

Frith, Simon and Angela McRobbie. 1991. *Rock and Sexuality*. In *On Record: Rock, Pop and the Written Word*, ed. Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin, 371-389. Routledge: London and New York.

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ROCK AND SEXUALITY

1978

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Of all the mass media rock is the most explicitly concerned with sexual expression. This reflects its function as a youth cultural form: rock treats the problems of puberty, it draws on and articulates the psychological and physical tensions of adolescence, it accompanies the moment when boys and girls learn their repertoire of public sexual behavior. If rock's lyrics mostly follow the rules of romance, its musical elements, its sounds and rhythms, draw on other conventions of sexual representation, and rock is highly charged emotionally even when its direct concern is nonsexual. Rock is the ever-present background of dancing, dating, courting. "Rock 'n' roll" was originally a synonym for sex, and the music has been a cause of moral panic since Elvis Presley first swiveled his hips in public. It has equally been a cause for the advocates of sexual permissiveness—the sixties counterculturalists claimed rock as "liberating," the means by which the young would free themselves from adult hangups and repression. For a large section of postwar youth, rock music has been the aesthetic form most closely bound up with their first sexual experiences and difficulties, and to understand rock's relationship to sexuality isn't just an academic exercise—it is a necessary part of understanding how sexual feelings and attitudes are learned.

Unfortunately, knowing that rock is important is not the same thing as knowing how it is important. The best writers on the subject state the contradictions without resolving them. On the one hand, there is something

about rock that is experienced as liberating—in Sheila Rowbotham's words, sixties youth music was "like a great release after all those super-consolation ballads."¹ On the other hand, rock has become synonymous with a male-defined sexuality: "Under my thumb," sang the Stones, the archetypical rock group, "stupid girl."

Some feminists have argued that rock is now essentially a male form of expression, that for women to make nonsexist music it is necessary to use sounds, structures, and styles that cannot be heard as rock. This raises important questions about form and content, about the effect of male domination on rock's formal qualities as a mode of sexual expression. These are more difficult questions than is sometimes implied. Lyrics are not a sufficient clue to rock's meanings, nor can we deduce rock's sexual message directly from the male control of its conditions of production. Popular music is a complex mode of expression. It involves a combination of sound, rhythm, lyrics, performance, and image, and the apparently straightforward contrast that can be drawn, for example, between Tammy Wynette's "Stand By Your Man" (reactionary) and Helen Reddy's "I Am Woman" (progressive) works only at the level of lyrics. It doesn't do justice to the overall meanings of these records: Tammy Wynette's country strength and confidence seem, musically, more valuable qualities than Helen Reddy's cute, show-biz self-consciousness. We will return to this comparison later.

There are few clues, then, in the existing literature as to *how* rock works sexually. Left accounts of popular music focus either on its political economy or on its use in youth subcultures. In the former approach, rock's ideological content is derived from its commodity form; rock is explained as just another product of the mass entertainment industry. But if we confine ourselves to this approach alone, we cannot distinguish between the sexual messages of, say, the Stranglers and Siouxsie and the Banshees. The contrast between the former's offensive attempts to reassert stereotypes of male domination and the latter's challenge to those stereotypes is lost if we treat them simply as equivalent bestselling products of multinational record companies. The problem of analyzing the particular ideological work of a particular piece of music is avoided with the assumption that all commodities have the same effect.

In the subcultural approach rock's ideological meaning is derived, by contrast, from the culture of its consumers. The immediate difficulty here is that existing accounts of youth subcultures describe them as, on the one hand, exclusively male and, on the other hand, apparently asexual. But even a good culturalist account of rock would be inadequate for our purposes. Rock is not simply a cultural space that its young users can win for their own purposes. Rock, as an ideological and cultural form, has a crucial role to play in the process by which its users constitute their sexuality. It is that process we need to understand.

Our difficulty lies in the ease with which the analysis of rock as an aesthetic form can slip past the comparatively straightforward sociologies of record production and consumption. An obvious indication of this problem is the complex reference to the term "rock" itself. As rock fans we know what we mean by rock empirically, but the descriptive criteria we use are, in fact, diverse and inconsistent. "Rock" is not just a matter of musical definition. It refers also to an audience (young, white), to a form of production (commercial), to an artistic ideology (rock has a creative integrity that "pop" lacks). The result of this confusion is constant argument as to whether an act or record is really rock—and this is not just a matter of subjective disagreement.

Records and artists have contradictory implications in themselves. The meaning of rock is not simply given by its musical form, but is struggled for. As a cultural product, a rock record has multiple layers of representation. The message of its lyrics may be undercut by its rhythmic or melodic conventions and, anyway, music's meanings don't reach their consumers directly. Rock is mediated by the way its performers are packaged, by the way it is situated as radio and dance music. Rock reaches its public via the "gatekeepers" of the entertainment industry, who try to determine how people listen to it. The ideology of rock is not just a matter of notes and words.

One of the themes of this paper is that rock operates both as a form of sexual expression and as a form of sexual control. Expression and control are simultaneous aspects of the way rock works; the problem is to explain how rock gives ideological shape to its sexual representations. We reject the notion, central to the ideology of rock as counterculture, that there is some sort of "natural" sexuality which rock expresses and the blue meanies repress. Our starting point is that the most important ideological work done by rock is the *construction* of sexuality. We will describe rock's representations of masculinity and femininity and consider the contradictions involved in these representations. Our concern is to relate the effects of rock to its form—as music, as commodity, as culture, as entertainment.

MASCULINITY AND ROCK

Any analysis of the sexuality of rock must begin with the brute social fact that in terms of control and production, rock is a male form. The music business is male-run; popular musicians, writers, creators, technicians, engineers, and producers are mostly men. Female creative roles are limited and mediated through male notions of female ability. Women musicians who make it are almost always singers; the women in the business who make it are usually in publicity; in both roles success goes to a male-

made female image. In general, popular music's images, values, and sentiments are male products.

Not only do we find men occupying every important role in the rock industry and in effect being responsible for the creation and construction of suitable female images, we also witness in rock the presentation and marketing of masculine styles. And we are offered not one definitive image of masculine sexuality, but a variety of male sexual poses which are most often expressed in terms of stereotypes. One useful way of exploring these is to consider "cock rock," on the one hand, and "teenybop," on the other.

By "cock rock" we mean music making in which performance is an explicit, crude, and often aggressive expression of male sexuality—it's the style of rock presentation that links a rock and roller like Elvis Presley to rock stars like Mick Jagger, Roger Daltrey, and Robert Plant.

Cock rock performers are aggressive, dominating, and boastful, and they constantly seek to remind the audience of their prowess, their control. Their stance is obvious in live shows; male bodies on display, plunging shirts and tight trousers, a visual emphasis on chest hair and genitals—their record sales depend on years of such appearances. In America, the Midwest concert belt has become the necessary starting point for cock rock success; in Britain the national popularity of acts like Thin Lizzy is the result of countless tours of provincial dance halls. Cock rock shows are explicitly about male sexual performance (which may explain why so few girls go to them—the musicians are acting out a sexual iconography which in many ways is unfamiliar, frightening, and distasteful to girls who are educated into understanding sex as something nice, soft, loving, and private). In these performances mikes and guitars are phallic symbols; the music is loud, rhythmically insistent, built around techniques of arousal and climax; the lyrics are assertive and arrogant, though the exact words are less significant than the vocal styles involved, the shouting and screaming.

The cock rock image is the rampant destructive male traveler, smashing hotels and groupies alike. Musically, such rock takes off from the sexual frankness of rhythm and blues but adds a cruder male physicality (hardness, control, virtuosity). Cock rockers' musical skills become synonymous with their sexual skills (hence Jimi Hendrix's simultaneous status as stud and guitar hero). Cock rockers are not bound by the conventions of the song form, but use their instruments to show "what they've got," to give vent to their macho imagination. These are the men who take to the streets, take risks, live dangerously and, most of all, swagger untrammelled by responsibility, sexual and otherwise. And, what's more, they want to make this clear. Women, in their eyes, are either sexually aggressive and therefore doomed and unhappy, or else sexually repressed and therefore in need of male servicing. It's the woman, whether romanticized or not, who is seen as possessive, after a husband, antifreedom, the ultimate restriction.

Teenybop, in contrast, is consumed almost exclusively by girls. What they're buying is also a representation of male sexuality (usually in the form of teen idols), but the nature of the image and the version of sexuality on display is quite distinct from that of the cock rocker. The teenybop idol's image is based on self-pity, vulnerability, and need. The image is of the young boy next door: sad, thoughtful, pretty, and puppylike. Lyrically his songs are about being let down and stood up, about loneliness and frustration; musically his form is a blend of pop ballad and soft rock; it is less physical music than cock rock, drawing on older romantic conventions. In teenybop, male sexuality is transformed into a spiritual yearning carrying only hints of sexual interaction. What is needed is not so much someone to screw as a sensitive and sympathetic soulmate, someone to support and nourish the incompetent male adolescent as he grows up. If cock rock plays on conventional concepts of male sexuality as rampant, animalistic, superficial, and just for the moment, teenybop plays on notions of female sexuality as serious, diffuse, and implying total emotional commitment. In teenybop cults live performance is less significant than pinups, posters, and TV appearances; in teenybop music, women emerge as unreliable, fickle, more selfish than men. It is men who are soft, romantic, easily hurt, loyal, and anxious to find a true love who fulfills their definitions of what female sexuality should be about.

The resulting contrast between, say, Thin Lizzy fans and David Soul fans is obvious enough, but our argument is not intended to give a precise account of the rock market. There are overlaps and contradictions. Girls put cock rock pinups on their bedroom walls, and boys buy teenybop records. Likewise there are a whole range of stars who seek to occupy both categories at once—Rod Stewart can come across just as pathetic, puppylike, and maudlin as Donny Osmond, and John Travolta can be mean and nasty, one of the gang. But our comparison of cock rock and teenybop does make clear the general point we want to make: masculinity in rock is not determined by one all-embracing definition. Rather, rock offers a framework within which male sexuality can find a range of acceptable, heterosexual expressions. These images of masculinity are predicated on sexual divisions in the appropriation of rock. Thus we have the male consumer's identification with the rock performer; his collective experience of rock shows which, in this respect, are reminiscent of football matches and other occasions of male camaraderie—the general atmosphere is sexually exclusive, its euphoria depends on the absence of women. The teenybop performer, by contrast, addresses his female consumer as his object, potentially satisfying his sexual needs and his romantic and emotional demands. The teenybop fan should feel that her idol is addressing himself solely to her; her experience should be as his partner.

Elvin Bishop's "Fooled Around," a hit single from 1975 captures lyrically the point we're making:

I must have been through about a million girls
I love 'em and leave 'em alone,
I didn't care how much they cried, no sir,
Their tears left me as cold as stone,
But then I fooled around and fell in love . . .

In rock conventions, the collective notion of fooling around refers explicitly to male experience; falling in love refers to the expectations of girls.

From this perspective, the contrast between cock rock and teenybop is clearly something general in rock, applicable to other genres. Male identity with the performer is expressed not only in sexual terms but also as a looser appropriation of rock musicians' dominance and power, confidence and control. It is boys who become interested in rock as music, who become hi-fi experts, who hope to become musicians, technicians, or music businessmen. It is boys who form the core of the rock audience, who are intellectually interested in rock, who become rock critics and collectors (the readership of *Sounds*, *New Musical Express*, and *Melody Maker* and the audience for the *Old Grey Whistle Test* are two-thirds male; John Peel's radio show listeners are 90 percent male). It is boys who experience rock as a collective culture, a shared male world of fellow fans and fellow musicians.

The problems facing a woman seeking to enter the rock world as a participant are clear. A girl is supposed to be an individual listener, she is not encouraged to develop the skills and knowledge to become a performer. In sixth form and student culture, just as much as in teenybop music, girls are expected to be passive, as they listen quietly to rock poets, and brood to Leonard Cohen, Cat Stevens, or Jackson Browne. Women, whatever their musical tastes, have little opportunity and get little encouragement to be performers themselves. This is another aspect of rock's sexual ideology of collective male activity and individual female passivity.

MUSIC, FEMININITY, AND DOMESTIC IDEOLOGY

Male dominance in the rock business is evident in both the packaging and the musical careers of female rock stars. Even powerful and individual singers like Elkie Brooks can find success only by using the traditional show-biz vocabulary. Indeed, one of the most startling features of the history of British popular music has been the speed with which talented women singers, of all types, from Lulu through Dusty Springfield to Kate Bush, have been turned into family entertainers, become regulars on TV variety

shows, fallen into slapstick routines, and taken their show-biz places as smiling, charming hostesses. Female musicians have rarely been able to make their own musical versions of the oppositional rebellious hard edges that male rock can embody.

Our argument is not that male stars don't experience the same pressures to be bland entertainers, but that female stars have little possibility of resisting such pressure. It may have been necessary for Cliff Richard and Tommy Steele to become all-round entertainers in the 1950s, but one of the consequences of the rise of rock in the 1960s was that mass success was no longer necessarily based on the respectable conventions of show biz; sexual outrage became an aspect of rock's mass appeal. But for men only. The rise of rock did not extend the opportunities for women; notions of a woman's musical place have hardly changed. The one new success route opened to women was the singer/songwriter/folkie lady—long-haired, pure-voiced, self-accompanied on acoustic guitar—but whatever the ability, integrity, and toughness of Joan Baez, Judy Collins, Sandy Denny, and the others, their musical appeal, the way they were sold, reinforced in rock the qualities traditionally linked with female singers—sensitivity, passivity, and sweetness. For women rockers to become hard aggressive performers it was necessary for them, as Jerry Garcia commented on Janis Joplin, to become "one of the boys." Some women did make it this way—Grace Slick, Maggie Bell, Christine McVie—but none of them did it without considerable pain, frustration, and, in the case of Janis Joplin, tragedy.

Perhaps the only way of resisting the pressures pushing women musicians into conventional stereotypes (and stereotyping is an inevitable result of commercialization) was to do as Joni Mitchell did and avoid prolonged contact with the mass media. Since her success in the sixties, Joni Mitchell has consistently refused to do TV appearances, rarely does concerts, turns down interviews with the music press, and exerts personal control over the making and production of her records. She, like Joan Armatrading, is rewarded with an "awkward" reputation; despite their artistic achievements, theirs is not the popular image of the woman musician. For that we have to look at a group like ABBA. The boy/girl group is a common entertainment device in both pop and disco music (Coco, the Dooleys, on the one hand, Boney M and Rose Royce on the other). ABBA provides the clearest example of the sexual divisions of labor such groups involve: the men make the music (they write and arrange, play the guitars and keyboards), and the women are glamorous (they dress up and sing what they're told—their instruments are their "natural" voices and bodies). ABBA: *The Movie* had a double plot; while a journalist pursued the men in the group, the camera lingered on Anna's bum—it was the movie's key visual image. In rock, women have little control of their music, their images, their performances; to succeed they have to fit into male grooves. The subordination of women

in rock is little different from their subordination in other occupations; as unskilled rock workers women are a source of cheap labor, a pool of talent from which the successes are chosen more for their appropriate appearance than for their musical talents.

But the problems of women in rock reach much further than those of surviving the business: oppressive images of women are built into the very foundations of the pop/rock edifice: into its production, its consumption, and even into its musical structures. Pop music reaches its public via a variety of gatekeepers—radio producers, TV producers, and film producers. Disc jockeys at discos and dances, and writers in music papers and girls' magazines compete to interpret musical meanings. The Bay City Rollers, for example, were taken by girls' magazines to represent vocally and visually their own persuasive sexual ideology, were heard to articulate the comic strip vocabulary of true love.

Teenage magazines have used pop star images, male and female, to illustrate their romantic fantasies and practical hints since their origin in the fifties. *Jackie*, for example, the highest-selling girls' weekly magazine in Great Britain, interprets music for its readers exclusively in terms of romance.² The magazine depends for its appeal on pop, carrying two or three large pop pinups each week; but it never actually deals with music. It doesn't review records and never hints that girls could learn an instrument or form a band, that they should take music seriously as either a hobby or a career. Music is reduced to its stars, to idols' looks and likes. Head-and-shoulder shots loom out of the center and back pages, symbols of dreamily smiling male mastery. Nothing else in *Jackie* is allowed such uncluttered space—even the cover girl has to compete for readers' attention with the week's list of features and offers. Pop stars, in *Jackie's* account of them, are not just pretty faces. Romance rests on more than good looks; the stars also have "personality." Each pinup uses facial expression and background location to tell readers something about the star's character—David Essex's pert cheekiness, David Cassidy's crumpled sweetness, Les McKeowan's reassuring homeliness. There is an obvious continuity in the visual appeal of teenybop idols, from Elvis Presley to John Travolta—an unformed sensuality, something sulky and unfinished in the mouth and jaw, eyes that are intense but detached; sexiness—but sexiness that isn't physically rooted, that suggests a dreamy fantasy fulfillment. These images tell us more about the ideology of female than male sexuality; the plot is revealed in the home settings of *Jackie's* photographs. Teenage music is not, after all, a matter of sex and drugs and carelessness; these stars are just like us—they're rich and successful and love their families, they come from ordinary pasts and have ordinary ambitions: marriage, settling down.

Girls are encouraged from all directions to interpret their sexuality in terms of romance, to give priority to notions of love, feeling, commitment,

the moment of bliss. In endorsing these values girls prepare themselves for their lives as wives and mothers, where the same notions take on different labels—sacrifice, service, and fidelity. In Sue Sharpe's words:

Women mean love and the home while men stand for work and the external world . . . women provide the intimate personal relationships which are not sanctioned in the work organisation . . . women are synonymous with softness and tenderness, love and care, something you are glad to come home from work to.³

Music is an important medium for the communication of this ideological message, and its influence extends much further than our analysis of teenybop has so far made clear. The BBC's daytime music shows on Radio 1 and 2, for example, are aimed primarily at housewives; their emphasis is consequently on mainstream pop, romantic ballads, and a lightweight bouncy beat. On these shows there is little new wave music, few of the progressive, heavy, punk, or reggae sounds which creep into the playlists once the kids, the students, the male workers, are thought to be back from school and class and job. The BBC's musically interesting programs are broadcast at night and the weekend, when men can listen, and this programming policy is shared by commercial stations. The recurrent phrase in radio producers' meetings remains: "We can't really play *that* to housewives!"

Music has a function for women at work too, as Lindsay Cooper has pointed out.⁴ Many employers provide piped music or Radio 1 for their female employees—indeed, piped music in a factory is a good indicator of a female workforce—and the service industries in which women work (offices, shops) also tend to have pop as a permanent backdrop. Music, like clean and pretty industrial design, is thought to soften the workplace, making it homey and personal, increasing female productivity and lessening female job dissatisfaction. Pop's romantic connotations are not only important for socializing teenagers, they also function to bring the sphere of the personal, the home, into the sphere of the impersonal, the factory. Music feminizes the workplace; it provides women workers with aesthetic symbols of their domestic identity; it helps them discount the significance of the boring and futile tasks on which they're actually engaged. If talk, gossip, passing round photos, and displaying engagement rings indirectly help women overcome the tedium of their work, then the pop music supplied by management is a direct attempt to foster a feminine culture, in order to deflect women from more threatening collective activities as workers. Women's music at work, as much as girls' music at home, symbolizes the world that is "naturally" theirs—the world of the emotions, of caring, feeling, loving, and sacrificing.

There's a feature on Simon Bates's morning Radio 1 show in which

listeners send in the stories they attach to particular records. Records are used as aural flashbacks, and they almost always remind Bates's listening women of one of the following moments:

- ▶ when we first met
- ▶ a holiday romance I'll never forget
- ▶ when we broke up
- ▶ when I told him I was pregnant
- ▶ when we got together again
- ▶ when he first kissed me / proposed / asked me out

This request spot illustrates with remarkable clarity how closely music is linked with women's emotional lives and how important music is in giving sexual emotions their romantic gloss. The teenybop mode of musical appropriation has a general resonance for the ideology of femininity and domesticity.

A similar argument could be made with reference to cock rock and male sexuality, showing how the values and emotions that are taken to be "naturally" male are articulated in all male-aimed pop music. But music is, in important respects, less important for male than for female sexual ideology. "Maleness" gets much of its essential expression in work, both manual and intellectual; it isn't, as "femaleness" is for women, confined to the aesthetic emotional sphere. Boys can express their sexuality more directly than girls; they are allowed to display physical as well as spiritual desire, to get carried away. The excitement of cock rock is suggestive not of the home and privacy but rather of the boozy togetherness of the boys who are, in Thin Lizzy's classic song, "back in town."

Of course male sex is no more "naturally" wild and uncontrollable than feminine sexuality is passive, meek, and sensitive. Both are ideological constructs, but there is a crucial difference in the way the ideologies and the musics work. Cock rock allows for direct physical and psychological expressions of sexuality; pop in contrast is about romance, about female crushes and emotional affairs. Pop songs aimed at the female audience deny or repress sexuality. Their accounts of relationships echo the comic strips in girls' comics, the short stories in women's magazines. The standard plots in all these forms are the same: the "ordinary" boy who turns out to be the special man, the wolf who must be physically resisted to be spiritually tamed, and so on. Ideologies of love are multimedia products, and teenage girls have little choice but to interpret their sexual feelings in terms of romance—few alternative readings are available.

This remains true even though we recognize that pop music is not experienced as an ideological imposition. Music is used by young people for

their own expressive purposes, and girls, for example, use pop as a weapon against parents, schools, and other authorities. At school they cover their books with pop pinups, carve their idols' names on their desks, slip out to listen to cassettes or radios in the toilets. In the youth club, music is a means of distancing girls from official club activities. They use it to detach themselves from their club leaders' attempts to make them participate in "constructive" pursuits. The girls sit round their record players and radios, at home and school and youth club, and become unapproachable in their involvement with their music.

Music also gives girls the chance to express a collective identity, to go out *en masse*, to take part in activities unacceptable in other spheres. Unlike their brothers, girls have little chance to travel about together; as groups of girls they don't go to football matches, relax in pubs, get publicly drunk. Teenage girls' lives are usually confined to the locality of their homes; they have less money than boys, less free time, less independence of parental control. A live pop concert is, then, a landmark among their leisure activities. The Bay City Rollers' shows, for instance, used to give girls a rare opportunity to dress up in a noisy uniform, to enjoy their own version of football hooligan aggression.

These moments of teenybop solidarity are a sharp and necessary contrast to the usual use of pop records in bedroom culture: as the music to which girls wash their hair, practice makeup, and daydream; and as the background music of domestic tasks (babysitting, housework) which girls unlike boys are already expected to do. But the ritual "resistance" involved in these uses of music is not ideological. Rather, girls' use of teenybop music for their own purposes confirms the musical ideology of femininity. The vision of freedom on which these girls are drawing is a vision of the freedom to be individual wives, mothers, lovers, of the freedom to be glamorous, desirable male sex objects. For the contradictions involved in popular music's sexuality we have to look elsewhere, to the cock rock side of our ideal type distinction, to rock's ideological break with pop, to its qualities as beat music, its functions for dance.

ROCK CONTRADICTIONS

The audience for rock isn't only boys. If the music tends to treat women as objects, it does, unlike teenybop romance, also acknowledge in its direct physicality that women have sexual urges of their own. In attacking or ignoring conventions of sexual decency, obligation, and security, cock rockers do, in some respects, challenge the ways in which those conventions are limiting—to women as well as men. Women can contrast rock expression to the respectable images they are offered elsewhere—hence the feminist

importance of the few female rock stars, such as Janis Joplin, hence the moral panics about rock's corrupting effects. The rock ideology of freedom from domesticity has an obvious importance for girls, even if it embodies an alternative mode of sexual expression.

There are ambiguities in rock's insistent presentation of men as sex objects. These presentations are unusually direct—no other entertainers flaunt their sexuality at an audience as obviously as rock performers. "Is there anybody here with any Irish in them?" Phil Lynott of Thin Lizzy asks in passing on the *Live and Dangerous* LP, "Is there any of the girls who would like a little more Irish in them?"

Sexual groupies are a more common feature of stars' lives in rock than in other forms of entertainment, and cock rock often implies female sexual aggression, intimates that women can be ruthless in the pursuit of *their* sex objects. Numerous cock rock songs—the Stones' for example—express a deep fear of women, and in some cases, like that of the Stranglers, this fear seems pathological, which reflects the fact that the macho stance of cock rockers is as much a fantasy for men as teenybop romance is for women.

Rock may be source and setting for collective forms of male toughness, roughness and noisiness, but when it comes to the individual problems of handling a sexual relationship, the Robert Plant figure is a mythical and unsettling model (in the old dance hall days, jealous provincial boys used to wait outside the dressing room to beat up the visiting stars who had attracted their women). Cock rock presents an ideal world of sex without physical or emotional difficulties, in which all men are attractive and potent and have endless opportunities to prove it. However powerfully expressed, this remains an ideal, ideological world, and the alternative teenybop mode of masculine vulnerability is, consequently, a complementary source of clues as to how sexuality should be articulated. The imagery of the cheated, unhappy man is central to sophisticated adult-oriented rock, and if the immediate object of such performers is female sympathy, girls aren't their only listeners. Even the most macho rockers have in their repertoires some suitably soppy songs with which to celebrate true (lustless) love—listen to the Stones' "Angie" for an example. Rock, in other words, carries messages of male self-doubt and self-pity to accompany its hints of female confidence and aggression.

Some of the most interesting rock performers have deliberately used the resulting sexual ambiguities and ironies. We can find in rock the image of the pathetic stud or the salacious boy next door, or, as in Lesley Gore's "You Don't Own Me," the feminist teenybopper. We can point too at the ambivalent sexuality of David Bowie, Lou Reed, and Bryan Ferry, at the camp teenybop styles of Gary Glitter and Suzi Quatro, at the disconcertingly "macho" performances of a female group like the Runaways. These references to the uses made of rock conventions by individual performers lead

us to the question of form: How are the conventions of sexuality we've been discussing embodied in rock?

This is a complex question, and all we can do here is point to some of the work that needs to be done before we can answer it adequately. First, then, we need to look at the *history* of rock. We need to investigate how rock 'n' roll originally affected youthful presentations of sexuality and how these presentations have changed in rock's subsequent development.

Most rock analysts look at the emergence of rock 'n' roll as the only event needing explanation; rock 'n' roll's subsequent corruption and "emas-culation" (note the word) are understood as a straightforward effect of the rock business's attempt to control its market or as an aspect of American institutional racism—and so Pat Boone got to make money out of his insipid versions of black tracks. But, from our perspective, the process of "decline"—the successful creation of teenybop idols like Fabian, the sales shift from crude dance music to well-crafted romantic ballads, the late fifties popularity of sweet black music and girl groups like the Shirelles—must be analyzed in equal detail. The decline of rock 'n' roll rested on a process of "feminization."

The most interesting sexual aspect of the emergence of British beat in the mid-sixties was its blurring of the by then conventional teenage distinction between girls' music—soft ballads—and boys' music—hard line rock 'n' roll. There was still a contrast between, say, the Beatles and the Stones—the one a girls' band, the other a boys' band—but it was a contrast not easily maintained. The British sound in general, the Beatles in particular, fused a rough R&B beat with yearning vocal harmonies derived from black and white romantic pop; the resulting music articulated simultaneously the conventions of feminine and masculine sexuality, and the Beatles' own image was ambiguous, neither boys-together aggression nor boy-next-door pathos. This ambiguity was symbolized in Lennon and McCartney's unusual use of the third person: "I saw *her* standing there," "*She* loves you." In performance, the Beatles did not make an issue of their own sexual status; they did not, despite the screaming girls, treat the audience as their sexual object.

The mods from this period turned out to be the most interesting of Britain's postwar youth groups, offering girls a more visible, active, and collective role (particularly on the dance floor) than had previous or subsequent groups and allowing boys the vanity, the petulance, the soft sharpness that are usually regarded as sissy. Given this, the most important thing about late sixties rock was not its well-discussed, countercultural origins, but the way in which it was consolidated as the central form of mass youth music in its cock rock form, as a male form of expression. The "progressive" music of which everyone expected so much in 1967–68 became, in its popular form, the heavy metal macho style of Led Zeppelin, on the one hand, and the technically facile hi-fi formula of Yes, on the other. If the

commercialization of rock 'n' roll in the 1950s was a process of "feminization," the commercialization of rock in the 1960s was a process of "masculinization."

In the seventies, rock's sexual moments have been more particular in their effects but no less difficult to account for. Where did *glam* and *glitter* rock come from? Why did youth music suddenly become a means for the expression of sexual ambiguity? Rock was used this way not only by obviously arty performers like Lou Reed and David Bowie, but also by mainstream teenybop packages like the Sweet and by mainstream rockers like Rod Stewart.

The most recent issue for debate has been punk's sexual meaning. Punk involved an attack on both romantic and permissive conventions. In their refusal to let their sexuality be constructed as a commodity some punks went as far as to deny their sexuality any significance at all. "My love lies limp," boasted Mark Perry of Alternative TV. "What is sex anyway?" asked Johnny Rotten, "Just thirty seconds of squelching noises." Punk was the first form of rock not to rest on love songs, and one of its effects has been to allow female voices to be heard that are not often allowed expression on record, stage, or radio—shrill, assertive, impure individual voices, the sounds of singers like Poly Styrene, Siouxsie, Fay Fife of the Rezillos, Pauline of Penetration; punk's female musicians have a strident insistency that is far removed from the appeal of most postwar glamour girls. The historical problem is to explain their commercial success, to account for the punks' interruption of the longstanding rock equation of sex and pleasure.

These questions can only be answered by placing rock in its cultural and ideological context as a form of entertainment, but a second major task for rock analysts is to study the sexual language of its musical roots—rhythm and blues, soul, country, folk, and so on. The difficulty is to work out the relationship of form and content. Compare, for example, Bob Dylan's and Bob Marley's use of supporting women singers. Dylan is a sophisticated rock star, the most significant voice of the music's cultural claims, including its claims to be sexually liberating. His most recent lyrics, at least, reflect a critical self-understanding that isn't obviously sexist. But musically and visually his backup trio are used only as a source of *glamour*, their traditional pop use. Marley is an orthodox Rastafarian, subscribes to a belief, an institution, a way of life in which women have as subordinate a place as in any other sexually repressive religion. And yet Marley's I-Threes sing and present themselves with grace and dignity, with independence and power. In general, it seems that soul and country musics, blatantly sexist in their organization and presentation, in the themes and concerns of their lyrics, allow their female performers an autonomous musical power that is rarely achieved by women in rock.

We have already mentioned the paradoxes in a comparison of Tammy

Wynette's "Stand By Your Man" and Helen Reddy's "I Am Woman." The lyrics of "Stand By Your Man" celebrate women's duty to men, implore women to enjoy subordinating themselves to men's needs—lyrically the song is a ballad of sexual submissiveness. But the female authority of Tammy Wynette's voice involves a knowledge of the world that is in clear contrast to the gooey idealism of Helen Reddy's sound. "Sometimes it's hard to be a woman," Tammy Wynette begins, and you can hear that it's hard and you can hear that Tammy Wynette knows why—her voice is a collective one. "I am woman," sings Helen Reddy, and what you hear is the voice of an idealized consumer, even if the commodity for consumption in this instance is a package version of women's liberation.

This comparison raises the difficult issue of musical realism. It has long been commonplace to contrast folk and pop music by reference to their treatments of "reality." Pop music is, in Hayakawa's famous formula, a matter of "idealization/frustration/demoralization"; a folk form like the blues, in contrast, deals with "the facts of life."⁴ Hayakawa's argument rested on analysis of lyrics, but the same point is often made in musical terms—it is a rock-critical cliché, for example, to compare the "earthy" instrumentation of rhythm and blues with the "bland" string arrangements of Tin Pan Alley pop. A. L. Lloyd rests his assessment of the importance of folk music (contrasted with the "insubstantial world of the modern commercial hit") on its truth to the experience of its creators. If folk songs contain "the longing for a better life," their essence is still consolation, not escapism:

Generally the folk song makers chose to express their longing by transposing the world on to an imaginative plane, not trying to escape from it, but colouring it with fantasy, turning bitter, even brutal facts of life into something beautiful, tragic, honourable, so that when singer and listeners return to reality at the end of the song, the environment is not changed but they are better fitted to grapple with it.⁶

Consolation derived not just from folk songs' lyrical and aesthetic effects, but also from the collective basis of their creation and performance: women's songs, for example, became a means of sharing the common experience of sexual dependence and betrayal. This argument can be applied to the realistic elements of a commercial country performance like Tammy Wynette's. But the problem remains: Is musical realism simply a matter of accurate description and consequent acceptance of "the way things are," or can it involve the analysis of appearances, a challenge to "given" social forms?

In analyzing the sexual effects of rock, a further distinction needs to be made between rock realism—the use of music to express the experience of "real" sexual situations—and rock naturalism—the use of music to express "natural" sexuality. An important aspect of rock ideology is the argument

that sexuality is asocial, that music is a means of spontaneous physical expression which is beset on all sides by the social forces of sexual repression. Rhythm, for example, the defining element of rock as a musical genre, is taken to be naturally sexual.

What this means is unclear. What would be the sexual message of a cock rock dancing classic like "Honky Tonk Women" if its lyrics were removed? Rock's hard beat may not, in itself, speak in terms of male domination, power, or aggression, but the question is whether it says anything, in itself. Rock critics describe beat as "earthy" or "bouncy" or "sensual" or "crude," and so reach for the sorts of distinctions we need to make, but such descriptive terms reflect the fact that rhythmic meaning comes from a musical and ideological context.

We can best illustrate the complexities of musical sexuality with another comparison—between Kate Bush's "Feel It" and Millie Jackson's "He Wants to Hear the Words." Kate Bush is the English singer/songwriter who became famous with "Wuthering Heights." "Feel It" is a track on her debut album, *The Kick Inside*, and is, lyrically, a celebration of sexual pleasure:

After the party, you took me back to your parlour
A little nervous laughter, locking the door
My stockings fall on the floor, desperate for more
Nobody else can share this
Here comes one and one makes one
The glorious union, well, it could be love,
Or it could be just lust but it will be fun
It will be wonderful.

But, musically, the track draws on conventions that are associated not with physical enjoyment but with romantic self-pity. Kate Bush performs the song alone at her piano. She uses the voice of a little girl and sounds too young to have had any sexual experience—the effect is initially titillating; her experience is being described for *our* sexual interest. But both her vocal and her piano lines are disrupted, swooping, unsteady; the song does not have a regular melodic or rhythmic structure, even in the chorus, with its lyrical invocation of sexual urgency. Kate Bush sings the lyrics with an unsettling stress—the words that are emphasized are "nervous," "desperate," "nobody else." The effect of the performance is to make listeners voyeurs, but what we are led to consider is not a pair of lovers but an adolescent sexual fantasy. The music contradicts the enjoyment that the lyrics assert. Kate Bush's aesthetic intentions are denied by the musical conventions she uses.

Millie Jackson is a black American musician who has made a career out of the celebration of adult sexual pleasure. Her performances are put together around long risqué raps and her stance, in the words of *Spare Rib*,

is somewhere between *Wages for Housework* and *Cosmopolitan*. "He Wants to Hear the Words" is a routine song on Millie Jackson's LP *Get It Outcha' System*. She sings the song to a new lover; "he" is the man she lives with:

He wants to hear the words, needs to know that it's for real.
He wants to hear me say that I love him in every way,
Though he knows he's got a hold on me and I will stay.
How can I tell him what I told you last night?

The song has a pretty tune, a gentle beat, and a delicate string arrangement. It has the conventional sound of an unhappy romantic ballad. But the passivity of this form is contradicted by the self-conscious irony of Millie Jackson's own performance. She gives the corny situation an interest that is not inherent in the song itself. She uses gospel conventions to express direct emotion, she uses her own customary mocking tone of voice to imply sexual need, and the effect is not to make the song's situation seem "real" (the usual way in which great soul singers are said to transcend banal musical material) but to reverse its meaning. Millie Jackson is so obviously in control of her torn-between-two-lovers life that it is the man she lives with who becomes the figure of pathos—so desperate for deception, so easy to deceive. Millie Jackson's contempt for her man's dependence on romance becomes, implicitly, a contempt for the song itself, and its own expression of romantic ideology. It is impossible to listen to her performance without hearing it as a "performance." Millie Jackson contradicts the sexual meaning of the song's musical form in her very use of it.

SEXUAL EXPRESSION / SEXUAL CONTROL

The recurrent theme of this essay has been that music is a means of sexual expression and as such is important as a mode of sexual control. Both in its presentation and in its use, rock has confirmed traditional definitions of what constitutes masculinity and femininity, and reinforces their expression in leisure pursuits. The dominant mode of control in popular music (the mode which is clearly embodied in teenybop culture) is the ideology of romance, which is itself the icing on the harsh ideology of domesticity. Romance is the central value of show biz and light entertainment, and in as far as pop musicians reach their public through radio, television, and the press, they express traditional show-biz notions of glamour, femininity, and so forth. These media are crucial for establishing the appeal of certain types of pop star (Tom Jones, Gilbert O'Sullivan, Elton John, etc.), and they are particularly significant in determining the career possibilities of female musicians, as discussed earlier in this essay.

It was against this bland show business background that rock was, and

is, experienced as sexually startling. Rock, since its origins in rock 'n' roll, has given youth a more blatant means of sexual expression than is available elsewhere in the mass media and has therefore posed much more difficult problems of sexual control. Rock's rhythmic insistence can be heard as a sexual insistence, and girls have always been thought by mass moralists to be especially at risk; the music so obviously denies the concept of feminine respectability. In short, the ideology of youth developed in the 1960s by rock (among other media) had as its sexual component the assumption that a satisfying sexual relationship meant "spontaneity," "free expression," and the "equality of pleasure"; sex in many ways came to be thought of as *best* experienced outside the restrictive sphere of marriage, with all its notions of true love and eternal monogamy. The point is, however, that this was a male-defined principle and at worst simply meant a greater emphasis on male sexual freedom. Rock never was about unrestricted, unconfined sexuality. Its expression may not have been controlled through the domestic ideology basic to pop as entertainment, but it has had its own mode of control, a mode which is clearly embodied in cock rock and which can be related to the general ideology of permissiveness that emerged in the sixties: the "liberated" emphasis on everyone's right to sexual choice, opportunity, and gratification.

One of the most important activities to analyze if we're going to understand how sexual ideology works is dancing. The dance floor is the most public setting for music as sexual expression, and it is the place where pop and rock conventions overlap; for teenybop girls music is for dancing, and rock, too, for all its delusions of male grandeur, is still essentially a dance form. Girls have always flocked to dance halls, and their reasons haven't just been to find a husband; dance is the one leisure activity in which girls and young women play a dominant role. Dancing for them is creative and physically satisfying. But more than this, dancing is also a socially sanctioned sexual activity—at least it becomes so when the boys, confident with booze, leave the bar and the corners to look for a partner from the mass of dancing girls.

One function of dance as entertainment, from Salome to Pan's People, has been to arouse men with female display, but this is not a function of most contemporary youth dancing—it remains an aspect of girls' own pleasure, even in the cattle-market context of a provincial dance hall. The girls are still concerned with attracting the lurking boys, but through their clothes, makeup, and appearance—not through their dancing. This is equally true of boys' dances—their energy and agility are not being displayed to draw girls' attention; the most dedicated young dancers in Britain, the Northern soul fans, are completely self absorbed.

The concept of narcissism, like that of realism, raises more difficult questions than we can answer here, but we do need to make one concluding

point: rock's sexual effect is not just on the construction of femininity and masculinity. Rock also contributes to the more diffuse process of the sexualization of leisure.

The capitalist mode of production rests on a double distinction: between work and pleasure, between work and home. The alienation of the worker from the means of production means that the satisfaction of her or his needs becomes focused on leisure, on the one hand, and family on the other. Under capitalism, sexual expression is constituted as an individual leisure need—compare precapitalist modes of production, in which sexual expression is an aspect of a collective relationship with nature. This has numerous consequences—the exchange of sex as a commodity, the exchange of commodities as sex—and means that we have to refer mass entertainment (films as well as music) to a theory of leisure as well as to a theory of ideology.

In writing this paper we have been conscious of our lack of an adequate theory of leisure. Underlying our analysis of rock and sexuality have been some nagging questions. What would nonsexist music sound like? Can rock be nonsexist? How can we counter rock's dominant sexual messages? These issues aren't purely ideological, matters of rock criticism. The sexual meaning of rock can't be read off independently of the sexual meaning of rock consumption, and the sexual meaning of rock consumption derives from the capitalist organization of production. In this essay we have described the ways in which rock constitutes sexuality for its listeners. Our last point is that sexuality is constituted in the very act of consumption.

NOTES

¹ Sheila Rowbotham, *Woman's Consciousness, Man's World* (London: Penguin, 1973) pp. 14–15.

² A 1967 issue of *Petticoat* magazine went so far as to urge girls to stop buying records and spend the money they saved on clothes, holidays, and makeup. "Borrow records from your boyfriend instead," the magazine suggested.

³ Sue Sharpe, *Just Like a Girl* (London: Penguin, 1976).

⁴ Lindsay Cooper, "Women, Music, Feminism," *Musics* (October 1977).

⁵ S. I. Hayakawa, "Popular Songs vs. the Facts of Life," in B. Rosenberg and D. M. White (eds.), *Mass Culture* (New York: Free Press, 1957).

⁶ A. L. Lloyd, *Folk Song in England* (London: Paladin, 1975), p. 170.