first *Rolling Stone* review in 1996, a joint review of *Tragic Kingdom* and 311's self-titled album. As No Doubt had not achieved any commercial success with earlier releases, it is interesting to see how they were originally written about and labelled musically. David Fricke wrote

It's the rhythm, stupid. Oh, and in No Doubt's case, a platinum-blond peach of a female singer, Gwen Stefani, who breaks up the asexual baggy-shorts-and balloon-pants monotony of alt-nation guy rock (311 included)... both bands are remarkably adept at genre juggling. No Doubt have on ska and white suburban takes on ska and Blondie-esque pop.⁸⁹

This issue of genre labelling continues to plague Stefani's career, including her solo album, *Love Angel Music Baby*.

Two other issues surface in the *Rolling Stone* review: Stefani is marked by her appearance, an issue which becomes increasingly complicated as her music evolves; and, more notably, she is fore-fronted as a *singer* in this article. In contrast to the above reviews, *Blender's* reviews from 2001 to the present increasingly focus on Stefani's girliness and appearance, both as a solo artist and member of No Doubt. This focus parallels Stefani's venturing further into the realm of top-40 pop, and in turn, increasingly reinforces stereotypical ideals within feminine-coded pop music. In these reviews,

⁸⁸ Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: Educational Advisory Service, British Film Institute, 1979), 22-24.

⁸⁹ David Fricke, "Tragic Kingdom/311," *Rolling Stone* 750-751 (December 1996 – January 1997): 195.

Stefani is ultimately represented as a blonde girl, who is primarily an entertainer, and an artist, whose singing skills are considered suspect.

This was not always the case, as can be seen in *Blender's* reviews of *Rock Steady* and *The Singles: 1992-2003* (from 2002 and 2003 issues, respectively). In both, Stefani is honoured as a good singer and the band as one that anyone can enjoy and appreciate.

In the words of Rupert Howe

And so on to *Rock Steady*, No Doubt's fifth album. It, too, offers something for everyone – and ends up an intermittently engaging but overall shapeless collection. Drawing on everything from funk to dancehall, it's the product of happy-go-lucky musicians who once cavorted in bad tack suits but now spend their days commuting between London, Jamaica and Los Angeles seeking the wisdom of expensive studio geeks...At such times, No Doubt sound just as they should: like a twenty-first-century Blondie... Of course, Stefani still has a wonderful voice...and the band can lay down a decidedly funkadelic groove.⁹⁰

This is supported by James Hunter's 2003 review when he remarks:

In the early 90s, when the World Was Grunge, five Anaheim, California, fans of Madness and other second generation ska... a band actually within shouting distance of such marketplace royals as Sting and Shania Twain... No Doubt eclipse their own blond fairy tale, though... The track is everything – beats, sonic energy, color, Stefani's confidence and wonder, beauty, gawkiness – that makes No Doubt a great band.⁹¹

Two later reviews, representative of the change in journalistic focus, come from *Blender's* November 2004 and January/February 2005 issues. The terms used to describe Stefani changed, even though she maintained the same, if not an increased level of popularity. For example, Laura Sinagra describes Stefani as the "marriage-minded tomboy agonizing over the task of taming restless playboys" while RJ Smith notes that

⁹⁰ Rupert Howe, "No Doubt: Rock Steady," from *Blender: The Guide*, <http://www.blender.com/guide/reviews.aspx?id=1117> (accessed January 28, 2006).

⁹¹ James Hunter, "No Doubt: The Singles 1992-2003," from *Blender: The Guide* <http://www.blender.com/guide/reviews.aspx?id=1526> (accessed January 28, 2006).

“during a dozen years as pop’s valley girl next door, she’s carved out a reputation as a humble Cinderella who somehow keeps hitting the lotto – whether it’s with hits, boyfriends or *Vogue* covers.”⁹² ⁹³ Here, the same aspects of her personality, which have previously been honoured in *Spin*, are now being mocked. Instead of heralding her hopes to be a wife and a commercial success, an image is created, in which Stefani is dependent on outside variables and she is merely the recipient of good luck and expert timing. Not acknowledging Stefani’s own sense of autonomy as a factor in her success drastically reduces her credibility. Whereas hard work is a marker of authenticity, this characterization supports the markers of pop construction and commodity.

In subsequent reviews of No Doubt and Stefani, it becomes evident that *Rolling Stone* tends to highlight Stefani’s girlie-ness more than the other publications. Although Stefani has no qualms about exhibiting stereotypically feminine qualities and being referred to as a girl, her song choices have also contributed to her labelling as a girl. No Doubt’s first hit single, “Just a Girl,” in addition to being influential in the pop culture realm, essentially solidified Stefani’s acquisition of the girlie label, for which Stefani herself can assume responsibility because she wrote the lyrics. The lyrics summarize the double-standard that exists between young men and women. She uses the word girl to emulate normative, societal, gender power relationships and distinctions in an effort to show their destructive force, but others have since used the word to define Stefani herself.

Stefani’s femininity has been highlighted in complicated ways, particularly within

⁹² Laura Sinagra, “No Doubt: Everything in Time,” *Blender* 31 (November 2004): 158.

⁹³ RJ Smith, “Turning Japanese: Blender’s Woman of the Year ♥s the ‘80s on uneven solo bid” *Blender* 33 (January – February 2005): 112.

Rolling Stone. A first example comes from the January 17, 2002, review of *Rock Steady*, where Rob Sheffield writes

But we still haven't gotten over No Doubt's Gwen Stefani, who lingers around the radio like that last of the hot-pink rock chick. Stefani wears her all-American vulnerabilities and anxieties in public not because it's a fashionably alienated pose but because she's vulnerable and anxious. She's a pure product of the American girl factory: blunt and guileless in detailing the ways that femininity has screwed her up and screwed her over. She's not coy about pleasures, either; she's a loudmouth party girl in the grand Eighties lineage of Pat Benatar, Dale Bozzio and Debbie Gibson... she added the right gum-snapping Valley Girl sass to Moby's "South Side," and she blew ya mind with Eve in "Let Me Blow Ya Mind," which showed just how much trouble a hip-hop girl and a New Wave girl can get each other into if the beat is right.⁹⁴

The second example, from the December 9, 2004, review of *Love Angel Music Baby*, is also by Rob Sheffield:

For her first solo album, Gwen Stefani could have gone the solemn schlock route. But fortunately, she obeys her disco instinct on *Love Angel Music Baby*. It's an irresistible party: trashy, hedonistic and deeply weird. Stefani's gum-snapping sass brings out the beast in her bandmasters, especially the Neptunes in "Hollaback Girl" and Andre 3000 in "Bubble Pop Electric." Dr. Dre and Eve appear in the Fiddler on the Roof/goof "Rich Girl." She sings repeatedly about her obsession with "Harajuku Girls," until she sounds like a Japanese pop princess in Valley Girl drag. And anyone who can get New Order on the same track and Wendy and Lisa ("Real Thing") is some kind of visionary.

Finally, Barry Walters's review of *Return to Saturn* highlights the complicated labelling of Stefani as a girl:

By the time Stefani softly confesses, "I always thought I'd be a mom/Sometimes I wish for a mistake," it's clear this woman whom many desire but few regard as a serious artist has penned a song that can sit on the same shelf with the likes of Elliot Smith and Aimee Mann. Her cutesy vocal mannerisms are gone, replaced by a longing that haunts well after the final chorus... Stefani matches the guy's power with a serious restless

⁹⁴ Rob Sheffield, "Rock Steady," *Rolling Stone* 887 (January 17, 2002): 47-49.

streak... No longer just a girl, this skanking flirt has finally grown into a woman.⁹⁵

This is a curious response, accentuating the complexity that seems to be Stefani. In his effort to prove that Stefani is just as much a rock star as her band-mates, Walters notes that few people consider Stefani to be a serious artist, though no other reviews or articles have questioned her status as such. Walters acknowledges that she has become a woman and that her girliness has disappeared, but in actual fact, it has not. Stefani's image and personality have not changed whatsoever throughout the course of her career, and it could be argued that they have actually become more concrete. It is significant that Walters attempts to downplay her girliness in order to argue for her rock credibility. This review ultimately reinforces the paradigm of male-dominated rock as the norm, in which a woman can only be present if she is "one of the guys."

Feature Articles

The following examination of feature articles is organized by publication in order to forefront the differing topics that each publication, as a gatekeeper, chooses to highlight. *Spin* focuses on genre authenticity in its fairly constant coverage of No Doubt and Stefani, with feature articles first appearing in 1996. In its one available feature article, *Blender* focuses mainly on Stefani's appearance, rather than musicianship. Like *Blender*, *Rolling Stone* tends to highlight Stefani's appearance, but it also considers her personal life, especially in terms of woman's issues, such as pregnancy, relationships with men and even menstruation.

⁹⁵ Barry Walters, "Return of Saturn," *Rolling Stone* 839 (April 27, 2000): 65-67.

Of the three publications covered in this study, Stefani has had the most feature articles in *Rolling Stone*. Although readership is a factor, it goes beyond just target demographics. The fact that *Blender* was not conceived until 2001, has created limited opportunities for feature articles, specifically on No Doubt, as that is the same year that No Doubt released their last album together (*Rock Steady*). *Spin* has maintained a fairly constant coverage of No Doubt and Stefani, with feature articles beginning as far back as 1996, the same time as *Rolling Stone* commenced coverage.

Stefani was featured on the cover for *Spin*'s 1996 article, "Riot Girlie: No Doubt just wanna have fun." Using the term Riot Girlie implies a connection between Stefani and the Riot Girl movement. Although she is a girl, and acknowledges her potential to be a role model to younger women, Stefani has never directly referred to herself as a feminist. When interviewers address feminist issues, Stefani appears to shy away and maintains that she enjoys being a girl and identifies with traditional ideals of what it means to be feminine. In her own words, "Maybe I should be more of a tough chick. But I'm not. That's not me. I love makeup. I love getting my hair done. I love getting pedicures. I'm the furthest thing from a rock chick."⁹⁶ This is not to say that she does not exude feminist tendencies; there are many different ways in which one can be a feminist, and even though Stefani may not define herself as one, her actions speak louder than her words. Even if Stefani does not outwardly associate herself with a feminist ideology, quotations such as this reflect the type of woman whom Naomi Wolf addressed in her writings from the early 1990s. For example, Wolf's *Fire with Fire* rejects the hold

⁹⁶ Ibid., 60.

that “victim feminism” had over the public’s perception of feminism, and argues for the concept of “power feminism.”⁹⁷ Power feminism urges woman to achieve power and create a difference in socially accepted views of gender from a position of power. At the core of Wolf’s power feminism is the belief that to be a feminist is to be human – women should be able to proclaim their beliefs without negative reactions from other women.⁹⁸ If a woman’s beliefs and personal preferences are to be a girlie-girl and take pleasure in getting her hair done, then this should be respected by others, including women.⁹⁹

In the text of the article, Jonathan Bernstein provides an historical account of the band. As this was their first feature article in a major music publication since achieving commercial success with *Tragic Kingdom*, Bernstein’s account would be useful for those who are not yet familiar with the band. Counter to the topics of representation proposed in chapter two, Bernstein does not focus solely on the appearance of Stefani but spends an equal amount of time recounting what each band member is wearing or tends to wear at home and on stage. With the following description of Stefani and her fans, Bernstein establishes the article’s tone, one in which Stefani emerges as the most important member of the band:

⁹⁷ Victim feminism, as noted by Wolf, focuses on the woman as victim, versus the power that the woman has the potential to achieve. Victim feminism cuts off the attempt at a dialogue between men and woman as equals, and thus many of its advocates acquire negative labels such as “man haters.”

⁹⁸ Naomi Wolf, *Fire with Fire: the new female power and how it will change the 21st century*, (Toronto: Random House of Canada, 1993).

⁹⁹ Wolf sums up the core tenets of power feminism as follows:

1. Women matter as much as men do.
2. Women have the right to determine their lives.
3. Women’s experiences matter.
4. Women have the right to tell the truth about their experiences.
5. Women deserve more of whatever it is they are not getting enough of because they are woman: respect, self-respect, education, safety, health, representation, money.⁹⁹

Smatterings of breathlessly excited, blonde-streaked, sparkle-lashed 14-year-olds litter the backstage area of San Francisco's fabled Fillmore. Oblivious to the portraits of Janis, Jimi, and the Jefferson Airplane scattered around the venue, these girls line up to press tokens of esteem on the recently adopted object of their devotion, No Doubt's bare-midriffed, high-octane frontwoman, Gwen Stefani... Such heartwarming scenes of girly empowerment, acted out nightly and with increasing glee during No Doubt's unlikely climb to stardom, must no doubt be growing commonplace, maybe even tiresome, to the boys in the band.¹⁰⁰

This account is almost synonymous with the characterization of a female pop star and her newly adoring, young, female fans. While Bernstein addresses the problematic manner in which Stefani has been singled out as the star in the band and discusses each member in depth, he still accords more space to Stefani in order to reflect how she has been showcased in the media.

The fact remains, and Bernstein alludes to this, that although the band has unwittingly reaped the benefits of Stefani's fame and notoriety, it is unlikely that No Doubt would have been as successful as they have become without her presence. Stefani is also aware of this: "we sucked... but for some reason there was automatically this built-in following. People loved the fact that it was a girl, that it was 2-tone, that is was me and John up there."¹⁰¹ Bernstein gives a voice to the band that seems bitter about the fact that Stefani is always in the forefront of their media coverage, and Stefani has no qualms about agreeing with them. Stefani admits that everyone wants to focus on her, and she even jokes about it, "Like, 'On MTV News, Gwen broke her foot last night blah blah blah...and in less important news, Tom Dumont was found dead.'"¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Jonathan Bernstein, "Get Happy," *Spin* 12, no.8 (November 1996): 54. (52-60)

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 56.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 60.

The posturing of Stefani, as both a rock star and a pop girl, is further explored in the May 2000 issue of *Spin*. Like the 1996 article, it begins by highlighting Stefani but goes on to explore issues of femininity, feminism and girl-power. Chris Norris begins the article:

In bed with Gwen Stefani! Bliss! Rapture! Total listener-contest dream come true! That is, if you haven't already spent two years in a tour bus with Gwen Stefani. Or a thousand hours at soundchecks with Gwen Stefani. Or 18 months in recording studios with Gwen Stefani. Or untold nights in cramped, urine-smelling, graffiti-mottled backstage dressing rooms with Gwen Stefani.¹⁰³

Norris addresses the issue of her femininity:

Girl power? *Jewel* wouldn't sing lines like these. But this is exactly the kind of unfashionable, unpunk sentiment No Doubt shouted out in the middle of grunge season, giving voices to legions of kids who know that, deep down, they weren't nearly as "alternative" as they dressed... Phrases like this got our sweet, open, slightly spacey California girl dissed six years ago, chided as Valley Girl among the moody rock chicks. But set against neo-navel-barers like Christina Aguilera and Jessica Simpson, Stefani's particular brand of frankness seems complicated, even mysterious, she can come off girly, glamorous, or surprisingly tough – calling her friends "Poop" one minute and "Dude" the next. She's shared rock stages with punks like the Vandals and *Vogue* spreads with movie stars like Heather Graham. In a way, today's emphatically "strong women" like Lauryn Hill and Courtney Love make this bipolarity seem even more unusual.¹⁰⁴

In a rock publication that focuses on rock credibility and authenticity, *Spin* writers seem to have difficulty in determining how to represent Stefani. Whereas her penchant for girliness and uncompromising desire to have a husband and children are outside of the definitions of traditional male rock authenticity, her music appeals to the publication's readers. She impresses both male and female rock fans, even with her sensationalist pop-

¹⁰³ Chris Norris, "Reinventing No Doubt (Ska? What's Ska?)," *Spin* 16, no.5 (May 2000): 94. (94-100)

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 95-100.

stylings that highlight her feminine appearance. In an effort to counter her pop music-coded association through her image, her appearance is downplayed, and writers attempt to give equal space to other bands members. To be deemed credible, the individual males in the band are highlighted more than in the members of all-male bands.

In *Rolling Stone*, the issue of genre definition is tied intimately to Stefani's gender.

No Doubt are the only band tonight with a female member, the only group more attuned to ska and reggae than rap, and the only act whose current single, 'Hey Baby,' is full of New Wave electronics and drum-machine beats. There is no aggression of angst to be found in "Hey Baby," kids, just Gwen Stefani singing about sipping chamomile tea.¹⁰⁵

Whereas *Spin* tries to cover the appearance of all band members equally, *Rolling Stone* makes no such attempt. Stefani's extravagant and glamorous appearance is always the top priority. In the July 6-20, 2002, issue, Stefani is described as:

And then there's Gwen, 30, sipping hot tea because she's a little sick. The tall diva dynamo has her neon pink hair pulled back and is rocking a black T-shirt with a pink cartoon cat, a white calf-length wool sweater-jacket held together by forty of fifty safety pins, and cranberry-colored toenails. She's the one who fills the room with her presence, playing coy, cartoonish sexy as well as badass hot mama – a little Betty Boop, a little bit Buffy (Boop is on her key chain). She's also the creative leader.¹⁰⁶

Female-coded issues, such as appearance, relationships and her status as singer rather than instrumentalist, became even more of a focus in *Rolling Stone*'s feature article that appeared after the release of *Love Angel Music Baby*. The author makes a small attempt to show how important it is that she be considered a *female* rock star. The following

¹⁰⁵ Neil Strauss, "No Doubt's," *Rolling Stone* 888 (January 31, 2002): 36-39.

¹⁰⁶ Toure, "No Doubt: Music from big pink," *Rolling Stone* 844-945 (July 16 – July 20, 2002): 68-71.

excerpt highlights these issues, which take precedent over what one would think should be the most important aspect of a feature article on a rock musician – the music.

- During the three days I spend with her, her desire to have children is a continual theme, whether she's talking about how she never planned on being a pop star...or the joy of marrying Rosedale...or her plans for the future... she worries about the conflicts of career and family...
- Disturbing but true: listen to rock radio these days and you'll hear a woman's voice only if it belongs to Gwen Stefani or Evanescence's Amy Lee. Lee sure sold a lot of records in the past few years, but Stefani is the only true female rock star left on radio or MTV.
- "I was in such a shit mood before you came," she says. "I'm really on my period right now, really bad. I'm so emotional. I'm gonna cry just talking about it."
- Gwen Stefani's parents – Dad is a marketing exec and Mom quit her job as a dental assistant to stay home with the kids.¹⁰⁷

Perhaps the focus on woman's issues demonstrates how a female writer differs from a male writer in discussing a female artist. This article, by Jenny Eliscu, is one of the few about Stefani or No Doubt that is written by a woman. It is highly unlikely that a man would want to write an article that included information about Stefani's menstrual cycle, but it could also be that Stefani would feel more open about discussing these issues with a female writer. This dialogue about menstruation creates a bond between the two women, and ultimately a connection to all women. In her book, *The Woman in the Body*, Emily Martin explores this issue through an ethnographic study of medical definitions and personal female responses. Medically, menstruation has been described as a process which signifies a woman's failure to become pregnant, but can also be viewed as a woman's potential to have a child in the future. Stefani, in mentioning her period, is subconsciously acknowledging that she has not been able to conceive a child, something

¹⁰⁷ Jenny Eliscu, "Gwen Cuts Loose," *Rolling Stone* 966 (January 27, 2005): 36-39.

which she desires. Also, while it is notable that Stefani feels comfortable discussing her menstruation with millions of readers, the way in which she states that she is “on” her period reinforces what Martin describes as the separation of self and body during womanly processes.¹⁰⁸ Stefani’s period is not *her*, but essentially something that happens *to* her.

Because *Blender* was not published until 2001, it is difficult to compare its feature articles with those in other publications; in general, however, *Blender* tends to focus on Stefani’s appearance and defines her as a pop star, not a rock star. Only two notable feature articles on No Doubt or Gwen Stefani have appeared in *Blender*: a 2004 interview published after the release of *Love Angel Music Baby* and a list of facts about the band, entitled “33 Things You Should Know About No Doubt,” in the February/March 2002 issue.¹⁰⁹ While the latter is informational, the former is more representative of Stefani as a person. In the December 2004 issue, Stefani is on the cover, being honoured as *Blender*’s “Woman of the Year.” The accompanying article begins by describing the commercial and pop music-codified life that she now lives:

Gwen Stefani is dancing barefoot in her kitchen. One of the tracks she’s just finished for her first solo album is playing on her laptop, and she’s spinning around, saying “I love this song!” while a small posse of assembled staff looks on: her publicist, her graphic designer and her British manservant Pete, who is juicing a lemon and preparing Stefani for her light, fragrant lunch.¹¹⁰

Not only does this excerpt highlight Stefani’s extravagant lifestyle, the first sentence (intentionally or not) supports the traditional notions of femininity espoused by Stefani.

¹⁰⁸ Emily Martin, *The Woman in the Body: a cultural analysis of reproduction* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987).

¹⁰⁹ Steve Lowe, “33 things you should know about No Doubt,” *Blender* 5 (February – March 2002): 33.

¹¹⁰ Ariel Levy, “The Coronation of Gwen Stefani,” *Blender* 32 (December 2004): 122. (120-128)

It is reminiscent of the old adage, barefoot and pregnant, when wives were thought of as a husband's property, not equal. As Ariel Levy continues, though, it is possible to interpret the statement not as demeaning but, as redefining stereotypes. Stefani may be dancing barefoot in the kitchen, but she is not the one preparing food for her man. Rather, she has a *manservant*, as well as a host of other employees who wait on her.

In an article that focuses heavily on Stefani's appearance and relationship to Rosedale, this first sentence establishes a tone implying that Stefani cannot be taken seriously as a rock star. As in *Blender's* reviews, in order to downplay Stefani's success, her achievements are credited to luck. Levy posits that Stefani's dependence on the men in her life has paved the way to success, suggesting that Stefani, as a woman, has no personal autonomy or agency in her own success. In Levy's words, "to be sure, Stefani has been lucky in one crucial regard: the men in her life have buffeted her from many of the uphill struggles of a life in music."¹¹¹

Levy places Stefani in a subordinate position to her male band mates numerous times in this article. He stresses that she has had no control in the creation of No Doubt's success, regardless of the facts that she is the sole lyricist for the band and that, without her, the band would never have achieved the fame they did. Levy carries this point over to her solo record, describing her success here as something of a fluke, dependent upon the people with whom she has worked with: "But when Stefani first started working on *Love Angel Music Baby*, she found herself – or cast herself – in a familiar role, as the

¹¹¹ Ibid., 122.

subordinate: dealing with other people's time lines, striving to meet other people's goals."¹¹²

The way Stefani's appearance takes precedence over musical talent in *Blender* undermines her rock credibility, which can be seen in the following:

Stefani is perched on an immaculate, overstuffed white sofa, her white hair pinned up in a glamorous puff... When Stefani talks, she actually does sound very much like that teenager who sings into hairbrushes and spends 6th period tracing her boyfriend's name in curlicues. But it's confusing, hearing this animated, teenybopper voice come out of the crimson mouth of a woman who is so outrageously glamorous. She doesn't wear clothes so much as she does costumes. Even sitting around the house, she has on gold high-heeled Mary Janes and a plaid Vivienne Westwood top with a cape-like piece that she throws dramatically over her shoulder every 20 minutes or so... She is not unlike that cliché of the platinum-haired silent-movie star who opens her mouth and spoils the illusion of frosty allure with her Betty Boop voice.¹¹³

In general, the feature articles about No Doubt and Stefani on her own do not undermine her rock credibility, as in the above *Blender* article, but many still fall into stereotypical female representations that focus on her appearance, personal relationships and the fact that she is a girl. Similar to *Rolling Stone's* reviews, *Blender* cannot define in which genre No Doubt belongs.¹¹⁴ Stefani's dilemma as a woman in the male-dominated rock sphere is mentioned, but is not the main issue. As with other articles, while Stefani remains the primary focus, there is an attempt to include all the band members, either as a way to promote her rock credibility through a masculine connection or a subversive attempt at downplaying or devaluing her importance to the band.

¹¹² Ibid., 126.

¹¹³ Ibid., 126.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

Random Notes

Random notes are particularly important for two reasons: they sustain interest in an artist and function as a marker of popularity. Whereas reviews and cover stories usually appear only after an artist has released a new album, random notes help to maintain interest by providing constant coverage. The most obvious difference between the random notes about Stefani in *Rolling Stone*, *Spin* and *Blender* is their content. *Rolling Stone* tends to be informational, reporting on her upcoming album releases, Harajuku girls,¹¹⁵ and music videos. In both *Spin* and *Blender*, Stefani is often represented with photographs, accompanied by captions describing the newest trend or hairstyle that she is using.

As outlined in chapter two, according to scholars including Helen Davies and Brenda Johnson-Grau, women tend to be represented by the press with a belittlement of their contributions, a focus on appearance and personal life, and presented as being part of a homogenous group. Indeed, *Blender's* random notes on Stefani focus on her personal life; there is often mention of Stefani's boyfriend, and later husband, and of her desire to have children. For example, the "The Blender 100" cover story from August 2003 ranks Stefani as number eleven with the title "Best Solo Move," subtitled "Fashion lines, movie parts, solo albums – Ms. Gavin Rossdale will have no time to help with the housework." The short write-up explains

¹¹⁵ Harajuku girls are young women in Japan who hang out in the Harajuku district to show off their distinctive and unusual fashion styles. Stefani has received much criticism for her actions surrounding her Harajuku girls. She has hired four Japanese dancers to dress in Harajuku-style clothes and follow her around and appear in concerts without ever speaking. The press has argued that Stefani is reinforcing notions of the silent/obedient Japanese woman, as well as the appropriation of the Harajuku culture.

After their recent marriage, Gwen Stefani had planned on chilling with her hubby, Bush's Gavin Rossdale – but no...Forthcoming projects include a handbag/accessories fashion line...then comes her long-awaited solo album.¹¹⁶

Her solo project is mentioned last, with her marriage to Rossdale taking precedence. Placing the information in this order posits that her personal life is more important, and perhaps more interesting than her solo musical work. *Blender* also has a subtle focus on appearance, with numerous allusions to her fashion line, which places her image in the forefront. This is also reflected in the small photo of Stefani with the caption, "Gwen: dressed to shill."¹¹⁷ The focus on her fashion and appearance aligns Stefani with an image of commodity, and consequently, a position within pop music. As Stefani's fashion line and fashion choices become more important than her musicianship in the press, her credibility in the rock genre becomes increasingly discredited.

Interestingly, "The Blender 100" from the September 2005 issue no longer highlights Stefani's personal life. Here, she places third with the subtitle "Gwen: Madonna of the Malls."

Trading in No Doubt for a gaggle of mute Harajuku girls, ambitious culture-vulture Gwen Stefani has managed a few other changes, too. She's become a style icon while helming her own fashion line...With help from the Neptunes, Linda Perry, and Dallas Austin, she hopped from one trend to another on her successful solo album...¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Jon Caramanica, Nick Catucci, Julia Chaplin, Clark Collis, Victoria DeSilverio, Matt Diehl, Nick Duerden, Kris Ex, David Keeps, Rob Kemp, Steve Lowe, Craig Marks, Andy Pemberton, Rob Tannenbaum and Jonah Weiner, "The Blender 100," *Blender* 18 (August 2003): 104. (78-108)

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*, 104.

¹¹⁸ Clark Collis, Victoria DeSilverio, Josh Eells, Lauren Harris, Steve Kandell, Craig Marks, Chris Norris, Brian Raftery, William Shaw, Rob Tannenbaum, Jonah Weiner, Robbie Whelan and Douglas Wolk, "The Blender 100," *Blender* 40 (September 2005): 120. (82-128)

While there is reference to her musical work, it is secondary to seemingly trivial items, such as her appearance, begging the question, is her style more important than her music? It almost becomes a rhetorical question, as her style *is* very important, perhaps tantamount, to the success of her solo work. Part of the appeal of Stefani is the mystique and glamour surrounding her fashion style and personality. In the commodified industry of pop music, music is not enough to sell records – the whole image must be taken into account in order to sell a product. The 2003 article, when Stefani was with No Doubt, emphasised her appearance, but not to the extent of the 2005 article, reflecting the ways in which rock authenticity do not allow for obvious commodification.

Since *Blender*'s inception in 2001, Stefani's appearance is often fore-fronted in the random notes. For example, the November 2004 "Editor's Note" mentions Stefani's appearance at a party, with an accompanying full-length half-page photograph of her at the party.¹¹⁹ The June 2005 "Burner" section includes photos of Stefani, Kevin Federline and Usher because they are wearing "Dunks" shoes.¹²⁰

There are some exceptions to *Blender*'s usual focus on her appearance. In the May 2005 issue, Stefani is highlighted as potentially empowering for women. Here, Kristin Chenoweth recounts her favourite albums in the "My Music" section, and among them is No Doubt's *Tragic Kingdom*. She notes

I love Gwen Stefani, everything about her. I was a cheerleader in high school and she sounds like she was too! I can see myself being friends with her. And I really love "Don't Speak," maybe because I'm a woman. Don't speak, I don't want to hear it, I know what you're going to say, I

¹¹⁹ Andy Pemberton, "Editor's Note," *Blender* 31 (November 2004): 24.

¹²⁰ Anonymous, "Pop Stars Must Have: Dunks!," *Blender* 37 (June 2005): 37.

know where this is going... There are better voices, surely, but she is an original.¹²¹

Even though this comment was referring to her work in a band, Stefani's commodified-pop influence shows through in how Chenoweth loves "everything about her." It is not just about Stefani's music or voice, but the whole package, something which is very important for pop stars. As Chenoweth remarks, this can also be a very positive and empowering characteristic of Stefani, and of other pop music artists. The possibility for Stefani to be a role model to young women is immense – her glamour, combined with strong morals and a sense of self-confidence, are traits that young women may wish to emulate.

But should Stefani's personal beliefs be something that young women strive to imitate? Stefani has always maintained the fact that she wants to be a wife and mother and although never explicitly stated, it is implicit that she would like to have the traditionally perfect nuclear family, where she would be a stay-at-home mother, dependent on her husband for security. While there is nothing inherently right or wrong with this image, in a society where young girls are heavily influenced by their role models in the entertainment industry, is it ideal to reinforce this model of femininity?

As with *Blender*, *Spin* focuses on Stefani's appearance and personal life, but with more mention of her rock authenticity, especially in earlier issues, when she was still only a member of No Doubt. In regards to appearance, though, in the October 2002 "Noise" section, there is a photo of her and Rosedale shopping, with only the caption, "I disagree

¹²¹ RJ Smith, "My Music," *Blender* 36 (May 2005): 75. (74-75)

luv, it's impossible to be too adorable."¹²² Also, in the December 2002 "Gaming" section, there is an interview with Stefani about lending her voice to a video game character, a genre which is dependent on visual imagery. In that interview, they make a point of asking if Rossdale is a video game junkie.¹²³ The issue is not that they asked about Rossdale, but the insinuated allusion to the double-standard. Whereas there is substantially less coverage on the girlfriends of male rock stars, there is always an attempt to include Stefani's boyfriend/husband. It perpetuates norms, much as Stefani herself does, that a woman acquires credibility through her man.

Spin's random notes, which attempt to authenticate Stefani's rock experiences, come before her solo release. From the 2002 issue, No Doubt appears at number twenty-two in "The Spin Top Forty." In this write-up, unlike the *Blender's* "Top 100" article, there is almost no mention of Stefani's appearance. Stefani is not singled out of the band at all, but is written about in more of a way that is reserved for discussing all-male rock bands:

After blowing up the ska revival with 1995's *Tragic Kingdom*, they weathered the inevitable backlash by going mature and moody on the pop-savvy follow-up, 2000's *Return to Saturn*. Then, on last year's *Rock Steady*, they welcomed the spirits of Grace Jones, the Cars, Prince and Altered Images into their 2-Tone, new wave dancehall. This checkerboard epiphany, plus Gwen's quality time with Moby and Eve, reinvigorated the band, inspiring a new generation of 80s worshippers to pretend that their lives actually resemble the part scene in *Valley Girl*.¹²⁴

Unlike many female vocalists, who are only measured against other females, Stefani is compared to artists of both genders.

¹²² Marc Spitz, "Noise," *Spin* 18, no.10 (October 2002): 24-25.

¹²³ Anonymous, "Club Girl: Gwen Stefani has a smashing good time as the star of Malice," *Spin* 18, no.12 (December 2002): 120.

¹²⁴ Marc Spitz, "The Spin Top Forty: No Doubt," *Spin* 18, no.4 (April 2002): 82.

Another example of *Spin*'s attempt to authenticate Stefani's rock presence is the September 2003 issue, in which Stefani places number thirty in "The Cool List." As the authors note:

What kinda makes her cool: Her array of onstage karate kicks. And her stomach.

What *really* makes her cool: Gay men adore her, and that's always a good sign.

What *will always* make her cool: Singing about how much you want to get married is intrinsically lame – *but Gwen simply does not care.*

The only problem? She makes ska music.¹²⁵

The very fact that *Spin* has labelled her as someone cool can be seen as an attempt at rock authentication. Being marked as cool by a magazine that focuses on rock and indie bands is important and shows that she has successfully gained access to the male dominated industry of rock, commanding respect without compromising her girliness. Noting that Stefani does not care about what others may think of her lyrics, this form of credibility is coded as a masculine trait, yet Stefani couples it quite comfortably and successfully with her feminine charm. This makes her an anomaly in the industry.

The layout of *Rolling Stone* does not permit as many random photos and short blurbs about artists. In the past ten years, there were only a handful of short, informational random notes featuring Stefani. For example, one December 2004 issue remarks that she will be sharing the stage with Rufus Wainwright in the movie, *The Aviator*,¹²⁶ and another December 2004 issue comments on Stefani's Harajuku girls.¹²⁷ They are each about 100 words, and neither addresses the issues of representation

¹²⁵ Chuck Klosterman, Alex Pappademas, Marc Spitz, William Van Meter, "The Cool List," *Spin* 19, no.9 (September 2003): 82. (77-82)

¹²⁶ Anonymous, "What U Waitin' 4?," *Rolling Stone* 964/965 (December 30, 2004 - January 13, 2005): 42.

¹²⁷ Anonymous, "Gwen Turns Japanese," *Rolling Stone* 963 (December 9, 2004): 49.

examined in Chapter three. In 2005, there were a few short, informational random notes on Stefani's Video Music Award nominations and the success of *Love Angel Music Baby*. The latter article mainly focuses on statistics and producers with whom she has worked.

More than six months after Gwen Stefani released her solo debut *Love Angel Music Baby*, the album scored its highest chart position, Number Six, during the week of April 24th. It hit the Top Ten six weeks ago and it stayed there, according to Nielson Soundscan, selling between 60,000 and 80,000 a week. The resurgence is due to her latest single, "Hollaback Girl," which has been Number One on the singles chart for four weeks and is a staple of MTV's TRL. The track, a Stefani cut with Pharrell Williams, was a last-minute inclusion... The singer is planning to release a follow-up solo album before Christmas, including tracks left over from *L.A.M.B.* sessions with producers Linda Perry, Williams, Terry Lewis, Jimmy Jam and Dallas Austin, plus new tracks she'll cut in the next few months...¹²⁸

Two notable longer random notes articles were published in the November 13, 2003, and March 28, 2002, issues of *Rolling Stone*.¹²⁹ While the 2003 article is merely informational on No Doubt's soon-to-be released greatest hits album,¹³⁰ the 2002 article begins informational, but also contains some commentary concerning Stefani's gender. After highlighting No Doubt's upcoming tour, the article ends with:

As for making herself sexy, Stefani says that ever since the early days when she was the rare girl member of an Orange County punk band, she has enjoyed "getting all made up and doing the girl thing" before shows. These days it takes her forty-five minutes to get ready, but when she gets onstage she never thinks about being sexy: "I never really pulled that side out. Once in a while I'd throw a bellybutton around, because my dad said I couldn't go out of the house like that. But when you get onstage and you're into the music, it's not a girl thing or guy thing. It's about getting the audience off."¹³¹

¹²⁸ Anonymous, "Gwen Bounces Back," *Rolling Stone* 976 (June 16, 2005): 18.

¹²⁹ The articles are word-counted at 334 and 581 words, respectively.

¹³⁰ Steve Appleford, "No Doubt raid their vault," *Rolling Stone* 939 (November 13, 2003): 20.

¹³¹ Tom Moon, "No Doubt," *Rolling Stone* 892 (March 28, 2002): 24.

Interestingly, this is one of very few articles that refer to her as being “sexy.” Although Stefani is known for showing a lot of skin and wearing what could be labelled sexy clothes, she is rarely labelled as sexy in the press. Perhaps the press downplays her sexiness in an effort to highlight the music and validate her rock star status, but her age could also be a factor.

At thirty-six, Stefani is an unlikely candidate for top-40 pop stardom and status as a teen sex symbol. The same could be said of other aging pop stars, such as Madonna, who has taken on a more classic and glamorous persona. These two stars differ in that Stefani, except for the one mention by *Rolling Stone*, has *never* been acknowledged as a sex-symbol. Even as a young girl in the band, with her bellybutton exposed to the world, she was a rock star, not sex symbol. The reason can only relate to the way in which the press upholds her rock credibility. Stefani was never criticized in the press for baring her bellybutton as Britney Spears was in 1999. Why would it be so much more problematic for Spears to expose her belly? Possibly it was her underage status, but the way in which Stefani’s bellybutton did not create controversy supports her rock authenticity: she commands respect by her mere presence – to question Stefani’s appearance is to question her music.

In general, the representation of Stefani in *Spin*, *Blender* and *Rolling Stone* correlates to the issues of representation set out in chapter two, and the difficulty in defining rock authenticity in chapter one. While there is a focus on her appearance, family life and attempts to undermine her credibility, there are also numerous attempts to accord her with

rock authenticity, which tend to be complicated by her gender and performance of traditional femininity. Her appearance is not as highlighted as one might expect. Stefani tends to wear glamorous and distinctive clothing, but this aspect seems to be downplayed, granting her further credibility. Discussions of her private life are extensive, not merely because she is a woman, but because she herself tends to highlight these issues when talking to the press and other media outlets and because, as the primary lyricist for No Doubt, she drew upon the personal for inspiration. If Stefani steers the conversation to her personal issues, these will also appear in the press. Journalistic representation of Stefani could merely be viewed as a complicated case of art imitating life, with the extravagance of her life underplayed by publications in order to create a sense of rock authority, authenticity and credibility. As a woman, she has made incredible in-roads into a male-dominated field, and critics, depending on their ideologies, have found various ways in which to accommodate this, some by focusing on her overt femininity, and others by honouring her for her continued success and potential to be a role model for young girls.

In revisiting Dyer's theory, we see that stars tend to perform set roles, which have been constructed through the star image created within various media outlets, including popular music magazines. Dyer admits that his analysis at this time of the ideological study of stars is incomplete, but even when he outlines the accepted fields in which women can be accepted as stars, Stefani is once again difficult to adequately label. While she best fits the star character of the independent woman, someone who takes on gender-neutral codings to ultimately become masculinised, Stefani does not take on masculine

imagery, nor does she fall into the category of sex symbol.¹³² She is an independent woman, having acquired much as a woman in rock, without denying her particular form of femininity and without using traditional notions of masculinity in search of power. Stefani's power comes from her femininity, which ultimately complicates the media's defining of her. Stefani is an enigma within the world of rock music, one who is not easily defined or categorized, but who deserves, and receives, respect.

¹³² Richard Dyer, *Stars*, 61-63.

~ CHAPTER FOUR ~

Beyoncé Knowles: “I Don’t Think You’re Ready for this Jelly”

Beyoncé Giselle Knowles rose to fame under the tutelage of her father/producer, Matthew Knowles, as a member of the top-selling girl group Destiny’s Child. While in the group, as well as through her solo projects, Knowles, in songs such as “Independent Woman,” and “Bootylicious,” has attempted to reclaim the female body in order to showcase its power and beauty. The irony becomes that, in reclaiming the body, Knowles has acquired the label of sex-symbol in a way that could be seen as counter-productive. In media representations, her sexiness becomes problematized, applauded, and enmeshed in issues of race and gender. Knowles’ blackness is never seen as a hindrance to her career because she has made deliberate attempts to distance herself from stereotypical notions of what it means to be a black person in the United States. While fore-fronting issues of Knowles’ sexuality and womanliness, her race is addressed indirectly through frequent comments about the lightness of her skin.

Born September 4, 1981, in Houston, Texas, Knowles was raised by her mother, Tina Beyince, and her father, Matthew Knowles. She began dancing at the age of seven and rose quickly to the top of her class. Knowles and her childhood friend, Kelly Rowland, joined with LaTavia Roberson and Letoya Luckett to become the group Girl’s Tyme, performing first in the local beauty shop, then local events before, and eventually entering the Star Search competition. They did not win the contest, but Matthew Knowles, convinced that the girls were destined to be famous, quit his six-figure job at

Xerox in order to commit all his time to promoting the group.¹³³ Together, Destiny's Child has released three full-length albums: *The Writings on the Wall* (1999), *Survivor* (2001) and *Destiny Fulfilled* (2004). Commercial success followed the release of *Survivor*, which also marked the finalization of the group members: Knowles, Michelle Williams and Kelly Rowland.

In 2003, Destiny's Child took a break to work on solo projects. Knowles branched out into film with roles in *Austin Powers: Goldmember* (2002), the MTV production *A Hip Hopera* (2001), alongside Cuba Gooding Jr. in *The Fighting Temptations* (2003) and with Steve Martin in *The Pink Panther* (2006). Knowles recently unveiled a couture clothing line with her mother. On her solo album, *Dangerously In Love* (2003), Knowles collaborated with many prominent hip hop artists, including Jay-Z, Missy Elliot, Sean Paul and Big Boi. Although she retained her R&B influences, the album was arguably more hip-hop and pop.

According to the black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins, in order to justify black woman's oppression, black women in the U.S. have traditionally been portrayed by those in power as stereotypical mammies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, or hot mammas.¹³⁴ Collins notes that "these controlling images are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life."¹³⁵ What becomes evident in the portrayals of Knowles in *Blender*, *Rolling Stone*, and *Spin*, though, is an almost removal of her race. Collins

¹³³ "Beyoncé Knowles," *Wikipedia*, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/BeyoncÃ©_Knowles](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beyonc%C3%99_Knowles) (accessed February 18, 2006).

¹³⁴ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (New York; London: Routledge, 2000), 69.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

refers to women like the “character” of Knowles that is being presented by these publications as assimilated women: women who reject connections to other black women and demand special treatment for themselves. In not highlighting Knowles’ race, is the press breaking from the tradition of “othering” those of different races, or, in ignoring her race, is it perceived that Knowles has assimilated into white culture without retaining a lineage to her past? While Knowles herself has not actively denied her history in regards to her race, she does make the point of distancing herself from negative racial stereotypes. She has asserted (as will be shown later in this chapter) that she has come from a very wealthy family, and has not had to financially struggle in order to achieve her successful career. By distancing herself from being associated with the “ghetto,” Knowles’ music becomes perceived more as pop, instead of hip hop, or other genres coded as black, which rely on rising above financial hardships as markers of authenticity.

Does the absence of race sustain the us/them dichotomy so inherent in racist America, or does it signal a relationship between the two in which neither is entirely dependent on the other? Popular music’s history of borrowing and sharing between ethnic traditions leads one to believe that ignoring her race indicates a dialogous relationship in which Knowles is not assimilated into white culture, thus losing the power associated with her race, but is an active agent of self-definition. By distancing herself from negative stereotypes of what it means to be a black musician in America, she is thus creating new definitions of blackness. In the press, instead of comparing Knowles to other black artists as a homogenous group, and defining Knowles as good, *for a black woman*, she is compared to other musicians within pop music, regardless of gender. In

publications such as *Spin*, that focus on rock music, Knowles may still be referred to as good, *for a pop star*, but within *Rolling Stone* and *Blender*, she is credited as a talented young star. She has never had to justify her work within the pop music genre in regards to her race, and the non-mentioning of her race by these publication signifies that. As a result, she is positioned neither within the norms of blackness, nor whiteness.

In examining how Knowles is represented in the publications of *Rolling Stone*, *Spin* and *Blender*, what becomes immediately apparent is the fact that there are extremely few references to Knowles in *Spin*. Since *Spin* is predominantly rock-oriented, this is not surprising; however *Spin* reviewed Stefani's pop-infused solo album and makes numerous mentions of Britney Spears (even if they are demeaning and mocking in tone). Despite her pop and R&B-coded music, Knowles possesses a remarkable voice and songwriting skills. For example, in 2001, she was the second woman, and first African American in history, to be awarded *Songwriter of the Year* from the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers, Pop Music Awards.¹³⁶ Perhaps the lack of representation of Knowles in *Spin* should be considered a positive point, for she has acquired credibility and authority in the genres of pop and R&B, not rock, *Spin*'s focus. Although the few mentions of her in *Spin* do mock her intelligence, the fact that she is not portrayed as a prefabrication and that her vocal skills are credited as good, help establish her status as a credible artist. While her work is not rock enough for *Spin*, not being mocked like other pop stars in the publication demonstrates that she possesses a certain amount of credibility across genres.

¹³⁶ "Beyonce Knowles," *Wikipedia*

Reviews

In the reviews from *Rolling Stone* and *Blender*,¹³⁷ themes of representation are brought forward: the drama within Destiny's Child; Knowles' position as star; and representations of her womanliness. Surprisingly, although *Blender* is marketed towards a male audience keen on seeing provocative photos of female entertainers, the most sexually explicit representations of Knowles appear in *Rolling Stone*. *Blender* seems to be more concerned with promoting Knowles as a talented artist, who just happens to be a sexual being, whereas *Rolling Stone* tends to place sexuality and womanliness to the forefront, diminishing her vocal talent and songwriting technique. Interestingly, although Knowles and the members of Destiny's Child are known for their extravagant stage costumes, their appearance is rarely noted, even in concert reviews.

The 2001 *Rolling Stone* review of Destiny's Child's *Survivor* album begins by outlining the main themes present in all of this publication's reviews of the group:

Well, what did you expect them to call it – Temptation Island? Destiny's Child aren't just a pop group, they're pure drama, each hit signals another chapter in their ongoing saga of the-tribe-has-spoken lineup changes, controversies, sex, shopping, gossip, and all-round fabulousness.¹³⁸

The opening paragraph continues with a focus on their bodies:

Destiny's Child are the great pop group of the moment, ruling the radio with fluid R&B harmonies, exotic techno beats and more floss than the American Dental Association. On *Survivor*, they bounce, baby, bounce; shake, baby, shake; and twist, baby, twist their way to destiny.¹³⁹

¹³⁷ There were no reviews to be found of Destiny's Child or Knowles in *Spin* magazine.

¹³⁸ Rob Sheffield, "Survivor," *Rolling Stone* 868 (May 10, 2001): 83-84.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

The focus on the body, womanliness and sex is imposed onto Knowles through the media but, as with the posturing of Stefani as a “girl,” it also comes from her self-representation. Because songs such as “Bootylicious,” “Independent Woman,” “Cater 2 U” and “Girl” focus on these issues, the press also highlight them. The problematic way in which Knowles’ sexiness is portrayed comes directly from a reflection and interpretation of her lyrics. For example, in “Bootylicious,” Knowles writes

I don't think your ready for this jelly
I don't think your ready for this jelly
I don't think your ready for this
Cause my body's too bootylicious for ya babe

Baby, can you handle this?
Baby, can you handle this?
Baby, can you handle this?
I don't think you can handle this!

I'm about to break you off
H-town goin' hard
Lead my hips, slap my thighs
Swing my hair, square my eyes
Lookin' hot, smellin' good
Groovin' like I'm from the hood
Look over my shoulder, I blow you a kiss
Can you handle, handle this?

Move your body up and down (whoo!)
Make your booty touch the ground (whoo!)
I can't help but wonder why (whoo!)
Is my vibe too vibalicious for you, babe

I shake my jelly at every chance
When I whip with my hips you slip into a trance
I'm hoping you can handle all this jelly that I have
Now let's cut a rug while we scat some jazz

While the song depicts women being proud of their bodies, it also seems to play into notions of the female body being available for the male gaze. Knowles' body may be too "bootylicious" for her male admirers to handle just yet, but she is still displaying her body for their gaze and pleasure. Alternatively, though, these lyrics could also play into understandings of the power of female sexuality, conveyed in many of these articles as her sexuality being too strong for males to handle. She is able to control men with her sexual power, leaving her ultimately in charge of the situation and how far it will go.

This "new" form of sexual power is seen in the same *Survivor* review where Sheffield notes

while the Charlie's Angels theme, "Independent Women Part I," dared to speak up for a very special kind of independent woman, the kind who requires an army of hairstylists, nail techs and publicists just to clear her throat.

While Sheffield seems to be mocking Destiny's Child's definition of independence, by implying that they are very much dependent on many people (also playing into definitions of pop stars in which every aspect of their careers are constructed through others), it is undeniable that they are promoting a form of femininity they feel is appropriate for young girls to emulate. In a society still influenced by the effects of slavery and the Victorian ideal of repressing female sexuality for fear of its power, it is admirable for women to reclaim that power. Knowles, in claiming that sexualized power for herself, has received mixed reviews, but generally, there has been a positive reaction and representation in *Spin* and *Blender*. This is akin to how Simon Reynolds uses the term "post-feminism" in relation to pop music in *The Sex Revolts*. In this form of feminism, Reynolds notes that women are able to reclaim stereotypical representations of

women that traditional feminist movements have “trashed.” Reynolds applies the term post-feminism to Madonna and her “inauthentic authenticity” in particular, but the same could be said of Knowles and other members of Destiny’s Child. The camp aesthetic that Knowles employs combined with “femininity...located not in the essence of the person but in accoutrements: make up, wigs, high-heels, glamorous clothes,”¹⁴⁰ represents exactly what Knowles is about and how she is represented within the media.

It cannot be ignored that black women have had a complicated history in regard to sexuality and their bodies. Cornel West has argued that Americans are obsessed with sex, yet are fearful of black sexuality. This issue is also complicated by the fact that

The paradox of the sexual politics of race in America is that, behind closed doors, the dirty, disgusting, and funky sex associated with black people is often perceived to be more intriguing, interesting, while in public spaces talk about black sexuality is taboo.¹⁴¹

West writes that it is important for ideas of black sexuality to be de-mythologized in order for black Americans to love their own bodies. Slavery as a form of control has socialized blacks to feel as though their bodies are disgusting, ugly and dirty.¹⁴² Therefore, the way in which Knowles reclaims this love of her body is admirable and a positive step for both feminist and anti-racist movements.

Blender’s Survivor review is significantly shorter, and therefore does not explore these themes as thoroughly as *Rolling Stone*. The following is the review quoted in its entirety:

¹⁴⁰ Simon Reynolds, *The Sex Revolts: Gender, Rebellion, and Rock ‘n’ Roll* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1995), 318.

¹⁴¹ Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 83.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 85.

L'Oreal pitchbabe Beyoncé and her supreme flankettes have outstripped the bugaboos, bill collectors and bounced bandmates that might have held them back. Hard as onyx, "Independent Women Part II" reconstitutes sisterly solidarity as threat, while the mock-opera melody is pulverized by a four-to-the-floor beat-down. "Bootylicious" manages to be both Christian and sexy thanks to a sample from Stevie Nicks's lusty "Edge of Seventeen." Aside from disposable ballads and the sappy "Perfect Man," *Survivor* blasts haters, child molesters and "been-around-the-block-females," keeping the blood up as they whup ass.¹⁴³

In such a short space, though, Laura Sinagra still manages to include the themes of Knowles as the star and ideas of sisterly/womanly power, as well as make note of their talent.

These topics continue with the *Rolling Stone* 2004 review of *Destiny Fulfilled* by Jenny Eliscu. In this review, Knowles is noted as the primary star of the group: "From the get-go Destiny's Child seemed to exist for the sole purpose of launching the career of one Beyoncé Knowles."¹⁴⁴ The article continues with an exploration of the girls' womanliness, sexuality and feminism. For example, as with Sheffield, in the following excerpt Eliscu seems to undermine Destiny's Child's definition of "independent woman." Eliscu differs here, though, in that she does not indirectly promote their form of femininity:

Jenkins should hang his head in shame for having a hand in the maudlin "Cater 2 U," a saccharine tune about how low Knowles, Rowland and Williams will stoop to prove their devotion to their man. In her verse, Beyoncé offers to brush her man's hair, put his do-rag on, rub his feet and give him a manicure. Rowland, meanwhile, promises to "keep my figure right," "keep my hair fixed" and, most important, if her man should come home late and she's asleep, all he's gotta do is tap her on the shoulder and

¹⁴³ Laura Sinagra, "Destiny's Child: *Survivor*," *Blender: The Guide*, <http://www.blender.com/guide/reviews.aspx?id=934> (accessed February 18, 2006).

¹⁴⁴ Jenny Eliscu, "Final Destiny?," *Rolling Stone* 962 (November 25, 2004): 86.

“I’ll roll over.” Since when did these independent women become so craven?¹⁴⁵

While Eliscu maintains that Knowles and the group still demonstrate strong vocal and song-writing techniques, she represents them as having lost the empowered edge that was present earlier in their careers. They are still very strong women, but, Eliscu notes the subtle and subversive shift in power dynamics, with the lyrical focus now more about women pleasing their men, as opposed to women pleasing themselves.

The *Blender* review of *Destiny Fulfilled* takes on the same issues as the review by Eliscu but with a slightly different tone. Here, the focus is still on Knowles as the primary star, but the treatment of femininity differs. Whereas Eliscu represented the group as falling away from their “independent women” ideals, Ben Sisario presents the group as still showcasing strong female energy and sexual power. In his own words:

Their third album, *Survivor*, streamlined hip-hop soul with playful feminism to create a 21st-century girl-group...[*Destiny Fulfilled*] kicks off with forceful, womanly eroticism. “Lose My Breath,” produced by Rodney Jerkins, with its quick-pulsed marching beat, is my-it’s-getting-hot-in-here call to any man alive. “Can you keep up?,” Destiny’s dare in the foxiest pop-rally cheer of all time. On “Soldier” – featuring don’t-let-them-see-my-boner raps by T.I. and Lil Wayne – the dating parameter narrow to “a rude boy that’s good to me with street credibility.”

Any man who passes their test – hats off to you, sir - must realize that he is dating not one woman but a phalanx.¹⁴⁶

Considering the critic’s role as gatekeeper, it is interesting to compare how these two critics react to the same album. In order to undermine Knowles’ sexual power, Eliscu highlights the lyrics from “Soldier,” contrasting them with the first single from the

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ben Sisario, “Destiny’s Child: *Destiny Fulfilled*,” *Blender: The Guide*, <http://www.blender.com/guide/reviews.aspx?id=2983> (accessed February 18, 2006).

album, “Lose My Breath.” While she addressed “Lose My Breath” by referring it to “a percussive sex romp where they pant in time to a marching band beat,”¹⁴⁷ she ignores the song’s empowering lyrics. As with “Bootylicious,” this song demands that men who would like to be with them be able to keep up with them and their “power.” The choice to focus on “Soldier” instead, demonstrates how easy it is to influence an audience by including, or excluding, materials. In *Blender*, where one would expect more of a focus on the sexual, and perhaps even more of a focus on female submissiveness, Sisario decides instead to focus on the female power that Destiny’s Child, and Knowles in particular, exudes.

Feature Articles

As with the reviews, there are no feature articles pertaining to Knowles, as a solo artist, or Destiny’s Child in *Spin* magazine. In *Blender*, there is only one cover story, which features Knowles by herself. There is more substantial coverage in *Rolling Stone*, reflecting its longer publication run and a publication schedule twice as frequent as *Blender*. Within the feature articles, the main issues highlighted are similar to those used to diminish the credibility of women in rock genres: a focus on the private life and appearance. What does not occur, however, is a belittlement of Knowles’ talents; instead, her talent tends to be forefronted, as well as her feminine power. The feature articles are the only format in which issues of race are mentioned openly.

¹⁴⁷ Jenny Eliscu, “Final Destiny?,” 86.

The first cover/feature article about Knowles and Destiny's Child, "A Date with Destiny" by Jancee Dunn, appears in *Rolling Stone* in May 24, 2001. It continues the themes of: a focus on the private life, drama within the group, female power, and vocal talents, but the longer format allows for a more in-depth analysis of these themes, as well as the introduction of spirituality and a focus on appearance. Whereas there was no particular focus on Knowles' clothing and appearance in the other formats, here we see closer attention to these matters. It is surprising that her appearance has not been the object of significant attention in the other formats, considering how important her appearance and stage clothes are to her whole image. In pop music, image is essential for popularity and as such, tends to be a focal point for journalists.

In this 2001 article, Knowles and Destiny's Child's appearances are described in the following manner:

Destiny's Child pranced onstage – with their tiny gold-lame hot pants and gyrating backup dancers and glossy makeup and long, long legs clad in gold stiletto boots – it was as if they had just debarked from George Clinton's Mothership. The three impossibly tall glamazons – Beyoncé Knowles, Kelly Rowland and Michelle Williams...her golden hair in a ponytail...The girl [Beyoncé] is just impossibly curvy, with luminous, tawny skin...¹⁴⁸

Because this article comes early in the group's success, it is mostly informational, though there is still mention of seemingly trivial items such as their relationships with "boys" and spirituality. It recounts how the group was formed, Matthew Knowles' "bootcamp," and the drama that ensued over the loss of two group members. In general, Knowles and the girls are represented as typical pop stars: there is a focus on their images and personal

¹⁴⁸ Jancee Dunn, "A Date With Destiny," *Rolling Stone* 869 (May 24, 2001): 52-58.

lives, the impact they have on men, and their penchant for the dramatic. Not only are they represented as typical pop stars, but the issues covered are indicative of their ages: at this point, Knowles was only 19 years old.

Since pop music parallels and is symbolic of the time when young girls experiment and explore different avenues of what it means to be free before “growing up,” it becomes clear why Destiny’s Child’s lyrics would speak to the theme of a young woman trying to mature in a world focused on superficiality and commodities. They can be described in mature terms, such as “Sophisticated Ladies,”¹⁴⁹ but their age is also mentioned, something that should be remembered when considering any media surrounding them from this point in their careers.

In 2004, when Knowles was 22, she was featured in another *Rolling Stone* cover story, this time after the release of her solo album. As with the earlier article, the majority of the text is informational, centering on her history with Destiny’s Child and the drama that surrounded her growing up, with her father as her manager and her mother as her stylist. What differs, though, is that the descriptions of her appearance are far more detailed and her race is mentioned. In the first paragraph, Knowles’ appearance is described in the following manner:

She wears no necklace and no rings, but she’s still dressed very girly, in big, chunky earrings, a pink off-the-shoulder cashmere sweater with a sort of bow in the front, a brown furlined wrap, fuzzy boots, jeans and a hot-pink baseball hat with embroidered sparkles on the front forming a cat and more sparkles on the back spelling out BEYONCÉ. Her shoulders and neck flow gracefully out from under her sweater, recalling old French sculptures that romanticized the curves of the female form. She has golden skin, three small birthmarks on her face, perfect teeth and a

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

dancer's posture that makes her seem much taller than five feet seven. And her tight jeans reveal her to be a healthy girl, someone the brothers would call thick, with a booming system in the back.¹⁵⁰

The description of her appearance is as long as many CD reviews in length. Even in descriptions of male pop stars, their appearance is never so fully documented, and this was merely the outfit that Knowles was wearing in the airport, not the extravagant stage clothes in which she performs.

As for her race, in the next paragraph, the author states

Beyoncé has become a cross-over sex symbol a la Halle Berry, a black girl who's not so overwhelmingly Nubian that white people don't appreciate her beauty. She's what Janet Jackson used to be: the tasteful sex symbol who's giving you R&B-flavored pop hits and state-of-the-art videos, tours and movies, too.¹⁵¹

Toure implies that, because of the lightness of Knowles' black skin, she is able to be enjoyed by both white and black audience and that skin colour is indicative of crossover popularity. This is definitely not something to be considered lightly. As noted in chapter one, R&B listeners are predominantly black, and top-40 pop listeners are predominantly white and female. In opposition to traditional notions of black sexuality as something to be feared, Knowles is cast as a "tasteful" sex symbol, one that is "toned down" and respectable. Because of the lightness of her skin, she can be considered "appropriate" for young audiences, and even for young white girls, to emulate.

Strong role models are important for young girls to emulate. As Pamela J. Tracy has noted in her study, "Why Don't You Act Your Color?," pre-adolescents are very keen on identifying themselves through the music they listen to. In a study of young girls aged

¹⁵⁰ Toure, "A Woman Possessed," *Rolling Stone* 943 (March 4, 2004): 38-42.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

nine to eleven, in a racially diverse midwestern school, Tracy found that certain artists were deemed appropriate for certain races. The young black girls would get “annoyed” at the young white girls (regardless of the fact that they were all actually friends) for “acting black,” and listening to “black” music such as Destiny’s Child and TLC. The black girls identified with black artists, and took pride in knowing all the dance moves. Interestingly, though, friendship history ultimately took precedence over racial difference. Because all the girls were friends, after fighting about acting one’s colour, they were all able to unite and teach each other the dance moves. The racial markers of musicians such as Destiny’s Child were important for determining how they perceived different races should act, but, the group mentality of Destiny’s Child ultimately provided the girls with the strongest way of acting.¹⁵² These young, impressionable girls are trying to form their identities in regards to race and relations between races, and while Destiny’s Child may provide them with ways of acting black, the way in which Knowles distances herself from negative stereotypes by creating new accepted forms of black musicianship is a positive influence.

Knowles’ blackness is also commented on in the corresponding *Blender* cover story from 2003. In this article, Nick Duerden writes

A good, God-fearing girl, Beyoncé was brought up to believe that she was blessed with certain gifts and that if she worked her brains out, she’d achieve everything that she wanted. The pigment of her skin was neither here nor there. Forget comparisons to other singers: it’s athletes-turned-megabranders like Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods whom Beyoncé resembles most. Because in the twenty-first-century America, green is the one color that matter most... [Beyoncé’s parents] brought her up in an

¹⁵² Pamela J. Tracy, “‘Why don’t you act your color?’: Preteen girls, identity, and popular music,” in *Race/Gender/Media*, ed. Rebecca Ann Lind, (Boston: Pearson, 2004), 45-52.

affluent neighbourhood surrounded by a lot of successful black people. This, she wants it known, is very relevant to her story. “Our neighbours were doctors and lawyers. Things were good for us. I went to private school. We had two cars and a three-story house, which is ironic when you consider how many people have since said that my dad pushed me into music so we could get rich. Money was never a problem.”¹⁵³

Compared to the *Rolling Stone* article, which mentioned race, this one from *Blender* has a different approach. Here, Duerden, and Knowles herself, try to differentiate between Knowles and stereotypical definitions of what it means to be a black person in America, and as thus, could be seen as changing these stereotypes while creating new possibilities for authentic black musicians. Because of her association with hip-hop, and apparent “street-cred,” Knowles runs the risk of being labelled as the stereotypical “gangsta” black who grew up in a poor neighbourhood and is essentially fighting to live. Knowles maintains that she came from a wealthy family and finds it important to let this be known. She is being released from the belief that in order for a black musician to be credible, she must be from the “hood”; in creating a self-definition which is aligned with the middle class, Knowles shows that it is OK to be wealthy and to be a successful, credible, black musician.

Interestingly, after mentioning that the colour of Knowles’ skin has never stood in the way of her acquisition of success, Duerden still compares her to other well-known black stars (albeit Tiger Woods is half black, but has darker skin than Knowles). As with female rock musicians being only compared to other females, here, even when trying to make a point that skin colour doesn’t matter, Duerden falls into the trap of comparing artists based on heterogeneous blackness. He compares Knowles to Michael Jordan and

¹⁵³ Nick Duerden, “A Date With Destiny,” *Blender* 18 (August 2003): 110. (108-114)

Tiger Woods in an attempt to show how broad her popularity reaches but, in turn, ends up highlighting her race even more.

Among the now-standard discussion of her history and relationship with Jay-Z, the article closes with a comparison to another black entertainer and by labelling Knowles as a “Diva,”¹⁵⁴

Diva started out as the highest compliment, when it became clear that here was a remarkable singer, only a teen, with the prodigious talent, poise and crossover beauty of a young Diana Ross. But then, as band members departed or were fired, enabling Beyoncé to enjoy the limelight unchallenged, the word became a slur. She was now, according to legend, the worst kind of diva: self-aggrandizing, conceited, arrogant and ruthlessly ambitious.¹⁵⁵

Knowles comments, in the article, that she hates the term diva and being labelled as one. She claims that she is not a diva at all, further distancing herself from negative black stereotypes or, it could be argued, as a way to promote female sexuality without the negative undertones. The term diva originally was used to label opera singers (and sopranos in particular), but has since been used to define female singers in any genre. Now, diva is perceived as a negative label; it implies that the singer is hard to work with, self-centered, and may throw tantrums when events do not unfold to her liking. Specifically, it has been closely linked to unruly black singers, such as Diana Ross, further enforcing negative black stereotypes in the press about black musicians. By maintaining that she is not a diva, Knowles is distancing herself from stereotypical

¹⁵⁴ Interestingly, the term Diva can be applied to both white and black singers, but in relation to specific genres. In popular music, Diva tends to be accorded to black singers, whereas in Classical/Operatic styles, the title is usually in reference to white singers.

¹⁵⁵ Nick Duerden, “A Date with Destiny,” 110.

representations of black popular musicians, and self-defining a new model of black musicianship.

Random Notes

A recurring theme in representing Knowles in the random notes of *Spin*, *Blender* and *Rolling Stone* is a focus on her relationships with her boyfriend, other group members and her father. This is complemented by a focus on her body and, in *Spin* magazine, a focus on her intelligence, or perceived lack thereof. As mentioned above, the relatively few random notes about Knowles do not present her in an overly celebratory light.

In the August 2002 issue of *Spin*, a mention of Knowles appeared to promote her movie role in *Austin Powers: Goldmember*. The article was very short and the mention of Knowles is at the end of the single paragraph, where Diane Vadino noted

“For this film, we could afford these incredibly lifelike robotic sharks,” Roach says. “The guy who was remote-controlling them could actually make them giggle.” More giggles were provided by Austin’s latest “companion,” played by Beyoncé Knowles, “It wasn’t like, ‘Let’s cross our fingers and cast the pop star,’” Roach says. “I was blown away.”¹⁵⁶

Another example, with essentially the same content, comes from the June 2002 issue:

The last time we mentioned Destiny’s Child, we quoted a Patricia Field employee who described them as “ghetto bitches.” That was wrong. But this item is as puffy as the Afro Destiny’s leader Beyoncé Knowles sports in her big-screen debut as Mike Myers’ sidekick Foxy Cleopatra, in the second *Austin Powers* sequel. In March, Knowles dished from the top-secret set about what it’s like to emote alongside the International Man of Mystery. “It’s a blessing and an honor,” she says. “Mike is hilarious.” Um, how about some plot-point spoilers? The poop on Britney’s cameo? Give us something juicy, or we’ll slowly lower your gorgeous self, Dr.Evil-style, into a pool full of ill-tempered sea bass. “Well, whenever I

¹⁵⁶ Diane Vadino, “Exposure: Movie News,” *Spin* 18, no.8 (August 2002): 46.

get tired, he does little things to make me laugh. He'll teach me animal sounds like 'Moo!' Or he'll imitate a parrot." All right, we frickin' quit.¹⁵⁷

Both these examples show the difficulty in representing Knowles as both a credible artist and as pop star – a concept that is never seen as credible in *Spin*. For example, in the first excerpt, Knowles is likened to a young school girl with the reference to her giggles, yet her acting skills are honoured by Roach. It is strange that she would be described as giggling, since her character in the movie references 1970s blaxploitation stars, who tended to be strong women, not giggling school girls. The second excerpt begins with an apology for a past article, which referred to Destiny's Child as "ghetto bitches," but then continues with a mock interview that mocks Knowles' intelligence. While the article was not available for analysis, the term "ghetto bitches" seems to be trying to place Destiny's Child back into the controlling images of black women from which they have been trying to break free. The term implies that they fall within the "welfare mothers" category used by Patricia Hill Collins in which they are seen as feeding off the dominant white, middle class society.¹⁵⁸ Being a pop star, Knowles is not afforded much coverage by *Spin* magazine, but the above-mentioned articles demonstrate that Knowles has achieved a small amount of respect from the publication and has not ended up being ridiculed frequently like other pop stars, such as Britney Spears.

The pop-oriented publication *Blender*, on the other hand, contains frequent references to Knowles, but in the random notes, the focus tends to be on her relationship with Jay-Z and the drama within Destiny's Child. This is seen particularly in the

¹⁵⁷ Marc Spitz, "Special report: Mike Myers, Hilarious," *Spin* 18, no.6 (June 2002): 21-22.

¹⁵⁸ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 79-80.

November 2004 and September 2005 issues of *Blender*. In both, there are photos of Jay-Z and Knowles on vacation: the former labelled, “Sexy!: Beyoncé and Jay-Z get loose in Europe on blinged-our yacht,” and the latter, “Crazy...In love! Beyoncé and Jay-Z spend some quality non-platonic time in Europe.” Knowles has always been candid when talking about her personal life, but *Blender*, in deference to its readership, enjoys exploiting and speculating about her romantic relationships. These random notes maintain audience interest in both Knowles and Jay-Z.

As for *Rolling Stone*, the majority of random notes concerning Knowles contain purely informational matter about her career, such as upcoming albums, concerts, and solo work that the Destiny Child members are undertaking independently, and do not pose any problematic representational qualities. The most interesting reference appeared in the November 11, 2004, issue, which reported Destiny’s Child’s sponsorship deal with McDonalds. Being a corporate shill reflects the commodified role of a pop star.

Although they are less prevalent, the longer random notes in *Rolling Stone* continue the above themes and are related to themes in the feature articles. For example, in the July 6 – July 20, 2000, issue, Jenny Eliscu conducted an interview with Knowles. The article begins with a focus on her relationships with her producer/manager father and the other members of Destiny’s Child, but then it continues with the new themes of sex, the body and “boys.” It is difficult to determine how valid the representation of an artist is, even though the words spoken during an interview are those of the artist, because of how questions are asked and the line of questioning. A look at the questions asked helps to show how the writer may persuade an artist to talk about certain subjects, ones that

may not have any relevance to the artist or her musicianship. It is because of Eliscu, and the way she directs the interview process, that Knowles discusses her personal life and relationships with boys, which can be seen in the following excerpt:

Now, most of your songs are about the stupid shit that boys do. Is it all drawn from real life?

[Laughs] Yeah. A lot of people have thought we're man haters, but we're basically writing from personal experience....

You were all just fourteen when you started working on your first album. The songs aren't explicit, but they do deal with sex. Did you worry about being too risqué?

I think we did a good job of making songs we could relate to, but older people could relate to them also. And I think if we didn't talk about what we talked about, we would have come across really cheesy and bubblegum. Once you come across as bubblegum, it's hard for people to watch you grow up. Now that we're all nineteen, by the next album we can talk about even older things.¹⁵⁹

For someone who exudes as much sexuality as Knowles does, it is surprising how often she is represented as sexual, as opposed to a sex-symbol.¹⁶⁰ She portrays traditional sex-symbol roles in her videos, yet she is also presented as glamorous, classy and respectable. While she arguably presents an image just as, or even more, sexual than Britney Spears, Knowles' sexuality is not perceived as problematic, and it is not highlighted to the extent that Spears' is. Perhaps Knowles' vocal talent allows for her to be sexual, as long as she

¹⁵⁹ Jenny Eliscu, "Beyonce Knowles of Destiny's Child: 'we're singing about what women go through, and it isn't all lovey-dovey,'" *Rolling Stone* 844-845 (July 6 – 20, 2000): 57.

¹⁶⁰ I would like to make a distinction between what I feel is being sexual as opposed to being a sex symbol. In being sexual, Knowles is demonstrating her ability to be a sexual being: a complex individual whose personality is not defined merely by sex. Her sexuality is powerful, yet not dependent on being appreciated by a male audience. On the other hand, someone who is a sex symbol is associated only with sex. They appear as one-dimensional, and dependent on satisfying the male audience.

is contained within the label of respectability. Her talent becomes more important than her image; there is no need to focus merely on her sexiness and clothing because she has vocal credibility. While she is still the “total package” of commodity within the pop industry, her vocal skill is the main focus.

Whereas Spears’ form of sexuality is criticized in the press and other media outlets as something that is degrading and a bad role model for young girls, Knowles’ similar positing of sexuality is not criticised in the press and is praised for creating a form of femininity for young girls in which female sexuality equals power. What is it that makes these two stars, so alike in their presentations, differ so much in press representations? While race could be seen as a factor, from the articles examined in this study, it does not seem to take precedence over Knowles’ representation. If anything, race is underrepresented in order to appeal to a wider audience – not that race should be fore-fronted, for fear of reinforcing homogenous groups of people in order to compare artists within. Instead of lumping Knowles into the category of “black musicians,” she is compared to musicians in pop music, regardless of gender. Without highlighting her race, the press is not reinforcing notions of black musicians as the “others” in popular music. In general, Knowles’ representation is typical of a top-40 female pop star: a dialectical relationship between art and life played out on the journalistic plane.

~ CHAPTER FIVE ~

Britney Spears: "Me Against the Music"

Britney Spears has been acknowledged as pop's teen princess. In the press, she has been both heralded for her contributions to the pop genre, as well as criticized for being too overtly sexualized and a bad role model for young girls. Growing up in the media eye, Spears never adopted an entirely wholesome image, but was accepted by many parents as the image of today's girl next door. As her image became more sexually overt, these parents felt betrayed and appalled by what they believed to be an entirely new image. Representations of Spears in the musical press, on the other hand, have centered on her sexualized nature, even from the start. An examination of the press reveals that how it represented Spears early in her career differs little from later representations, yet the public became increasingly upset over her image. In the seven years since her debut album, Spears has followed in the steps of her musical idol, Madonna, by challenging stereotypical notions of female sexuality and power, while fore-fronting a seemingly new genre of "blond top-40 pop stars" that dominated popular music charts in the early 2000s. Recently, many of the lifestyle choices made by Spears have been questioned by the press, and even openly mocked in publications such as *Blender*.

Britney Jean Spears was born December 2, 1981, in McComb, Mississippi, and was raised in Kentwood, Louisiana, by her now-divorced parents, James Parnell Spears, a

building contractor, and Lynne Irene Bridges, a grade school teacher.¹⁶¹ As a young child, Spears was a talented gymnast, competing in many state-level competitions. She began auditioning for a spot on Disney's "New Mickey Mouse Club" by the age of eight, and while too young to actually be on the show at that time, the producers took notice and introduced her to a New York talent agent. After a failed attempt at "StarSearch," Spears auditioned again and, in 1993, gained a role on the "New Mickey Mouse Club," which she kept until the show's cancellation in 1994.

In 1999, Spears, with Jive Records, released her debut album, ...*Baby One More Time*, with a single and video by the same name. The album has become the best-selling LP by a teenager in history, and remains her best-selling album thus far. She has subsequently released five other albums: *Oops!... I did it Again* (2000), *Britney* (2001), *In the Zone* (2003), *Greatest Hits: My Prerogative* (2004) and *B in the Mix: the Remixes* (2005). She is also slated to release an album of new material some time in 2006. Altogether, Spears' albums and singles sales amount to over 125 million worldwide, and within the US, she ranks eighth in the list of best-selling female artists in American music history. Although she has been nominated numerous times for Grammy Awards, she has never won. Spears has, however, received other awards, such as Billboard Awards, and in 2003, *Forbes* named her the most powerful celebrity in the world.¹⁶²

Spears has achieved all this with a singing voice that is arguably not strong or virtuosic, a fact that demonstrates the power of the image over musicality in pop music genres. Spears' image, which has always been the crux of her popularity, has sparked

¹⁶¹ "Britney Spears," from *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Britney_spears (accessed 25/02/2006).

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

controversy throughout her career; beginning early with criticism of the “Lolita-themed” 1999 photo shoot in *Rolling Stone*, followed by accusations of breast implants, and the ongoing theme of her suitability as a role model for young girls. Spears has always maintained that she does not consider herself a role model for anyone except her own younger sister. In the press, Spears has been vocal about her belief that parents, not she, should raise their children by instilling and modeling positive moral values.

From 2003 to the present, Spears’ personal choices have been criticized in the press. Her life has continued to unfold in the public eye, with parents vilifying Spears for being a bad role model. In 2003, her fifty-five hour marriage to childhood friend, Jason Alexander, was annulled. In 2004, Spears married her former back-up dancer, Kevin Federline, who already had two children (one an infant) with the teen actor Shar Jackson. The press has speculated on and ridiculed Spears’ choice in marrying Federline because his image is associated with the “white trash” stereotype of the poor, white, southern man. In 2005, Spears gave birth to her first child amidst rumours that she and Federline had split up because of his refusal to stop partying.

In general, Spears’ representation in *Blender*, *Spin* and *Rolling Stone* focuses on her as a sexual being: not just her image, but the music itself is marked as being overtly sexual. As with Knowles, there is limited coverage of Spears in *Spin* because of its rock focus, but unlike Knowles, when Spears does appear in *Spin*, it is usually with the intention to mock her and, in turn, mock the whole institution of top-40 pop music. While all three publications acknowledge her substantial contributions and influence in the industry, they also tend to make the point that it is not merely Spears’ music that

should be credited with her fame, but also her entire constructed image, in conjunction with publicity. As with most top-40 pop, Spears' constructed image is highlighted in feature articles, which showcase her different on- and off-stage personas. Spears and Knowles are both usually calm, subdued women in interviews, but their stage personas are markedly different, which is obviously a facet of their constructed identity/product.

The "image" of Spears should be considered within the ideologies of stardom.

Richard Dyer, in *Stars*, defines stardom as

an image of the way stars live. For the most part, this generalized life-style is the assumed backdrop for the specific personality of the star and the details and events of his or her life. As it combines the spectacular with the everyday, the special with the ordinary, and is seen as an articulation of basic America/Western values, there is no conflict here between the relationship between the general life-style and the particularities of the star... The general image of stardom can be seen as a version of the American dream, organized around the themes of consumption, success and ordinariness.¹⁶³

Therefore, Spears represented the values of society, but she also challenges them; she provides a "version of the American dream" in which a woman can be a powerful being, but also very sexual. The way in which she challenges stereotypes, especially in regard to her sexuality, prove to be problematic for the press, and in turn for dominant North American society. She is marked as different from the norm by her spectacular lifestyle, but with the creation of her star image through promotion, publicity and commentaries/criticism, she is also shown as ordinary – not far removed from the general public. This constructed star image gives the public an illusion that they *know* stars such as Spear intimately and as such, feel that they know what is best for her. In the case of

¹⁶³ Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: Educational Advisory Service, British Film Institute, 1979), 39.

someone like Spears who has grown up in the media's eye, the public assumes an almost parental role in how it views her and the choices she makes.

Reviews

Due to the fact that it has been in publication the longest, the greatest number of reviews of Spears' albums were found in *Rolling Stone*. Since its inception in 2001, *Blender* has reviewed all of Spears' albums. I found only one review in *Spin*, and it was not particularly favorable. The *Spin* review, however, employed the most use of specialized popular music knowledge, or "knowledges,"¹⁶⁴ requiring a great deal of sophistication for readers to fully interpret the review. Playing into notions of rock authenticity, the review's writing promotes a "masculine" form of specialized knowledge, which separates authentic music fans from the stereotypical top-40 pop listener. Even when writing a review of Spears, *Spin* tries to distance itself, and its faithful readership, from the audience that they assume to be Spears' top demographic.

Since there are only reviews of Spears' earliest albums in *Rolling Stone*, which tended to focus on a Lolita image, there is little fodder for comparison. Looking back, it would seem obvious to label Spears as a Lolita because of the Lolita-themed photos by Dave LaChapelle that appeared in the April, 1999, issue, but even before that issue, the first review of Spears mentions her Lolita status. Interestingly, this metaphor appears only in her early career and only in *Rolling Stone*. In a review of the single "...Baby One More Time," from February 4, 1999, issue, the reference is not directly addressed at

¹⁶⁴ See chapter two for a description of "knowledges."

Spears, but as a commentary on the prefabricated nature of popular music at the time. In the words of Barry Walters

She was flown to Sweden's Charion Studios, the Lolita-pop doll house where 'N Sync, Robyn, Five, Ace of Base and the Backstreeters all record their Eurofied impersonation of teen-targeted R&B...transforming this exMouseketeer born in a tiny Louisiana town into a growling jailbait dynamo.¹⁶⁵

Spears' album of the same name, *Baby One More Time*, was reviewed jointly with Christina Aguilera's self-titled album and Jennifer Lopez's *On the 6* by Rob Sheffield in the December 16 – December 23, 1999, issue. Although the entire review is fairly short, half the space was allocated to Spears, and her album is reviewed first.

Forget the Masons – the Mouseketeers were the year's hottest secret society. As Britney Spears and her fellow Mickey Mouse Club alumni took over the airwaves, you could imagine them cutting deals in the halls of power while wearing those little plastic mouse ears. Britney led a cheese-disco boom with "...Baby One More Time," one of the robotically catchy products that could come only from the pop laboratories of Sweden. Fortunately, Miss B. kept the drecky ballads to a minimum ("E-Mail My Heart," yeesh), and took the fast ones to the radio. The title track, "Sometimes" and "(You Drive Me) Crazy" had surprisingly sharp lyrics about teen sexual obsession over the booming beats, and Britney invested each one with high-school-confidential pathos.¹⁶⁶

The review already hints at Spears' sexuality: it presents an image of a not entirely wholesome teen and of a pre-fabricated, sexually in-control, young girl. It is interesting that both reviews highlight the fact that many pop groups/acts were being produced, or "constructed," in Sweden. This seems to be the process of constructing a pop star akin to what Phil Spector was creating with his girl groups in the 1960s. Barry Walters uses the

¹⁶⁵ Barry Walters, "...Baby One More Time," *Rolling Stone* 805 (February 4, 1999): 60.

¹⁶⁶ Rob Sheffield, "...Baby One More Time / Christina Aguilera / On the 6," *Rolling Stone* 828/829 (December 16-23, 1999): 218.

term R&B to describe their music, but it is a watered-down version that is deemed appropriate for a young, white, female audience – similar to Spector’s aims.

By the June 8, 2000 review of Spears’ second album, ...*OOPs! I Did It Again*, in *Rolling Stone*, Rob Sheffield was dismissing the Lolita theme of the first album in favour of portraying a young girl who desperately wants to explore an adult-oriented form of sexuality but cannot quite fit the role yet. What remains is a conflicted representation: a girl who has the potential to be wholesome and entirely pop-oriented juxtaposed with images of a sexually aware rock and roll star. Sheffield writes

Britney Spears carries on the classic archetype of the rock & roll teen queen, the dungaree doll, the angel baby who just has to make a scene. She has nothing to do with Lolita and everything to do with Ann Margaret’s pink Capri pants in Bye Bye Birdie...it’s her party and she’ll grind if she wants to. Shooting at the walls of heartache, she is the warrior. Britney is a solo starlet working the girl-group shoop shoop... fantastic pop choose...but that brutal growl is all Britney, articulating a violently ambivalent sexual confusion her audience can relate to, kicking and screaming for the right to figure out her desires before the world decides for her. She’s in the dressing room, trying on various styles of adult sexuality that don’t quite fit yet, and her fans know how that feels.¹⁶⁷

With Spears’ third album, *Britney*, reviews appeared in both *Blender* and *Rolling Stone*. While the *Rolling Stone* review by Barry Walters is considerably longer than the one by Alex Pappademas in *Blender*, they both cover many of the same themes: the constructedness of pop music, a comparison of Spears to Janet Jackson and a downplaying of her sexuality. Walters still uses the Lolita term, but here it is in reference to her need to distance herself from that symbol, perhaps in order to help her career: “her Lolita shtick is past its expiration date.” One has to question why *Rolling Stone* keeps

¹⁶⁷ Rob Sheffield, “Girls Can Tell,” *Rolling Stone* 842 (June 8, 2000): 118.

imposing this term on Spears, since she has maintained that her intention was not to be someone's Lolita-girl. Walter mentions that she needs to grow out of this image, but it is unclear what he would like her to become. By stating that her audience has become less innocent, should we then infer that he would rather she be a full-blown sex symbol, or is it a request that she abandon top-40 pop altogether?

Still, *Britney* belabors the obvious: Spears is one month away from entering her twenties and clearly needs to grow up if she's going to bring her fans along. Her Lolita shtick is nearly past its expiration date, and the growing pains presented throughout the album come across as contrived. While she's envisioning herself as a renegade fairy-tale princess, other gals her age are contemplating college majors, contraception and motherhood. America itself has aged abruptly over the past two months, perhaps too quickly for "Britney," Britney or even Britney. Time will tell whether any of her incarnations remain relevant in an era that's suddenly not that innocent.¹⁶⁸

Therefore, this excerpt (the last paragraph of the review) could be read in several different ways. If his intention is that she should abandon pop music, this could be seen as tying into notions of popular music and the carnivalesque, as explored by Diane Railton¹⁶⁹ – popular music is appropriate for those escaping reality during a time of legitimate illegitimacy, but it is not appropriate for real life. Popular music is considered to be an appropriate medium for young girls to explore their sexuality and bodies before growing up and becoming functional members of society, i.e. falling under the influence of a patriarchal society that does not understand or accept overt female sexuality.

Since the review was written two months after 9/11, the abandonment of popular music takes on additional meanings. The last sentence, where Walters remarks that the

¹⁶⁸ Barry Walters, "Britney," *Rolling Stone* 882 (November 22, 2001): 85.

¹⁶⁹ See chapter one.

American public has grown up and is no longer innocent relates to the sense that everyone should eventually grow out of listening to popular music, regardless of gender. He implies that the events of 9/11 have forced the public to grow up and relinquish the hold popular music had had on them, which begs the question, in order to become what? What they, or Spears, are to become is not evident, and is something that was not, and has not, been fully answered since those events. Railton notes that one of the key aspects of the carnivalesque nature of pop music is that it undermines social hierarchies. In a time of great grief, and of struggling to reclaim power and prestige through serious imagery, threatening social hierarchies could in turn threaten social power through anarchy. A rejection of the freedom of pop music, therefore, aids in the creation of a serious social landscape in order to promote healing and the rebuilding of the perceived power of the country/society.

In the *Blender* review, Pappademas complicates the issue of representing Spears' sexuality by remarking that the musical sounds of the album are sexual, though not overtly:

On the first single, "I'm a Slave 4 U," ultrasuccessful hip-hop producers the Neptunes are in top form, greasing their trademark whips-and-chains rhythm with slippery synth lube. "Slave" is weird, dark and irresistibly dirty, and it's hard to listen to the rest of *Britney*... without imagining what the album would have sounded like had they produced the whole thing. Instead, *Britney* backs off double-quick from overt sexuality.¹⁷⁰

While both reviews contain substantial references to Britney as a product – being something that has been constructed – the above excerpt places the alleged overt

¹⁷⁰ Alex Pappademas, "Britney Spears: *Britney*," *Blender: The Guide*, <http://www.blender.com/guide/reviews.aspx?id=1212> (accessed February 27, 2006).

sexuality of her music in the hands of male producers. At this point in her career, Spears was still relying on others to write her lyrics, compose her music and choreograph her routines; in this instance, the individuals writing her most sexually explicit songs were two young males in their twenties.

The question that then needs addressing, both within the personal and public realms, becomes: what codes a genre of music as sexual? Pappademas refers to “whips-and-chains rhythm with slippery synth lube,” but these are merely characteristics imposed from above onto the music. Is it, then, the actual music, the producers’ intentions, or the inherent sexuality of Spears’ image that provides critics with the fodder to represent Spears in this fashion? Simon Frith argues that the sexual nature of pop music can be found directly in its rhythm:

The sexual charge of most pop music comes, in fact, from the tension between the (fluid) coding of the body in the voice (in the instrumental voice) and the (disciplined) coding of the body in the beat... In the end, music is “sexy” not because it makes us move, but because (through that movement) it makes us feel; makes us feel (like sex itself) intensely present. Rhythm, in short, is “sexual” in that it isn’t just about the experience of the body, but also (the two things are inseparable) about the experience of time.¹⁷¹

It is interesting that Frith would argue that the music is sexual because it makes us present because Spears’ voice is generally so digitally/musically altered that you do not get a sense of *her*. Following from the theories of Roland Barthes in *The Grain of the Voice*, we are losing a sense of her body within her voice. Her being/body is almost removed through digital means, yet the music itself is still characterized as being sexual. Her “grain” (the feeling of the body producing the sound of her voice) is so digitally

¹⁷¹ Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: on the value of popular music* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1996), 144.

altered that one only gets a sense of the digital means needed to produce her voice. Is this creating a new “digital grain” whereas intimacy must be re-defined in order to allow for digital production?

There are reviews from all three publications for Spears’ fourth album, *In the Zone*. Interestingly, while *Rolling Stone* and *Blender* make use of extensive sexual imagery and metaphor in their reviews, *Spin* focuses on the actual music and what it sounds like. Both Mim Udovitch, of *Blender*, and Jon Pareles, of *Rolling Stone*, titillate and pander to their readership by focusing on the sexual nature of the lyrics and Spears’ image in the media, as opposed to the music itself.

Caryn Ganz, in the December 2003 issue of *Spin*, uses the imagery in the following excerpt to describe the music:

Most of the record’s up-tempo bangers trace the single’s footsteps, bopping raucously without slipping into chintzy faux rock of flavorless hip-hop. Gone are the spare Neptunes beats of *Britney*, replaced by a hectic sonic pileup. Spears hit pay dirt on “Toxic,” holding her own against a wall of drum breaks, strings, and James Bond surf guitar that warps and struts like it’s been fed into the Matrix... the record’s biggest declaration of self may be the Moby-produced “Early Mornin’.” Over a lulling, circular bass line and morose flute sample, Spears crashes on the couch, trying to shake the residual fog of an obviously misspent night out, musing, “I can’t be like that anymore.” At these moments, *Zone*’s offhand mastery suggests that she may not have to.¹⁷²

In her musical descriptions, with the use of terms such as “chintzy faux rock” and “circular bass line,” Ganz assumes that her readers possess a degree of musical knowledge. Ganz’s use of assumed knowledge could be seen as an attempt to legitimize Spears through her music, even if that music is ultimately created by the producers, not

¹⁷² Caryn Ganz, “Britney Spears: Get in the Zone,” *Spin* 19, no.12 (December 2003): 130-131.

Spears herself. Ganz even uses the label “mastery,” a loaded term with masculine overtones that is more likely to be applied to a heavy metal album laden with virtuosic guitar solos, not a pop music album. For a publication that, in other sections, tends to mock top-40 pop music, and Spears in particular, it is interesting to see her represented in this way through this review.

The representation of Spears’ sexuality in this review is limited to the opening paragraph, with a reference to “sexy jeans,” which is taken directly from Spears’ lyrics.

The review begins

Just two years ago, Britney Spears was not a girl, not yet humping walls on a newsstand near you. But teen queens mature in dog years, and now that Hillary Duff is dangling her watch before the swing-set crows, dear Brit can get down to the dirty work. After a coolly received second album, a did-she-or-didn’t-she Durst alliance, and an eternity of tabloid-hounded par-taying later, Spears is slapping on a headlamp and heading into the mines.¹⁷³

In contrast to the reviews in *Rolling Stone*, and *Blender*, Ganz attempts to legitimize Spears’ work, not only with a detailed discussion of the music, but also by recognizing her personal growth. Even the short description of her sexuality, which could be construed as another de-legitimizing effect, is minimal.

The sexual representation of Spears, her music and her lyrics is a central focus for the reviews by Udovitch and Pareles. For example, the following excerpt epitomizes how Udovitch describes the music:

Appropriately, she has made a (literally) heavy-breathing record... For the most part, however, Spears pants, moans and even raps over a smorgasbord of club beats... one of the record’s numerous lyrical references to her hips, her ass and her low-rise jeans... she does it with

¹⁷³ Ibid.

style and a lot of dirty giggling... is like calling the Britney phone-sex line without a per-minute charge – a sensuous, swaying beat accentuated by a wash of strings that comes and goes like a slow inhalation... This I'm-coming-out record is an unhesitant move from songs of the heart to songs of the groin.¹⁷⁴

Similarly, the following is Pareles representation of the music:

There's no question that Spears wants *In the Zone* to be erogenous, so she lays on the heavy breathing and offers herself for hookups on and off the dance floor... as if endorsing Spears' foray into come-hither posing and club-land beats... *In the Zone* offers strip-club, 1-900 sex, accommodating and hollow. Beyond the glittering beats, Spears sounds about as intimate as a blowup doll.¹⁷⁵

While the lyrics lend themselves to sexual interpretation, there is nothing inherent in the music that is coded as sexual – this interpretation is guided by forces outside of Spears. As a gatekeeper, the decision on how to represent someone rests with the critic, and in this case, the choice is to represent Spears sexually.

Many of the decisions of how to represent a performer in a review are perceived to be the critic's choice, but publications hire critics who will promote their views and maintain readership. In this sense, all three reviews present problematic representations of Spears. Even though the majority of the production of *In the Zone* was out of Spears' control, this album represents the most lyrical and musical control that Spears has had. The lyrics she employs have greater sexual context than her previous albums, but the problem is not that the lyrics *are* sexual, per se, but that the reaction of the public towards them is. In general, the public is not prepared to accept the overt re-claiming of female sexuality as a means of attaining power. Lyrically, Spears relies on self-satisfaction, and

¹⁷⁴ Mim Udovitch, "Britney Spears: *In the Zone*," *Blender: The Guide*, <http://www.blender.com/guide/reviews.aspx?id=1448> (accessed February 28, 2006).

¹⁷⁵ Jon Pareles, "Heavy Breathing," *Rolling Stone* 937 (December 11, 2003): 198.

even in the accompanying videos, is always firmly in control of the situation and those, including the males, around her. While her image has been deemed inappropriate by many people, consideration should be given to her attempt at challenging female sexual repression. *Spin*, by ignoring this altogether, seeks to neutralize her gender in order for her to be seen as more authentic in a rock-oriented publication. *Rolling Stone* and *Blender* showcase Spears' sexuality, but interpret it in a way that places Spears in the stereotypical role of the subject of the male gaze. Even what could be seen as a redeeming factor at the end of the *Blender* review, where Udovitch notes,

The girl who started her career looking up at you from her first album cover with a Crest-fresh smile and her knees together now has her legs wide open – and, on more than one occasion, something all her own between them. You can't get any more in control than that. No longer a girl, freed from slavery, now fully a woman...¹⁷⁶

is tainted by the next sentence: "she makes a pretty convincing mistress."¹⁷⁷

Feature Articles

There are no feature articles on Spears available from *Spin*, one from *Blender* and over five from *Rolling Stone*, the only publication covering Spears early in her career. The *Blender* article appeared the December 2003 issue, after the release of *In the Zone*. Like the highly sexualized reviews mentioned previously, the feature articles in both publications also address her sexuality, but they ultimately aim to highlight Spears' off-stage personality. Perhaps as a way to humanize her public persona, Spears is often represented as the "girl next door" with southern sensibilities, but also as someone who is

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

still very young and growing into her power as a (sexual) woman. The girl-next-door persona provides the public with an image of someone who conforms to societal norms. Dyer notes that it is important for stars to reflect social norms in order to be accepted fully, for the public wants to be able to relate to stars.¹⁷⁸

In some cases, the text downplays her sexuality, but the photos are overtly sexual. A prime example of this was the 1999 *Rolling Stone* cover story, accompanied by photographs by Dave LaChapelle that sparked controversy over their Lolita-themed imagery. The photographs for the 2004 cover story in *Blender* from were also sexually provocative, though the article itself dealt very little with Spears' sexuality, poking fun instead at her intelligence and the spectacle of her life.

The April 1999 issue of *Rolling Stone*, with photographs by LaChappelle, portrayed Spears photographically as a seventeen-year-old Lolita. In hindsight, with the knowledge that we have now of what Spears' image has become, these photos have lost their controversial edge: the main problem is that she is legally underage. She is not revealing too much skin, but the seductive way in which she stares into the camera from her school-girl bedroom definitely resonates with the Lolita image and notions of the male gaze. In one photograph, Spears is dancing in front of the television while a man, who is actually her brother, lies in front of her, without a shirt, pointing the remote control towards her. There are multiple ways in which this could be interpreted, such as Spears portraying a robotically programmed woman who is controlled by a man and his

¹⁷⁸ Richard Dyer, *Stars*, 39.

remote control, but few center on the empowering element that Spears has taken on since taking full control of her image.

This study's central concern is the way in which she is represented in music critical writing. Because this was Spears' first *Rolling Stone* cover article, the writing is mostly informational and concerned with how Spears' life has unfolded up to the present. In stark contrast to the provocative photos, the writing represents Spears as the typical American "girl next door" who did gymnastics as a child and sang in talent shows, all with the drive to succeed in life. The article questions where this new-found success will take her life path and generally works to support her *Rolling Stone*-imposed title of "Queen of Pop."

One of the few instances where her sexuality is showcased is at the beginning of the article. Steven Daly writes

Britney Spears extends a honeyed thigh across the length of the sofa, keeping one foot on the floor as she does so. Her blond-streaked hair is piled high, exposing two little diamond earrings on each ear lobe; her face is fully made-up, down to carefully applied lip liner. The BABY PHAT logo of Spears' pink T-shirt is distended by her ample chest, and her silky white shorts – with dark blue piping – cling snugly to her hips. She cocks her head and smiles receptively.¹⁷⁹

But as we learn in the subsequent paragraph, this was just a technique to illustrate the constructedness of her sexualized image and the difference between the image and reality of Spears:

But hold on. It's not like that. You're falling into the same trap as the lovelorn youths who call Spears' local florist to send her long-stemmed roses and the randy fellows outside the MTV studios with prom invites

¹⁷⁹ Steven Daly, "Britney Spears: inside the heart and mind (and bedroom) of America's new teen queen," *Rolling Stone* 810 (April 15, 1999): 60-69.

scrawled on their chests. Admittedly, that trap is carefully baited by a debut video that shows the seventeen-year-old singer cavorting around like the naughtiest of schoolgirls. But, as Spears points out, nothing is actually revealed.¹⁸⁰

The May 25, 2000, *Rolling Stone* cover article continues the theme of Spears as a maturing young girl and the writer's uncertainty about where her future career within the fleeting world of pop music, are central in. Chris Mundy opens the article by representing Spears as a young *girl* – the word *girl* is used numerous times before her name is even mentioned – and, as with the previous article, the labelling of Spears as a girl helps to humanize her by including a description of her off-stage personality. The article begins with the following references:

There are nine songs, five costumes changes and 10,000 screaming fans. Explosions erupt from each side of the stage, eight dancers writhe suggestively in unison, and in the center of it all is one small girl... she has managed to separate herself from the masses and become the nation's prom queen.

And when it's all over, the girl sprints from the stage to a waiting bus, still sweaty from the performance. She climbs onboard and, within seconds, before the fans have even left their seats, the girl is on the road, a police escort leading the way. Her name is Britney Spears. She is eighteen years old, and this may be her only moment, so she is working like there's no tomorrow.¹⁸¹

The article continues with references that liken her to a normal teenage girl, who just happens to have a multimillion dollar career, as well as providing the standard historical information about her personal life growing up. The mention of her hard work may position Spears within the trope of the American Dream, but in general, this article maintains that her success is a product of good luck, and good timing. In addition, as

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Chris Mundy, "The girl can't help it," *Rolling Stone* 841 (May 25, 2000): 46-52.

with the nature of pop music, this success could also be fleeting, hence the hard work to maintain it.

The only other mention of her sexuality is when Spears, during the interview, makes the point that it is not her, but her artistic image. In the words of the article:

These days Britney Spears has been thinking a lot about sex. This is probably because, these days, a lot of people have been thinking about Britney Spears in a sexual way.

Perhaps it is the perpetually bare midriff. Or the cleavage-baring gown she wore to the American Music Awards. Or maybe the cleavage-baring jumpsuit she performed in at the Grammys. Maybe fans have caught the skintight number Spears wears in her new video... Whatever the reason, a trend has developed.

Spears claims that she never meant for her public persona to be sexual. You don't believe her. As evidence, you offer her first *Rolling Stone* cover, when she was seventeen, on which she wore hot pants and a push-up bra.

"It was about being in a magazine and playing a part for that magazine," says Spears. "It's like on TV, if you see Jennifer Love Hewitt or Sarah Michelle Geller kill someone, do you think that means they go out and do that? Of course not. You know, I've taken millions of pictures. That's not me."

The struggle to separate public and private selves is a difficult one for any celebrity; it is all the more difficult if you happen to be a teenager with considerable sexual power. On her own time, Britney is still a jeans and T-shirt girl. In public, however, there are the revealing outfits, which help to sell a product, which happens to be herself.¹⁸²

While Spears' personal life, her appearance/image, her boyfriend and other typical topics for writing about women in music are discussed, the topic of music is barely mentioned. Besides being labelled pop, there is little discussion of what her music actually sounds like and there are no reactions from/questions to Spears surrounding the production of her new album. There is casual mention of her extravagant tour and how her new album is "hot," but according to Mundy, it is clear that Spears is famous for

¹⁸² Ibid.

more than just her music. Spears is clearly a product herself, more popular for the controversy surrounding her than for the music she performs. Although Mundy never mentions Madonna, Spears has obviously been influenced by the original Material Girl - a product who is famous for being a product. Spears' music becomes secondary to the money-making spectacle that is top-40 pop.

With the release of her album, *Britney*, Spears took more control, not only of her image, but also of the songwriting credits. The September 2001 cover story in *Rolling Stone* by Jenny Eliscu, delves much deeper than previous articles into the actual music that Spears is producing, but it also downplays this by providing more detailed descriptions of Spears' appearance. The music is still secondary to the personal, including Spears' new home, her relationship with Justin Timberlake, how the public perceives her appearance, her appearance itself and issues dealing with Spears' maturation.

Both the October 2003 issue of *Rolling Stone* and a cover article in the December 2003 issue of *Blender* promoted the release of *In the Zone*. The *Rolling Stone* article, by Mark Binelli, follows in the same vein as the ones before it – asking the now-standard questions about her personal life, her relationships, her virginity and her music, accompanied by a focus on her sexual appearance. The *Rolling Stone* feature articles are similar overall and represent Spears as a constructed pop star, even though she notes that she is fully in charge of her career. Her off-screen persona is described as closer to that of the girl-next-door who enjoys playing the powerful sexual woman on stage. *Blender*, while acknowledging many of the same issues, attempts to undermine Spears'

intelligence and her understanding of everyday life. After being asked the standard personal questions, Spears gets annoyed and withdraws from the interview, a fact that the interviewer William Shaw conveyed to his readers. He then proceeded to ask untypical questions of the pop star. The following excerpt demonstrates how Shaw set out to represent Spears:

Four days after *SNL*, we're cloistered in a small conference room in Trump Towers in Manhattan. Our interview is not going especially well.

Do you know how much money you have?

"I don't know," she says, exasperated. "I know how much money I have in my trust fund, but that's a personal question."

We're not asking for figures. Just, are you the sort of person who keeps an eye on her money? Do you know how much a quart of milk is?

"I don't know - \$4.50?"

During your so-called hiatus, when Christina and Justin released their albums and both of them did well, didn't a part of you sit there and think, "Damn, I've got nothing out?"

"I had my moment. I had my time. I think it's inspiring when Shakira or Avril Lavigne does something. Gwen Stefani. Madonna. We're all true artists. We're just here as vessels trying to bring some light to the world. That's all it boils down to."

So you never suffer from bouts of paranoia?

"What are you talking about?" she says, suddenly testy. "I just don't understand where you're coming from."

Did you hear about how U.S. soldiers found a picture of you on the wall inside one of Saddam Hussein's palaces in Iraq?

"They did? That's scary." She picks up a bottle of water. "So what?" she suddenly asks, suspicious that *Blender* is trying to pin something bad on her.

In the wake of the September 11 attacks, you were mentioned as one of the reasons people were hostile to America. You were alleged to represent the immorality and hegemony of American culture.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

Did you ever hear that?

"This interview," she says, "is way too deep."

Pause.

Given that you're just beginning to promote your new CD, you've got months of interviews ahead of you. It's going to be trying, isn't it?

"Yes it is."

How on earth are you going to cope?

Suddenly, for a second, the ice melts. She relaxes with a sudden burst of laughter. “Oh, I don’t know. Gosh.”¹⁸³

This positioning of Spears as someone who is focused on superficial issues, and perhaps lacking the intelligence to take on deeper subject matter, reinforces the stereotype of young, women pop musicians as inherently dumb and easily manipulated. In addition, there is a conflict of representational power occurring within this interview. While Shaw attempts to undermine Spears’ authority and dismiss her as merely a pop star (i.e., inauthentic and superficial), she seems to be trying to gain control by relating pop stars to divine agents by using the term “vessels.” She also answers his questions with questions: as an effort to gain power in the situation. It could be argued that Spears sensed Shaw’s challenge to undermine her representation, and therefore used what means were available to her in a written interview to try and re-gain control of how she will be represented.

Examining the male/rock – female/pop dichotomy, if rock is defined as masculine and intelligent, then pop music is superficial, unintelligent and merely of the body. As Diane Railton notes in “The Gendered Carnival of Pop”

Rock culture created its own spaces and its own infrastructure for the production and discussion of rock music...[women] were excluded from the intellectual involvement in these spaces. They were there to by physical, and only the physical... rock was neither part of the staid institutions of Western art music nor was it part of the mindless, mass music that had preceded it.¹⁸⁴

Spears is represented by Shaw as being part of this tradition of “mindless, mass music” that requires little intelligent thought, yet is strongly associated with the body. Railton

¹⁸³ William Shaw, “Britney Busts Loose!,” *Blender* 23 (December 2003): 93-94. (84-94)

¹⁸⁴ Diane Railton, “The Gendered Carnival of Pop,” *Popular Music* 20, no.3 (2001): 325.

continues with a discussion on how women like Spears tend to be insulted in sexualized terms,

If you are a woman at the “pop” end of the genre you will be insulted in sexualized terms... In the case of women involved in commercial pop music, however, this terminology is particularly pertinent. To be a woman, in rock hegemony, is to be sexual. To be sexual and produce music that is purely commercial easily transforms into prostitution and commercial sex.¹⁸⁵

While many of the articles focused on Spears’ sexuality, none seemed to insult her as directly as did this one. *Blender’s* was the most openly insulting article, because it demeaned her intelligence.

The representation of Spears’ sexualized pop music is the focus of all the feature articles examined here. While popular music scholars have argued that the genre of rock music is the arena for overt, masculine sexuality, Spears presents an image of a highly sexual woman, one who is powerful and very much in control of her representation. For example, even in her first music video, for *...Baby One More Time*, it was her choice to tie her shirt up in the front. Most journalists seem to have trouble identifying this power with a sexual being, rather than sex symbol. Instead of praising Spears’ challenging of traditional submissive femininity, the press focuses on how her image is satisfying for the male gaze. Joanne Hollows, in *Feminism, Femininity and Popular Culture*, examines how other scholars have dealt with the issue of sexuality in pop music. Hollows notes that Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie, in *Rock and Sexuality*, argue that rock expresses sexuality, whereas pop represses sexuality, and continues

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

Undermining Frith and McRobbie's argument is the assumption that teenybop performers are presented as vulnerable and gentle in order to encourage girls to buy into the ideology of romance. Pop may offer girls a vision of freedom, but only the freedom to be wives, mothers, and the objects of male desire.¹⁸⁶

And so, here we have Spears, who is not promoting any of these ideals in her actual music/image, and the press, with its problematic representation of her fluctuating between honouring Spears for her breaking away from gender stereotypes, and alternatively, presenting her as an object of male desire.

Random Notes

Blender, *Spin* and *Rolling Stone* all represent Spears differently in their random notes sections. *Blender* seems to be obsessed with reporting any detail of her personal life for which it can find an accompanying photograph, which humanizes their coverage of Spears. *Spin*'s coverage is less extensive, but in direct opposition to the humanizing attempts by *Blender*, its random notes are focused on presenting Spears as an extravagant pop star, far removed from the "real world." Occupying the middle, neutral ground between these two publications is *Rolling Stone*, which tends to present informational random notes, mostly concerning upcoming concerts, videos, and album releases.

Blender's representation of Spears in its random notes sections presents to readers the image of a young woman who struggles with everyday issues, just like anyone else her age. For example, there are numerous short mentions of her, alongside photographs of her at home or having private moments with her friends or husband, such as in the

¹⁸⁶ Joanne Hallows, *Feminism, Femininity and Popular Culture* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2000), 178-179.

September 2004 issue, where photographs of Spears smoking a cigarette are accompanied by the caption. “Give a hoot!: Tsk! Britney Spears heaves a cigarette off her balcony shame!”¹⁸⁷ or the April 2005 issue, in which there is a photograph of Spears at a mall “energy healer.”¹⁸⁸ Sometimes, the commentary for candid photographs questions her choices, such as in the October 2004 issue: “Sugar High!: Soon-to-be-stepmom Britney Spears could be loading up on too much junk food, experts say.” In the article by Noel Boddie, Vidya Albrink, a health-care practitioner, analyzes Spears’ food intake through a series of candid photographs of Spears eating and buying junk food.

An indication of *Blender*’s obsession with Spears was the whole page devoted to a photo of her in a store, with a heading in the top corner reading, “Britney Watch.”¹⁸⁹ Another example of this appears in the March 2005 issue, entitled “Preggers?” with the subtitle, “Would Britney Spears commit these pregnancy no-nos if she were carrying Kevin’s third child? No, right?” It then proceeds to present more candid photos while critiquing what her actions could do to an unborn child.¹⁹⁰ This obsession extends further beyond Spears to her dog, Bit Bit, who is also afforded space in *Blender*’s random notes. In the May 2005 issue, Johanna Piazza’s article, “yo quiero a piece of me?” tries to determine if Hilary Duff, Paris Hilton or Spears’ Chihuahua has the best “doggystyle,” by comparing a list of facts about the dogs.¹⁹¹ The June/July 2002 issue included a short

¹⁸⁷ Anonymous, “Give a hoot!: Tsk! Britney Spears heaves a cigarette off her balcony. For shame!,” *Blender* 29 (September 2004): 52.

¹⁸⁸ Anonymous, “Quack!,” *Blender* 35 (April 2005): 42.

¹⁸⁹ Noel Boddie, “Sugar High!: Soon-to-be stepmom Britney Spears could be loading up on too much junk food, experts say,” *Blender* 30 (October 2004): 28-29.

¹⁹⁰ Anonymous, “Preggers?,” *Blender* 34 (March 2005): 48.

¹⁹¹ Johanna Piazza, “yo quiero a piece of me?,” *Blender* 36 (May 2005): 28.

interview with the costumers who construct Spears' tour clothes, entitled "We make sure Britney doesn't end up naked."¹⁹²

Because of the ubiquitous nature of Spears, not only within top-40 pop, but in all popular culture media outlets, the public begins to feel as if they *know* her and what is in her best interest. People often become obsessed with stars because they feel that, through their music and image, they have a particular emotional connection with them, though one constructed entirely in their minds. This obsession seems to have influenced *Blender's* coverage of Spears, for, through these are humanizing representations, it also supports public's attachment to her.

There are fewer instances in which *Spin* covers Spears. In *Spin*, the goal is more of an attempt to distance Spears from the public by demonstrating how different her life truly is. A prime example comes from the May 2002 issue, with a short article by Victoria DeSilverio, "Britney vs. A normal College-Age Girl." DeSilverio compares the life of Emily Campany to Spears through a series of questions. Campany's answers are her own while Spears' are based on media representations. The article locates Spears' outside of everyday reality in many ways. For example

Lives

Britney: In new \$3 million mansion in Hollywood Hills; also has mansion in England.

Emily: With parents in Cleveland; has own bathroom

Still gets acne?

Britney: Had an aloe and chamomile acne wash called Britney Wash developed for her by top dermatologists after a bad breakout

Emily: "I get some pimples, but I'm usually pretty clear."

¹⁹² Matt Diehl and Rob Kemp, "The Ultimate Summer Preview 2002: We make sure Britney doesn't end up naked," *Blender* 7 (June – July 2002): 82. (80-89)

Has rumor ever been spread about you?

Britney: Dating Prince William; dies in a car crash; has breast implants; lip-synch; is an alien

Emily: "There was this kid who asked me out, but I just wanted to be friends. A week later, I found out he told everyone I gave him a blowjob."

Last birthday party

Britney: A buff male stripper danced for her in front of her parents and ten-year-old sister. Justin sent Baccarat crystal glasses, a teddy bear, and a silver candelabra

Emily: "I had a small dinner with my family and my friend, Susan. I don't really like having big parties."¹⁹³

Another example is from the June 2002 issue, in which the *Spin* writers concocted an imaginary series of email exchanges between Spears and Justin Timberlake during their breakup titled, "Stick it up your inbox! Britney and Justin: email from the big breakup." The anonymous article recounts the imaginary events leading up to the breakup. The email exchanges undermined the intelligence of both artists' and reinforced the notion that pop music is for young, unintelligent women. The following is that last email from Spears to Timberlake:

Jsitin...fuck you. i Hate when you talk black when you're upset... you sound so stupid... My mom told me that i want to remind you that YOU weres the one who stuck your little dick in that broonet slut (She DIDN'T sAY slut but I am so maDDER)... well, now you're free so do whatever yuo want. i don't care... TarA and me are having a blast. I'm never going back to the housth in the hills... i'm having some people box up my stuff (INCLUDING THE BOOK THE ART OF THE FEMALE ORGASM WHICH IS GONNA COME IN HANDY NOW) and send it to New York. and guess what else, i met this cute boy names Julian who's in this band The Strokes... and they WRITE THEIR OWN SONGS. AT FIRSST they didn't believe I loved rock and rol!!! like i sang but then I did "THE OTHER THING" to them all and now we're working on songs for mynew

¹⁹³ Victoria DeSilverio, "Britney vs. a normal college-age girl," *Spin* 18, no.3 (March 2002): 56.

album, which is gonna totally change everything people think about me.
B¹⁹⁴

Not all the emails are as filled with spelling errors as this one, but the errors work both to show how angry she is and to undermine her intelligence.

Rolling Stone's neutral representation of Spears in its random notes neither humanizes nor distances Spears for her readers. Essentially, the notes provide information about upcoming events, tours, videos, and albums. Of all the publications, though, this is the only one that maintains a focus on sexuality in the random notes, such as this excerpt from the November 27, 2003, issue, promoting Spears' upcoming TV special, "Britney: In the Zone and Out All Night":

She moaned. She teased. She stripped. Britney Spears went on one hell of a club binge on October 18th performing surprise shows at three New York dance spots. Appearing in various states of undress, Spears brought out a few dance-floor favorites.¹⁹⁵

as well as the April 1, 2004, issue, promoting her tour:

"The past six months have been kind of a roller coaster," Britney Spears told fans at her March 2nd concert in San Diego, the first of twenty-five shows on her Onyx Hotel Tour. With the distractions of kissing Madonna and a fifty-hour marriage behind her, Spears got back to what she does best: putting on a sexy concert spectacle.¹⁹⁶

While representing Spears in sexualized terms seems to be a theme for *Rolling Stone*, much of its in the random notes remains neutral, not only in the way it represents her understanding of reality, but also from a sexual standpoint. This can be seen in the following excerpt from the July 8 – July 22, 2004 issue by Jenny Eliscu:

¹⁹⁴ Anonymous, "Stick it up your inbox!," *Spin* 18, no.6 (June 2002): 26-27.

¹⁹⁵ Shirley Halarin, "Guerrilla club far," *Rolling Stone* 936 (November 27, 2003): 21.

¹⁹⁶ Steve Appleford, "Britney's Hot Date," *Rolling Stone* 945 (April 1, 2004): 23.

Two weeks before she was scheduled to kick off the second U.S. leg of her Onyx Hotel Tour, Britney Spears suffered a knee injury that could keep her off her feet for more than a month. In New York on June 8th, Spears fell while filming the video for “Outrageous” – which will appear on the Catwoman soundtrack. She underwent arthroscopic surgery shortly thereafter. Though the tour is still officially on, one source says the pop singer is expected to take up to six weeks to recover, and the entire road trip could be postponed.¹⁹⁷

Even though *Rolling Stone* contains notices about upcoming events, the majority of the random notes from all three publications tend to ignore Spears’ music. As with the feature articles and reviews, her image represented as more important than her music.

Top-40 pop success is dependant on an image created by the artist, in collaboration with their manager and record company. Spears’ image, which constructs her as Madonna’s descendent, may be understood as reclaiming female sexuality, and ultimately, social power. While Spears has been somewhat successful in acquiring this power, the press has undermined her efforts by representing her as solely an object of male desire. Spears’ recent representation as lacking judgment in her lifestyle choices, coupled with the media’s exploitation of her decisions, has markedly decreased her claim to either social or sexual power. She has become a shadow of what she once was, and even though she is still ubiquitous in the media, she has lost much of the intrigue and allure surrounding her former image. Within the seven years that she has grown up in the public eye, her sexual power has emerged and disappeared, reinforcing societal notions that pop music is only suitable for young girls to explore their sexuality before joining the real world. Spears has almost become an example of what happens if someone doesn’t “outgrow” pop

¹⁹⁷ Jenny Eliscu, “Brit’s knee gives out,” *Rolling Stone* 952/953 (July 8 – July 22, 2004): 16.

music. This is not to say that pop music cannot be enjoyed by those who have matured past adolescence, but merely that Spears is reinforcing negative stereotypes about the social function of pop music.

~ CONCLUSION ~

Music magazines are the most comprehensive vehicle for documenting popular music history; the way in which artists are represented today will strongly influence how they are remembered in the future. While there are journals and groups, such as IASPM, which examine and document current popular music, in academia, textbooks offer the means to provide what is perceived by much of the public as the most comprehensive accounts of popular music. Magazines, journals, and such work to shape what will be documented in textbooks, but, ultimately, they lag behind actual contemporary music production, often waiting until an artist has made enough of an impact to be deemed credible enough. Magazines, therefore, are important for providing the most widespread account of popular music as it is within any specific time period, regardless of whether or not an artist has “proved” him, or herself worthy of textbook status.

Because of the male-dominated canonization process, popular music has befallen the same fate as art music’s history: the efforts of women are belittled in genres which are not coded as feminine, such as rock music. Magazines, and history textbooks alike, can easily re-define genres after the fact, in order to characterize, limit and augment who should be considered authentic within said genres. Thus, if more women writers are vocal and present within the magazine industry, beyond just being the token woman on staff, by breaking free of the male-oriented notions of credibility, women’s efforts will be better documented and recorded in history. At the moment, as has been shown in chapter three, because of a lack of female dominance within the role of the critic, women are

compelled to write in the dominant masculinist approach. Of course there is no way to know if more women in the prestigious jobs would alter the landscape, but I can only hope that there is strength in numbers, and those numbers would push for a change.

Canonization is a crucial aspect of magazine production, and hopefully will not continue to praise the efforts of males as more legitimate than those of women. Even with women taking leadership positions within popular music publications, gatekeeping theory maintains that this may not even have an impact on the industry as a whole. While the writers themselves may be female, and wish to write in way that acknowledges the achievements of both genders, others along the gatekeeping process may be male and/or wish to maintain a masculinist approach. For a change to occur, it must be at all levels of the process.

The difficulty in writing this thesis came in creating a critical distance from myself and my fanatic personal interests in popular music. As someone who has been reading *Rolling Stone*, *Blender* and *Spin* magazines fanatically for a number of years, it was difficult to step back to critically examine how these publications were representing women. Before this study, I had never really had a problem with how women were being represented, and I can see how easy it would be for a female pop music critic to fall into the old-boys' club-style of journalistic writing. Mostly, I just found these magazines entertaining, and enjoyed having the knowledges required to fully enjoy them, without considering the consequences they could have on shaping the social consciousness of the readers. If women's efforts continue to be belittled, and women's appearances are

discussed as being more important than their musical contributions, this will be reflected in how the readers perceive women, and, perhaps, their efforts beyond the musical stage.

The three women examined, Britney Spears, Gwen Stefani and Beyoncé Knowles could all be considered feminist role models by presenting themselves as strong individuals who are capable of being both sexual and traditionally feminine, but also powerful and in control of their lives. Problems arise, though, in the way they are documented using a masculinist approach in the press. Their efforts are belittled, they are judged more on their appearance than their music, and the social consciousness of the readers is shaped to reflect this. The powerful status these women have achieved allows them to portray themselves as strong beings, but the press remains stronger, and able to re-define their representations to suit the publication's cognitive structures. What remains to be remembered, then, is the magazine's representation of these artists, as sex symbols, girly-girls and drama queens rather than as powerful women.

My intentions here have not been to criticize or condone the actions of these specific performers, but merely to present what I have interpreted as their intentions, and highlight the marked difference between those, and how they are represented by three distinct publications. Hopefully, this thesis will lead to other opportunities to examine and explore how contemporary popular musicians impact the current social landscape, and to an increased study of the effects of magazine publications that shape the social reality of their readers. I feel that it is very important to have first-hand, documented research, concerning the popular culture that is constantly shaping our lives and our perceptions of the world around us. The study of popular culture is the study of *who we*

are. Therefore, while tracing the lineage of popular artists is extremely important, this study should not stop at the last artist who has achieved credibility, but should be ongoing and reflective of the ever-changing industry. Magazines provide this coverage. As scholars and consumers of popular music, it becomes our role to ensure that future generations have an understanding of how women critics and artists fit into popular music, and in turn, society, as defined by a specific culture at a specific time and location in history.

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