

“Cock Rock: Men Always Seem to End Up on Top”

RAT MAGAZINE

The rock world of the late 1960s/early 1970s was a decidedly male-dominated one, where it often seemed as if the aggressive attitudes of groups like the Rolling Stones allowed little agency for women outside the thrill-seeking adventures of groupies.¹ One of the first articles to address the contradictory allure and repulsion of rock music from a woman's perspective, “Cock Rock” originally appeared in the New York-based underground feminist publication *Rat* magazine.² The article is cast in a decisively downbeat tone, no doubt influenced by the passing of one of rock's few female icons, Janis Joplin (1943–1970), who had died from a heroin overdose mere days before the essay was published. Like many of the writings in *Rat*, “Cock Rock” appeared without an attributed author, an anonymity that served to reflect the communal solidarity of the women's movement itself. The article was later anthologized, however, under the pseudonym of Susan Hiwatt, a playful allusion to a British line of guitar amplifiers favored by groups like the Who and Pink Floyd.³

I. THIS WAS THE WORLD THAT ROCK BUILT

I grew up on Peter Trip, the curly-headed kid in the third row (an AM D.J. in New York City in the late '50s). I spent a lot of time after school following the social life of the kids on *American Bandstand*. Then in high school I spent most of my time in my room with the radio, avoiding family fights. Rock became the thing that helped fill the loneliness and empty spaces in my life. The sound became sort of an alter-world where I daydreamed—a whole vicarious living out of other people's romances and lives. “Sally Go 'round the Roses.” “Donna.”

In college, rock was one of the things that got me together with other people: hours spent in front of a mirror learning how to dance, going to twist parties—getting freakier—tripping off the whole outlaw thing of “My Generation” and “Satisfaction.” I was able to dance rock and talk rock comfortably in a college atmosphere when other things were mystified and intellectualized out of my comprehension and control. You didn't have to have heavy or profound thoughts about rock—you just knew that you dug it.

¹ For an alternative view of the Rolling Stones, see Karen Durbin, “Can a Feminist Love the World's Greatest Rock and Roll Band,” *Ms.*, October 1974, pp. 23–26.

² *Rat* appeared under various titles throughout its brief publication run, including *Rat Subterranean News* and *Women's LibeRATion*.

³ Susan Hiwatt, “Cock Rock,” in Jonathan Eisen, ed., *Twenty-Minute Fandangos and Forever Changes: A Rock Bazaar* (New York: Random House, 1971), 141–47.

A whole sense of people together, behind their own music. It was the only thing we had of our own, where the values weren't set up by the famous wise professors. It was the way not to have to get old and deadened in White America. We wore hip clothes and smoked dope and dropped acid. Going to San Francisco with flowers in our hair.

For a couple of years, when I was with a man, I remember feeling pretty good—lots of people around, a scene I felt I had some control over, getting a lot of mileage off being a groovy couple. For as long as I was his woman, I was protected and being a freak was an up because it made me feel like I had an identity.

When I split from him a whole other trip started. It got harder and harder to be a groovy chick when I had to deal with an endless series of one-night stands and people crashing and always doing the shitwork—thinking and being told that the only reason I wasn't being a freak was because I was too uptight. Going to Woodstock all but bare-breasted somewhere in the middle of all that and thinking I was fucked up for not being able to have more fun than I was having. In a world where the ups were getting fewer and fewer, rock still continued to turn me on.

Then I connected to the women's movement and took a second look at rock.

II. CRASHING: WOMEN IS LOSERS

The Sound of Silence

It took me a whole lot of going to the Fillmore and listening to records and reading *Rolling Stone* before it even registered that what I was seeing and hearing was not all these different groups, but all these different groups of men. And once I noticed that, it was hard not to be constantly noticing all the names on the albums, all the people doing sound and lights, all the voices on the radio, even the D.J.'s between the songs—they are *all* men. In fact, the only place I could look to see anyone who looked anything like me was in the audience, and even there, there were usually more men than women.

It occurred to me that maybe there were some good reasons, besides inadequacy, that I had never taken all my fantasies about being a rock musician very seriously. I don't think I ever told anyone about them. Because in the female 51 percent of Woodstock Nation that I belong to, there isn't any place to be creative in any way. It's a pretty exclusive world.

There are, of course, exceptions. I remember hearing about some "all-chick" bands on the West Coast, like the Ace of Cups, and I also remember reading about how they were laughed and hooped at with a general "take them off the stage and fuck them" attitude. And how they were given the spot between the up-and-coming group and the big-name group—sort of for comic relief. On the two women I saw once who played with the Incredible String Band. They both played instruments and looked terrified throughout the entire concert (I kept thinking how brave they were to be there at all). The two men treated them like backdrops. They played back-up and sang harmony, and in fact, they were introduced as Rose and Licorice—no last names. The men thought it was cute that they were there and they had such cute names. No one, either on stage or in the audience, related to them as musicians. But they sure were sweet and pretty.

It blew my mind the first time I heard about a woman playing an electric guitar. Partly because of the whole idea we have that women can't understand anything about electronics (and we're not even supposed to want to), and also because women are supposed to be composed, gentle, play soft songs. A guy once told my sister when she picked up his electric guitar that women were meant to play only folk guitar, like Joan Baez or Judy Collins, that electric guitars were unfeminine. There are other parallel myths that have kept us out of rock: women aren't strong enough to play the drums; women aren't aggressive enough to play good, driving rock.

And then there is the whole other category of exception—the “chick” singer. The one place, besides being a groupie, where the stag club allows women to exist. And women who make it there pretty much have to be incredible to break in, and they are—take, for example, Janis Joplin and Aretha Franklin. It’s a lot like the rest of the world where women have to be twice as good just to be acceptable.

Words of Love

Getting all this together in my head about the massive exclusion of women from rock left me with some heavy bad feelings. But still there was all that charged rock energy to dig. But what was that all about, anyway? Stokely Carmichael once said that all through his childhood he went to movies to see westerns and cheered wildly for the cowboys, until one day he realized that being black, he was really an Indian, and all those years he had been rooting for his own destruction. Listening to rock songs became an experience a lot like that for me. Getting turned on to “Under My Thumb,” a revenge song filled with hatred for women, made me feel crazy. And it wasn’t an isolated musical moment that I could frown about and forget. Because when you get to listening to male rock lyrics, the message to women is devastating. We are cunts—sometimes ridiculous (“Twentieth Century Fox”), sometimes mysterious (“Ruby Tuesday”), sometimes bitchy (“Get a Job”) and sometimes just plain cunts (“Wild Thing”). And all that sexual energy that seems to be in the essence of rock is really energy that climaxes in fucking over women—endless lyrics and a sound filled with feeling I thought I was relating to but couldn’t relate to, attitudes about women like put-downs, domination, threats, pride, mockery, fucking around and a million different levels of women-hating. For some reason, the Beatles’ “rather see you dead, little girl, than see you with another man” pops into my head. But it’s a random choice. Admittedly, there are some other kinds of songs—a few with nice feelings, a lot with a cool *macho* stance toward life and a lot with no feelings at all, a realm where, say, the Procol Harum shines pretty well at being insipid or obscure (“A Whiter Shade of Pale”). But to catalog the anti-women songs alone would make up almost a complete history of rock.

This all hit home to me with knock-out force at a recent Stones concert when Mick, prancing about enticingly with whip in hand, suddenly switched gears and went into “Under My Thumb,” with an incredible vengeance that upped the energy level and brought the entire audience to its feet, dancing on the chairs. Mass wipeout for women—myself included.

Contrast this with the songs that really do speak to women where our feelings are at, songs that Janis and Aretha sing of their own experience of being women, of pain and humiliation and the love. And it’s not all in the lyrics. When Aretha sings the Beatles’ “Let It Be,” she changes it from a sort of decadent-sounding song to a hymn of hope. A different tone coming from a different place.

The Great Pretenders

The whole star trip in rock is another realm where *macho* reigns supreme. At the center of the rock universe is the star—flooded in light, offset by the light show and the source of incredible volumes of sound. The audience remains totally in darkness: the Stones kept thousands waiting several hours, till nightfall, before they would come on stage at Altamont. The stage is set for the men to parade around acting out violence/sex fantasies, sometimes fucking their guitars and then smashing them, writhing bare-chested with leather fringe flying, while the whole spectacle is enlarged a hundred times on a movie screen behind them. And watching a group like the Mothers of Invention perform is a lesson in totalitarianism—seeing Frank Zappa define sound and silence with a mere gesture of his hand. There is no psychic or visual or auditory space for anyone but the performer. Remember Jesse Colin Young of the Youngbloods turning to his audience with disdain and saying, “the least

you could do is clap along"? First you force the audience into passivity and then you imply that they are fucked up for not moving.

Smile On Your Brother

Something else about the audience. Even after I realized women were barred from any active participation in rock music, it took me a while to see that we weren't even considered a real part of the listening audience. At first I thought I was being paranoid, but then I heard so many musicians address the audience as if it were all male: "I know you all want to find a good woman," "When you take your ol' lady home tonight . . ." "This is what you do with a no-good woman," etc., etc. It was clear that the concerts were directed only to men and the women were not considered people, but more on the level of exotic domestic animals that come with their masters or come to find masters. Only men are assumed smart enough to understand the intricacies of the music. Frank Zappa laid it out when he said that men come to hear the music and chicks come for sex thrills. Dig it!

It was a real shock to put this all together and realize rock music itself—all the way from performing artist to listener—refuses to allow any valid place for women. And yet I know there would never be rock festivals and concerts if women weren't there—even though we have nothing to do with the music. Somehow we're very necessary to rock culture.

Women are required at rock events to pay homage to the rock world—a world made up of thousands of men, usually found in groups of fours and fives. Homage paid by offering sexual accessibility, orgiastic applause, group worship, gang bangs at Altamont. The whole rock scene (as opposed to rock music) depends on our being there. Women are necessary at these places of worship so that, in between the sets, the real audience (men) can be assured of getting that woman they're supposed to like. Well, it's not enough just to be a plain old cunt. We have to be beautiful and even that's not enough: we've got to be groovy, you know, not uptight, not demanding, not jealous or clinging or strong or smart or anything but loving in a way that never cuts back on a man's freedom. And so women remain the last legitimate form of property that the brothers can share in a communal world. Can't have a tribal gathering without music and dope and beautiful groovy chicks.

For the musicians themselves there is their own special property—groupies. As one groupie put it: "Being a groupie is a fulltime gig. Sort of like being a musician. You have two or three girl friends you hang out with, and you stay as high and as intellectually enlightened as a group of musicians. You've got to if you're going to have anything to offer. You are a non-profit call girl, geisha, friend, housekeeper—whatever the musician needs."

This total disregard and disrespect for women is constant in the rock world and has no exceptions. Not even Janis Joplin, the all-time queen of rock. She made her pain evident in all her blues—that's what made them real. And the male rock world made her pay for that vulnerability in countless ways. Since women don't get to play the instruments, it means they're always on stage with nothing to relate to but the microphone, and nothing between them and the audience but their own bodies. So it is not surprising that Janis became an incredible sex object and was related to as a cunt with an outasight voice. Almost everyone even vaguely connected to rock heard malicious stories about how easy she was to fuck. This became part of her legend, and no level of stardom could protect her because when you get down to it, she was just a woman.

And Who Could Be Fooling Me?

And who ever thought this was all the brothers were offering us when they rapped about the revolution? Why do we stick with it? Women identified with youth culture as the only alternative

to our parents' uptight and unhappy way of life. We linked up with rock and never said how it fucked us over. Partly this was because we had no sense of being women together with other women. Partly because it was impossible to think of ourselves as performing as exhibitionists in *macho* sex roles, so we didn't wonder why there weren't more of us on stage. Partly because we identified with the men and not other women when we heard lyrics that put women down. And a lot because we have been completely cut off from perceiving what and who really are on our side and what and who don't want to see us as whole people.

In a world of men, Janis sang our stories. When she died, one of the few ties that I still had left with rock snapped. It can't be that women are a people without a culture.

Source: "Cock Rock: Men Always Seem to End Up On Top," *Rat*, October 15–November 18, 1970, pp. 16–17, 26.