Chapter Two

"The Homecoming Queen's Got a Gun": Humor and Gender in Feminist Music Videos

Humor is the oldest form of deconstruction; it breaks down barriers, shatters polarities, and conducts subversive, or even liberatory, attacks upon the reigning order. —B. Ruby Rich

Feminist humor is, as Nancy Walker informs us in her book on the subject, "a very serious thing," especially when it appears in popular culture. Humor can be used to make trenchant criticisms of patriarchal society. Through humor, an audience can be manipulated into seeing or at least laughing at gender stereotypes or patriarchal conventions. Laughter can rupture the illusion of patriarchal authority and imperviousness. Most important, the use of humor can make a feminist message appealing to a wide audience. Feminist humor is aggressive, disturbing, disruptive. Regina Barreca explains in her introduction to *Last Laughs: Perspectives on Women and Comedy* that "women's comedy is marginal, liminal, concerned with and defined by its very exclusion from convention, by its aspects of refusal and its alliance with subversive female symbols. The difference of women is viewed as risk to culture. So it should be" (15). Humor deserves to be singled out for its liberatory power, as B. Ruby Rich argues in the epigraph to this chapter. The association of humor with postmodernism seems

obvious—the very qualities of postmodernism such as self-reflexiveness, pastiche, and a breakdown between high and popular art lend themselves to humor. In addition, for an oppressed group, humor can be used as a way of bonding; Nancy Walker writes that "women have used humor to talk to each other about their human condition, to survive and frequently to protest their condition" (x). Walker's identification of the humorist as someone who is "at odds with the publicly espoused values of the culture" (9) allows her to explain the appeal of humor for American women in particular, for they are "members of a subordinate group in a culture that prides itself on equality" (x). Because humor is aggressive, "the humorist adopts at least a *stance* of superiority . . . a position of privileged insight" (25). Perhaps the most useful contribution that Walker makes is her differentiating feminist from female humor. She cites Gloria Kaufman distinguishing between feminist hopefulness and female hopelessness, a distinction that allows the viewer to appreciate the feminism of humorous music videos, which are marked by their optimism. In part because of this optimism, these feminist music videos suggest that humor can be a particularly effective tool in the arena of popular culture.

Humor is perhaps one of postmodernism's most unappreciated qualities. While most critics cite parody as a quality of postmodernism, few see the broader sense of humor that is displayed in postmodern music videos especially. Frederic Jameson proclaims, "Pastiche is blank parody, parody that has lost its sense of humor" (1988, 16). This analysis may be partly a generational blindspot, for the humor of one generation is not always that of the next. Certainly Jameson's generalization does not

apply to music videos, especially feminist music videos. As this chapter will demonstrate, feminist performers use pastiche to make wry and telling commentaries about sexism and gender roles. Using humor, music videos can make critiques that are enjoyable as well as trenchant. Humor characterizes the most popular and most subversive show on MTV, *Beavis and Butt-Head*.

Humor is the defining feature of *Beavis and Butt-Head's* mass appeal. The MTV show makes fun of the music business, its consumers, and its performers. But it does so by using fragmentation, self-reflexiveness, and the breakdown between genres to point to ludicrous aspects of gender roles, capitalism, and male adolescence. Since *Beavis and Butt-Head* is discussed in great detail in chapter 4, I will turn first to humorous feminist music videos from the mid-1980s that prepare for this 1993 MTV show and then to two music videos from the 1990s that actually appeared on *Beavis and Butt-Head*.

A popular form of the music video genre, humorous music videos draw attention to the use of sex as a promotional device and to the commercial aspects of the star system of American corporate rock and roll. Video performances by artists like Pat Benatar, Julie Brown, Cyndi Lauper, Tina Turner, Annie Lennox, David Bowie, Billy Idol and Weird Al Yankovic demonstrate the ways in which performers and directors can use humor in a self-reflexive fashion to expose the commercialism of music videos and to address issues of gender formation. These videos suggest that the genre is more complex than some of its critics acknowledge. The participation of performers in self-deprecating parodies suggests that humor is a persuasive way of criticizing a popular genre from the inside. Barreca explains that "when you

see humor in a situation, it implies that you can then also imagine how the situation could be altered" (19–20). While not all humorous music videos are feminist, humorous videos performed by women show that a feminist message can be conveyed in a popular genre through an inviting sense of humor. Music videos and humor both deserve to be taken seriously as strategies of resistance. Both genres have been devalued because they are part of mass culture, but, as poststructuralist theories demonstrate, popular as well as high art deserves critical attention. Feminist critics need to examine humor as a strategy because of the possibilities it offers for criticizing patriarchal institutions. Music videos present a promising case study of humor and gender.

Julie Brown's "The Homecoming Queen's Got a Gun" (1985), (The Real) Roxanne's "Roxanne's on a Roll" (1985), Tina Turner's "Typical Male" (1985), Maggie Estep's "Hey Baby" (1994), and Jill Sobule's "I Kissed a Girl" (1995) deserve particular attention as humorous feminist appropriations of the video form. Despite formal differences in their visual and musical styles, these videos promulgate a feminist message through humor. The artists use postmodern qualities—self-reflexiveness, pastiche, exaggeration and parody—to expose the ridiculousness of stereotypical gender roles and the deleterious effects such rigid stereotypes have on relationships between men and women. "The Homecoming Queen's Got a Gun" is, as its title suggests, more directly and simply humorous than many other feminist videos. The incompatibility of a sweetly attired and excessively feminine homecoming queen and the American symbol of machismo, a gun, reveals the blatant nature of Brown's attack upon sex stereotyping. Roxanne's playful irony

provides an example of how performance can suggest an image of feminine strength by playing with metaphors of masculine power and authority. Turner's tongue-in-cheek title similarly suggests that gender roles will be the object of her humor, which is played out within the conventions of postmodern sensibility. Estep uses a humorous role reversal to criticize sexual harassment. These music videos use the self-reflexive humorous frame characteristic of postmodern art forms to make their feminist points. In music videos, self-reflexiveness appears in the numerous references to the filmic nature of a video, such as the television camera's filming of the homecoming queen's rampage, the appearance and servitude of a caricature of Elvis Presley in Roxanne's performance, the television set in Turner's video, a marquee trumpeting Estep's name, or the camera that appears in Sobule's video. The qualities of postmodernism used to create humor in these videos include a breakdown between the fine arts, the avant garde and the mass media; an emphasis on pastiche; and repeated self-reflexiveness. In general, postmodern art stresses paradox, contradiction and self-awareness. By calling aesthetic and cultural assumptions into question, these postmodern elements lend themselves to the deconstruction of gender through humor.

As the music video viewer watches these parodies of gender roles, she begins to realize the myriad absurdities forced on us by the construction of gender. In Julie Brown's music video, for example, the ludicrousness of the role of the homecoming (or prom) queen is illuminated by the violence of this particular young woman but also by the chagrin of the runner-up (clearly distraught at losing out) and by the panoply of pseudo-regal activities that surround the "queen." "Roxanne's on a Roll" directs the viewer's attention to the masculine version of the homecoming queen—the teen idol Elvis. The role reversal between the "fan" (Roxanne) and the figure of Elvis points to the gendered subservience and passivity of this rock and roll pattern of male star and female fan. Similarly, in "Typical Male," Tina Turner attacks notions of romance, with the video pointing up the gendered expectations and frustrations of traditional heterosexual romance. Using an ironic role reversal, Estep attacks the objectification of women by depicting men as objects. Sobule's far more radical "I Kissed a Girl" directly challenges compulsory heterosexuality. As examples of a postmodern art form, "The Homecoming Queen's Got a Gun," "Roxanne's on a Roll," "Typical Male," "Hey Baby" and "I Kissed a Girl" contain deconstructive and subversive possibilities, which were emphasized by the controversy surrounding the airing of Brown's video on Music Television.

The response of MTV to Julie Brown's music video attests to the power of feminist humor; the station initially refused to air "The Homecoming Queen's Got a Gun." After the refusal was assailed in the *New York Times*, however, the song received brief but heavy airplay (Kort 60), and it was later released in an anthology of comedy music videos. Her song and video parody conventional gender roles, allowing the viewer to see the humor in sex-stereotyped high school role models for young women. This depiction of high school stereotypes such as the beautiful, blond, smiling homecoming queen, the peppy cheerleaders, the burly football player, the geek, and the school mascot reveals how ludicrous the heavy-handed and sexist customs of high schools are. Like many other feminist music videos, this video

follows the detailed story lyrics closely.[1] The narrator, a narcissistic Valley Girl, describes the shooting spree of her best friend, Debi, the Homecoming Queen. The first verse tells of the narrator's elation at her friend's promenade as Homecoming Queen and includes details about her dress and the sentimental song the band is playing. The narrator breathlessly compares the scene to the Cinderella ride in Disneyland, a comparison that reveals how passive and unrealistic this cultural myth is and how it is embedded in high school ritual. The pleasant scene is punctured by someone screaming "the Homecoming Queen's got a gun" and, immediately thereafter, Debi begins shooting. Perplexed by Debi's actions, the narrator asks, "How could you do what you just did? Are you having a really bad period?" The police arrive and Debi is killed by a shot in the ear. Before she dies, however, she manages to gasp out (in response to the narrator's insistent questions), "I did it for Johnny," an enigmatic response that the narrator identifies with the movie *Citizen Kane*. Over Debi's body, the narrator meets the eyes of a handsome police officer and walks off into the crowd with him. The humor of the song is stressed by Julie Brown's playing both the role of Homecoming Queen and her Valley Girl friend.[2]

Even though "The Homecoming Queen's Got a Gun" employs a traditional narrative plot structure, Julie Brown uses a postmodern sensibility to create the humor. Playing the role of both the Homecoming Queen and her girlfriend emphasizes the artificiality of each as a role, as a representation. In this sense, Julie Brown stresses the performance qualities of femininity, just as contemporary artist Cindy Sherman does with her photographs of herself in various feminine guises. Throughout the video, humor is generated through a postmodern sensibility

that relies on pastiche, self-reflexiveness and breakdown of distinctions between genres and forms. For example, the mass murder committed by the Homecoming Queen is depicted in terms of cartoon graphics. No actual or believable violence occurs, even when Debi herself dies. She leaps off her float with a perfect backward somersault, in an amusing and performative demise. Her death reminds the viewers that they are watching a representation, a film. The unrealistic and exaggerated depiction allows the viewer to laugh rather than cry as Debi kills off her schoolmates, who represent caricatures of sex stereotypes rather than believable or sympathetic characters. Secondly, humor is generated by the contrast between the narrator's attitude and the activities that she describes. Debi's friend is more concerned about her reputation and her friend's dress than she is about the carnage. Her blasé attitude is reflected in the actions of other characters—for example, the police officer who sells T-shirts as Debi continues to shoot more victims or the television reporter who seems more concerned with combing her hair than with the violence around her. The commodification of the event through the sale of T-shirts reminds viewers that they themselves are watching a promotional video. The television reporter, the camera and the microphone that Debi appropriates evoke the self-reflexiveness characteristic of postmodernism. Such incidents continually remind viewers of the artificiality of representation.

Throughout the video, which, like the song, is cowritten with Charlie Coffey, humor is produced by this basic role reversal: not only a woman, but a prim and proper homecoming queen, a cultural icon, behaves murderously. The role reversal is stressed by the huge gun that Debi totes, presumably hidden in the capacious bosom of

her dress. The camp outfits—mixtures of 1960s scarves, bright colors, and mini-skirts—and the diverse mixture of fashion styles throughout the video enhance the sense of bizarre and amusing inappropriateness. Pastiche dominates, again reminding us that femininity is a construction. For example, Debi's forced beauty queen smile contrasts with her violent actions, and she puts her compact to an unconventional use when she peers into it to shoot the math teacher in a balcony behind her.

The source of the humor, then, lies in the representation of femininity. The humor in the video stems from what Walker identifies as "the myriad absurdities that women have been forced to endure in this culture" (xii)—in particular, having to act and look like Cinderella, being brainwashed into a search for romantic love, being a cheerleader, and so on. While stereotypical representations of femininity are exposed through humor, Brown also legitimates feminism. Both Brown and the viewer share a position of superiority in relation to the characters in the video. As Walker explains, "Because the humorist adopts at least the *stance* of superiority that others are accustomed to accepting on its own terms, he or she works from a position of privileged insight" (25). Watching this video, the viewer is forced into a feminist gaze. Whatever their particular ideologies, when viewers watch this video and laugh, they create a feminist community, if only temporarily and unconsciously. Nancy Walker explains that "[h]umor is a means both of establishing and testing the boundaries between groups of people . . . the community of laughter is itself an ethnicizing phenomenon as we develop a sense of we-ness laughing with others" (114). As this community is created, so is a feminist critique.

Although Brown's song is humorous, her message is serious—sexist roles breed violence and rage in women. Through the striking contrast between the prim and proper Homecoming Queen's appearance and her murderous rage, Brown exposes the hollowness of this feminine success story. Her friend the narrator is delighted with Debi's new role, but the Homecoming Queen has something besides the glory of being crowned on her mind. The narrator's description of Debi's looking like Cinderella, particularly Walt Disney's Cinderella, suggests the superficiality of this role for women. Although Debi looks like Cinderella, in Brown's feminist revision of this fairy tale, Cinderella is the aggressor rather than the victim as in the original fairy tale. "The Homecoming Queen's Got a Gun" resembles feminist fairy tales written by contemporary women authors such as Tanith Lee, Robin Morgan, and Angela Carter. Like other feminist revisions of fairy tales, Brown's parodic song serves as a warning of the suppressed anger of women trapped in traditional roles. Her Homecoming Queen functions as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar suggest the Queen does in Snow White, as a symbol of how "conventional female arts *kill*" (40). Like the Queen in Snow White, Brown's Homecoming Queen is "mad," but her madness illuminates the oppressive nature of the only power available to women in a patriarchal culture.

The absence of a clear motive suggests that the role of Homecoming Queen itself produces Debi's rage. Brown stresses the pervasiveness of shallow roles for women through the Valley Girl narrator and other female voices. The anonymous narrator inadvertently reinforces the reasons for Debi's shooting spree as she describes the scene, admiring Debi's appearance without appreciating

its artificiality. A chorus of female voices reiterates the importance of appearance with the lines "Stop it Debi you're making a mess / Powder burns all over your dress." The narrator struggles to find a motive for Debi's murderous rage. When Debi gasps out her last words, the narrator tries to discover who Johnny is, dismissing the one guy she knows because he was a "geek." The narrator's blindness to any other interpretation of Debi's actions is demonstrated in the final shot, when she walks off into the crowd with the cop she met over Debi's body. Her action stresses the folly of romantic love, exemplified by a romance that takes primacy over her best friend's death.

Encoded as popular culture, this video is consumed as part of a package—that is, the record packaging can be read alongside the video. Brown connects the two through parody. Her feminist message is emphasized by the album jacket that contains a mock newspaper account of the Homecoming Queen's shooting spree. The quite plausibly sensational headline on the album cover—"Sugar and Spice and Everyone's Dead"—stresses the importance of gender stereotypes in Debi's shooting spree. Significantly, Debi's first targets are the cheerleaders, who—like her—typify the secondary status of girls. On the album cover, Brown stresses the importance of sexism to Debi's outbreak. In a fake "article" about the shootings, the football coach complains, "I've always said a woman's got no place in the football field. Was I right or wasn't I?" In a decade when young women are beginning to find a place on the football field as players, the coach's comments emphasize the hostility that young women face if they challenge the construction of the feminine as passive. Debi's violent response to her

sex-stereotypical role belies the purported passivity and weakness of girls.

The heart that surrounds the narrator and her new boyfriend at the video's end calls to mind the television series "Love American Style," which concluded each episode in the same fashion. This and many other allusions to representations of femininity suggest that popular culture provides its own referent system and that perhaps the best response to sexism in a genre occurs *within* that genre. For example, Brown raises the spectre of another popular depiction of apparent resistance to traditional feminine roles—the one found in Stephen King's novel *Carrie*. In contrast to King's Carrie, however, who depends on mysterious witchlike powers, Brown's murderous Homecoming Queen packs a gun. More important, Debi is a "success" in traditional terms; she does not strike out at her classmates as revenge for humiliation or ridicule. Brown's Homecoming Queen singles out representatives of the culture who are part of the structure that oppresses women—the cheerleaders, the football player, the math teacher. By eliminating them, she exposes the sexism they typify.

In "The Homecoming Queen's Got a Gun," Brown not only criticizes feminine roles, but shows how little they have changed over time. The pastiche of music and costuming emphasizes this sense of history. The music begins with the sounds of 1950s rock and roll, moves through the early 1960s, with songs like "Johnny Angel" and "The Leader of the Pack," and on to the hard rock guitar solos of the 1970s. In Brown's updated version of rock and roll rebellion, however, it is the woman, rather than a young man, who is the rebel/victim. Debi's last words about "Johnny" draw attention to those well-

known songs and highlight Brown's role reversal. Ironically, Brown uses the same narrative and musical style to criticize the romantic and sexist roles promulgated by the popular songs of the early 1960s. The costumes also strengthen this parallel; Debi's dress and those of the narrator and the other actors feature elements from both the 1960s and the 1980s.

Brown suggests, however, that popular culture can also provide channels for resistance, and that 1980s retro style, which involved the appropriation of older fashions—especially, in this case, women's fashions—presents subversive possibilities. This retro style involves using postmodern pastiche to comment on gender roles; the mixture of feminine attire itself pokes fun at femininity and reveals its construction and performativity. (That the music in the 1980s allows this attack on the construction of femininity is stressed by the "article" on the album cover, in which Debi's mother confesses, "Lately [my daughter] had been listening to a lot of that new-wave type music. . . .") Like Aimee Mann, another feminist performer, Julie Brown depicts new wave music as liberating for women. Also like Mann, Brown drew on personal experience to create her feminist heroine, for she too "was a homecoming princess and rode a float similar to Debi's in the video" (Kort 60). Where Brown differs from Mann and other feminist performers is in her clever use of humor to make a didactic message appealing and engaging. Brown's music video is an example of what Barreca describes as "women us[ing] comedy to narrate their experience and so diffuse the pain" (a 22).

Brown's own career flourished after "The Homecoming Queen's Got a Gun," and she continues to press feminist claims through her use of humor. She had her

own show on MTV, *Just Say Julie*, in which she functioned as a video jock, although she, unlike the other VJs, was licensed to interrupt and comment on videos as they aired. This show prefigures *Beavis and Butt-Head* in its format. As in "The Homecoming Queen's Got a Gun," Brown used humor to comment on gender roles, as, for example, she made fun of male rock stars' physiques or the size of a model's brain. Brown also starred in a film, *Earth Girls Are Easy*, based on a song from the same album as "The Homecoming Queen." The film contained a number of musical numbers staged like music videos, including the eponymous track and "Cuz I'm a Blond," a hilarious send-up of American culture's idolization and stereotyping of the dumb blonde female. Most recently, Brown starred in *Medusa: Dare to Be Truthful*, a parody of Madonna's *Truth or Dare*. In this film, which first aired on Showtime and is widely available on video, Brown uses humor to poke fun not only at the image of Madonna but also at notions of masculinity and femininity. Brown's success shows how a music video can lead to an even broader appearance of feminist message. If a music video promotes a female star with a feminist message, then its advertising function can be appropriated by a female performer.

Through its humor, Brown's ironic presentation of femininity reaches a far wider audience than a straightforward critique could. And the entertaining presentation of the song may keep the viewer's attention longer as well. For the space of a few minutes at least, the viewer is invited to laugh at a cherished icon, a representation of American femininity at its finest. It may not be Hélène Cixous's "The Laugh of the Medusa," but it is a laughter that challenges conventional notions of gendered

behavior and foregrounds the artificiality of this representation of American womanhood.

While Tina Turner is not known primarily as a comedian (unlike Brown, who stars in a comedy show on the Fox Network, and who had her own comedy show with Charlie Coffey on MTV), she has made a spectacular career comeback by drawing on the same tropes used by Brown. Her tremendous popularity attests to the success of an assertive and positive feminist depiction of female humor as a commercial strategy. "Typical Male" is the second feminist video for Turner; the first was the even more popular "What's Love Got to Do with It?," a clever and straightforward assertion of female sexual desire. While that video certainly has humorous moments, it is in "Typical Male" that Turner is most explicitly and directly feminist, under the aegis of humor. While Brown focuses on gender stereotypes but only briefly alludes to their effect on male-female relationships, Turner emphasizes this aspect. Her music video relies less on lyrics and more on image to produce the humor, but the dynamic is the same as that in Brown's music video: through self-reflexiveness, pastiche, and stylized parodic violence, Turner criticizes gender stereotypes. While Brown focuses on femininity, however, Turner directs her attention to masculinity and to racism.

The patriarchy is represented in the figure of a spectacled white male. On a superficial level, the video's plot focuses on Turner's attempt to captivate this man. He represents more than a character, however, as the symbols that surround him demonstrate. The video opens with Turner pirouetting around a gigantic male shoe and leg, pantomiming her desire and inability to attract and retain the attention of a typical male. Images suggest

that gender roles and sexuality are games—puzzles, toys, a chess game, and a plastic bat are all employed to evoke the idea of pleasure and competition in its most extreme and ridiculous aspects. She tries again and again to captivate this typical male, and finally, at the end of the video, she succeeds. She walks away hand-in-hand with the man, as the camera pans the giant shoe and leg, finally toppled. The end of the video answers questions the viewer might have about the point of Turner's desire to win the male character. It is a conversion rather than a scopophilic relationship, because Turner succeeds in breaking the viewer/viewed relationship when she grasps the man's hand and leads him out of the video. At the end the white male consents to be led by her; he leaves behind the symbols of patriarchy. Significantly, the edifice of a male shoe is depicted as spats, an old-fashioned and out-of-date piece of men's wear. Its demise is timely and promising. The camera angle throughout stresses the end of framing and fragmentation of woman. At no point in the video is any one part of Turner's body highlighted in the stereotypical fragmentation of a woman's body into fetishized parts. Again, this emphasis on the wholeness of Turner's effect contrasts strikingly with the attention paid in sexist music videos (like David Lee Roth's "California Girls") to female breasts, a conventional objectification of a female part. Furthermore, Turner's articulation of desire occurs in the context of a setting that continually calls patriarchal articulations into question through exaggeration and reference to toys.

Unlike Brown's, which focuses on an unenlightened narrator, Turner's video features her playing herself and exuding an air of confidence and delight, which informs us that she is not only conscious of the humor in the video

but is directing it. She continually plays to the camera with a variety of smiles and knowing grins. She laughs gleefully at her performance, at her attempts to distract the man, and at the ridiculous nature of his masculine obsessions—baseball, calculations, chess. Through her laughter, she undermines and challenges the authority of patriarchy. Wrapping herself around the giant male shoe (itself a humorous rendering of patriarchy) does not indicate debasement but rather her sense of fun or challenge—with her facial expressions, she lets the viewer know from the beginning that she is determined to topple that symbol of male authority, and the viewer has no doubt of her eventual success.

Because she is the singer, and because she manipulates the camera so skillfully, Turner defies the conventional depiction of woman as object for a male gaze; it is her own gaze that determines the action of the video, her own sense of humor that she gratifies. This shift in emphasis is made clear when Turner gyrates, not directly into the camera, but to her own reflection in a series of mirrors, laughing and smiling all the while. In her video, Turner asserts the right of the woman to develop and mature through the identification of her sexual selves in the mirror. Like the videos previously mentioned, this one also explicitly evokes the idea of self-reflexiveness. Turner dances for her own pleasure as well as for that of the viewer and the male character. Her subversion of the music video form draws on her character's assumption that women feel and have a right to assert sexual desire. Again, humor is used to make this message explicit but nonthreatening. The camera plays with phallic symbols like the baseball bat, which Turner handles lightly; there can be no doubt that the

violence is stylized because of the bat's ludicrous size and bright red color—it is a toy, as are the phone and the other items with which she bombards the man. Most appealing perhaps is the implicit idea of equality in a sexual relationship. The scales seen early on in the video evoke this idea, but the final image of the toppled male shoe and leg, combined with Turner's walking off hand-in-hand with the white male character, suggests a female sexuality concerned with equality rather than with replacing male dominance with female dominance. Turner does not want to erect her own shoe and leg, but asks for and implies sexual and racial parity. In this sense, casting a blond white male is particularly significant. This casting choice forces the viewer to look at the video's larger symbolic frame, which criticizes racism, and to appreciate the cooperative nature of Turner's actions. She does not attempt to reverse the power relation, but to replace it with one characterized by equality.

Significantly, she does so in a video marked by a prevailing tone of humor. The postmodern, self-reflexive nature of music videos is indicated by the frame of a television screen that Turner enters in order to grasp a plastic bat from a ballplayer. She then uses the bat in a stylized act of violence to attack the "typical male." Turner is criticizing a whole system that separates men and women—the institution and televising of sports. Here is yet another example of popular culture providing its own referent system. A music video responds to the issue of gender division created by televised sports. In another scene, Turner dances in front of a group of mirrors, reflected images that stress the film aspects of video. These images emphasize the breakdown of women into separate and alienated selves. At the same

time, the mirrors stress fragmentation, for there are six of them in a row, creating a number of images, first of Turner and then of the saxophone, a phallic image that echoes the spats and, like them, represents conventional masculinity. Fragmentation also occurs in the confusing array of images presented in each frame—a plethora of graphics, actors, and large oversize props, like the gigantic red telephone receiver on which both Turner and the male actor sit. The postmodern world is dominated by exaggerated signs of everyday life, as in the work of Claes Oldenburg, who creates monumental public sculptures of objects such as buttons or clothespins. The video reminds its viewers that even everyday objects are subject to interpretation, and that these objects can become alienating, particularly if they alienate women from men. The evocation of high art and cartoon-like graphics creates a pastiche similar to the effect produced in "The Homecoming Queen's Got a Gun" but in a more overtly and stylistically humorous context.

Using a similarly playful and humorous approach (The Real) Roxanne challenges gender roles by ridiculing the masculine role of teen idol. In addition, because the idol she ridicules is Elvis, she addresses issues of race as well as gender, just as Turner does. At the same time, Roxanne uses popular culture's internal referent system, drawing on the music video form to criticize an earlier borrowing within popular culture: Elvis's appropriation of style from African-American performers. Her music video provides another example of a kind of internal critique and response within popular culture. This music video exposes Elvis's appropriation to a mass audience. Roxanne also responds to the glitz and exploitation of Las Vegas by commandeering the city for her own self-

promotion, hence publicizing a female voice in a city known for its objectification of women.

(The Real) Roxanne's music video tackles the question of musical heritage and appropriation forthrightly through humor. The video opens with Roxanne stranded in the desert; then Elvis drives by in a suitably gaudy Cadillac and offers her a ride. From the moment when she thinks "Is he for real?," their roles are reversed—he becomes her chauffeur, fan and backup dancer. Elvis falls in step with her, crossing his arms and imitating her, and then later follows her dance steps on the sidewalk in Las Vegas. This humorous role reversal highlights Elvis's notorious appropriation of African-American music and places him in a subordinate position. Roxanne's refrain—"This is how it should be done"—makes the significance of the role reversal clear. The woman of color should be in control, but she exerts her role of authority with playfulness and humor. As part of her play with power, Roxanne appears in many guises—cowgirl, gambler, showgirl. As with Benatar's role-playing, the variety itself points to the various constructions of gender. Yet, as a showgirl, for example, Roxanne is not depicted in revealing full-body shots or demeaning positions. The emphasis remains on the humor of the guises rather than on the exploitation inherent in a depiction of a Las Vegas showgirl. In each mode, she clearly relishes her playacting.

Throughout the video, Roxanne asserts her right to be in control, to be at "the top of the line." She also promotes herself as a female rapper, able to move the crowd through her performance. "Watch how a real Queen moves the crowd," she declares, and she emphasizes her superiority as a rapper "sucker M. C. can't beat." She

warns others to "step aside." At the end of the video, she loses at gambling, but her wry smile and her leap into the Cadillac and exit with Elvis into the sunset suggest that she's won the game she wanted to win.

In her appropriation of Elvis, Roxanne draws upon the many different and postmodern personas of this performer. The figure of the Las Vegas Elvis, rotund and wearing white-fringed leather, ridicules that of the formerly slim sex symbol and positions him and his imitators as culturally blanched—without originality. She implicitly uses this ridiculous figure and his antics to comment on Elvis's use of music from African-American culture, reclaiming it for herself as part of her identity. "Puerto Rican and proud" is how she describes herself—a stark contrast to her thought, "Is he for real?" For, of course, the many impersonators and indeed perhaps Elvis himself are not "real," but, in Baudrillard's terms, a simulacrum. Roxanne's use of a simulation of Elvis to make a feminist point about race and gender belies the pessimism of Baudrillard's vision of an America in which "[e]verything is destined to reappear as simulation" (1989, 32).

At the same time that she makes Elvis look like a buffoon, she identifies and asserts her right to a healthy, vibrant, and specifically female sexuality: "You're all dried up but I'm moist." Roxanne's many costume changes and the depictions of her gambling emphasize the construction of sexuality as a game, one she is eager and ready to play. The playfulness of the video and Roxanne's dress, look and enunciation license the interpretation of her music video as a rebuttal to more conventional and oppressive characterizations of female sexuality. The camera angle supports this reading, for the extreme close-ups of Roxanne's face resist the depiction of the

female body as the object of the male gaze. "This is how it should be done," Roxanne declares, and, after watching this video, the viewer agrees. Roxanne's light tone makes clear and engaging her points about role reversal, cultural appropriation and the performativity of femininity.

Maggie Estep's "Hey Baby" is also humorous, but with a much darker, more sardonic tone. That the music video is filmed in black and white adds to the bitterness of its humor. MTV featured Estep in short ID clips, and she participated in their *Spoken Word* tour, which included music and poetry. "Hey Baby" was featured prominently on *Beavis and Butt-Head,* a tremendously popular MTV show discussed in detail in chapter 4. The appearance of Estep's music video on this show ensured it a wide audience, for *Beavis and Butt-Head* had a viewing audience of fifty million at the time Estep's video aired.

Though Estep's feminist music video aired eight years after the ones discussed earlier in this chapter, it strongly resembles the music videos of Brown, Turner and Roxanne. Like Brown, Estep exaggerates a real-life situation; while Brown lampoons the homecoming queen, Estep ridicules a male sexual harasser. As Turner creates a role reversal in which a male character is led away by a woman, Estep depicts a woman turning the tables on a man who is harassing her. And, just as Roxanne transforms Elvis into her backup dancer, Estep changes a cast of men and the harasser into mock sexual objects.

Estep not only repeats patterns, but also draws on many of the same features of postmodernism employed by Brown, Turner and Roxanne. The music video opens with a huge marquee that proclaims "MAGGIE ESTEP WHOLESALE BEEF." The sign proclaims that the video is a representation, humorously identifying its topic as

being Estep's "beef" about sexual harassment. The words also draw our attention to the presentation of women as objects for consumption, like meat. Estep plays both the victim of harassment and the singer, as Brown plays dual roles in "The Homecoming Queen's Got a Gun." The video's alternation between shots of Estep confronting her harasser and of her fronting a band emphasizes the different roles that women perform. Wearing a raincoat and Doc Marten boots, Estep seems to have appropriated masculine attire. But the harasser's behavior reveals that sexual harassment is not about attire but about power and dominance.

Estep's humorous lyrics emphasize that sexual harassment is about dominance. She adopts the masculine voice to parody it. "Hey baby, yo baby, hey baby, yo baby, yo, yo, yo" are the opening words of the video. Mocking that salutation, she explains how being stalked by a harasser is frightening, but in this case she turns and confronts the man. She invites him "to go," saying "I got a huge bucket of non-dairy creamer and some time to kill," inviting him to drink with her "foul-smelling artificial milk drink" until their bladders are full, torturing themselves with the sound of a running shower. She exclaims, "I'll even spring for some of that blue stuff in the toilet. That's my idea of a good time, so how about it? You wanta?" When he asks whether she has something against men, she replies, "I don't have anything against men, just stupid men."

The images reinforce the role reversal, as the male character, who is shorter than she is, ends up on the sidewalk, with her shouting down at him. At the very end of the music video, we see Estep fingering the T-shirt of one of her band members, who are all hanging by their shirts from meathooks. They are stamped with various

grades of meat, including "choice." Just in case we are not clear about the music video's message, the last frame we see is of the harasser's face, stamped "stupid."

While Estep's feminist music video is not subtle, it is quite humorous. As with Brown's portrayal of a homecoming queen, the humor stems from the role reversal. In its exaggeration of the harasser as an overdressed, sleazy man and Estep as a strong urban woman, the music video exposes harassment as a power play that will not be tolerated. The excessiveness of Estep's mock lewd response to the harasser exposes the grossness of that type of sexual overture. At the same time, having the male band members stamped with meat names again brings in the title "Wholesale Beef" and reminds viewers of pornographic movie marquees in gritty urban districts such as the one where the music video was filmed. Women are presented as pieces of meat, and Estep wants us to laugh but also to be disgusted. The title of the compact disc on which the song appears—*No More Mister Nice Girl*—encapsulates Estep's role reversal.

Jill Sobule's "I Kissed a Girl" has a much lighter, campier air, but her feminist message is arguably more radical, especially in the context of the extreme emphasis on heterosexuality in rock music, and, hence, in music videos. With bright lurid colors and oversized, fake-looking props, Sobule's video resembles Turner's "Typical Male." But instead of emphasizing a male-female relationship, Sobule turns to a lesbian relationship. She ridicules the trappings of conventional romance, as Brown does, but through lyrics and images provides the viewer with an alternative to compulsory heterosexuality.

The music video undoubtedly made a breakthrough on MTV in terms of its explicit reference to lesbian sex

because of its light humorous tone. Whereas Estep's music is rap, Sobule's is a light upbeat pop tune. Like Turner, Sobule uses close-ups and facial gestures to convey surprise, wry pleasure and an air of fun and delight. As she narrates the experience of kissing a girl "for the first time," we see parodied scenes of a suburban neighborhood. The very first scene shows an all-American, blond newspaper boy, with several tiny American flags on his bike, throwing newspapers onto the lawns of absurdly colored cardboard houses. These bizarre houses and the white picket fences askew in front of them constitute a pastiche that ridicules the vision of surburban conformity and traditional family. Their artificiality is obvious even to Beavis and Butt-Head, two characters who watch the video carefully. Beavis complains, "Those houses look fake," and Butt-Head responds, "Of course they do—that's the whole point of college music—to make the suburbs look bad."

Two housewives emerge from their houses to get their newspapers. Sporting fifties retro hairstyles that evoke the beehives of the rock group the B-52s, one woman wears an apron, the other pearls. They direct fake, forced smiles at each other and wave. Peering from their windows, each watches as the other trims a hedge or waters her flowers. We see them looking at each other. One wears a scarf, the other carries Tupperware—accoutrements that signal 1950s suburban housewives. But then the two women are alone, sitting at opposite ends of a sofa. A huge fish mounted over the fireplace looms, a giant soon-to-be subverted symbol of patriarchy. Like Brown, Sobule adds to the sense and critique of the construction of femininity by playing herself—the artist singing the song—and also one of the

two women. At the end of this sequence, the women sit close together on the sofa, and one woman places her hand on the other's thigh. In the words of the song, "We laughed at the world . . . We had a drink, we had a smoke, she took off her overcoat . . . I kissed a girl."

But the song does more than simply champion the pleasures of kissing a girl. In a sequence after the one in which the women are on the sofa, we see their husbands come home from work, hard hats on, lunch pails in hand.

The husband of Sobule's character turns out to be the heartthrob model Fabio. He takes off his hat and shakes his long beautiful hair, a gender-bending surprise. Then we see Fabio and Sobule in a variety of traditional heterosexual poses—Fabio as himself, Sobule as a mermaid in his arms; Sobule as a medieval lady, Fabio as a knight in armor. Subsequently we see the other woman imagining Sobule as a mermaid and herself as her lover, wearing a face mask and diving suit. They both look happy and smile at the camera. Since Fabio achieved fame as a cover model for romances, his casting here again shows a critique of one popular culture form within another, romances being exposed in a music video.

The music video also shows the two women at a cookout, talking to their husbands but playing footsie with each other under the table. The music video concludes with the two women exiting their front doors again, each apparently nine months pregnant. They look at each other, sigh and turn back into their homes, apparently trapped. Rather than reifying compulsory heterosexuality, this music video makes fun of suburbia, as Butt-Head notes, but also more specifically of heterosexuality. The women's delight in each other and the campy setting make it clear that a lesbian relationship can be a pleasure.

At the very end of the music video, Sobule herself falls back, smiling, onto a bed, with the fake houses in the background. The refrain "I kissed a girl" emphasizes action and passion and fun. It is difficult to listen to a traditional heterosexual love song after hearing Sobule's recasting of kissing and seeing her entertaining music video, because "I Kissed a Girl" compellingly reframes romance. As Brown reinvents and alters the homecoming queen, Sobule reinvents the first kiss.

Since, as many critics have argued, humor is socially constructed, feminist critics must more carefully examine the site of its construction and be ready to look for humor in unexpected places. Music videos display the sense of doubleness, of play and diversity. Humor, as these examples suggest, can be a powerful and persuasive means of promoting a feminist message. Through humor, music videos also offer moments of resistance to abusive stereotyping of women. Exposing sexism through ridicule is an entertaining and compelling way to rebut the misogyny of many music videos. As Julie Brown says, "[I]f we can laugh at the idea of women as only sexual objects, it's good . . . anytime you make people laugh, it puts a distance between them and what they're laughing at. And then they can get a better look at it" (Kort 61). These humorous music videos show that the "image" of woman is a more complex one than the picture of woman as sex object so familiar to us, and that humor is a strategy that can and should be embraced by feminists, both as a means of resistance within a genre and also as a means of reaching a wide audience. That these female performers draw on postmodernism to create the humor shows that the two strategies are closely related.

Chapter Three

"Justify My Love": Music Videos and the Construction of Sexuality

Nothing is less certain today than sex, behind the liberation of its discourse. And nothing today is less certain than desire, behind the proliferation of its images. —Baudrillard, *Seduction*

Since MTV first began broadcasting in 1981, music videos have been castigated for their explicit portrayal of sexuality. Many critics, feminist and otherwise, have damned MTV's depiction of women, as though music videos were unique in their exploitation of female bodies.[1] In the context of this book's evaluation of music videos, however, I ask the reader to reconsider the standard, reductive dismissal of music video depictions of sexuality, especially female sexuality. On MTV, as elsewhere, sexuality is a construction, and there is a variety of portrayals of sexuality. To make their case, critics of music videos assume that there is but one depiction of sexuality and that any representation will be exploitative. However, as the theoretical discussions in chapters 1 and 2 suggest, especially from a poststructuralist perspective, popular culture texts are complex and multilayered. While there certainly are many disgusting and deplorable representations of women's bodies in music videos, many others problematize the whole notion of sexuality.[2] As John Leland notes, all-female groups like Salt 'n Pepa and