

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

En Vogue "play sex as sex, but also as politics. At a time when popular music is particularly hostile to women, theirs is a celebration of female sexual control" (56). It may be this complicated approach to sexuality that explains the attacks on music videos from both the left and the right—the left looking for a unified, essentialist sexuality that privileges and protects the feminine, while critics on the right oppose the representation of sexuality at all. In contrast, this chapter explores the issue of sexuality as a heterogeneous postmodern construct in music videos.

Since many feminists and critics do not watch music videos on a regular or systematic basis, they may be unaware of how slanted and distorted are the attacks on music video depictions of sexuality. Attacks on music videos often take the same form as those on other arts that challenge dominant forms of sexuality, such as Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs. The Reverend Donald Wildmon, for example, through his American Family Association, is notorious for excerpting pieces of an artwork that are offensive and using the fragments to justify censorship or the withholding of National Endowment for the Arts grants from particular artists. Similar distortions appear in documentaries attacking the depiction of sexuality in music videos. A thirty-eight-minute video entitled *Rising to the Challenge: A Revealing Look at the Pied Pipers of Today's Rock 'n' Roll*, produced by the Parents' Music Resource Center (Tipper Gore and company) in 1991, contains only excerpts from music videos. As the title of its documentary suggests, the Parents' Music Resource Center (PMRC) is interested primarily in showing that music videos are violent and damaging to children. To make this point, the documentary relies on

excerpts from some music videos to make the argument that the genre itself is dangerous. Similarly, a recent "exposé" of MTV made by Sut Jhally, a professor of communications at the University of Massachusetts, *Dream-worlds*, runs fifty-five minutes, includes images from more than 150 music videos, and strips the music from the images. To make their case, both documentaries must isolate images and distort the normal viewing practice, in which a variety of complete music videos appear. Such a proceeding is a cheap, easy and sloppy way to condemn the depiction of sexuality in music videos. These recastings of music videos create a false unity of image, implying a seamless construction of sexuality.

The implicit elitism of both the conservative (PMRC) and the Marxist (Jhally) assumes that music video viewers and performers can only be the dupes of media images, rather than being informed consumers and fans in the active sense of fandom that Lisa A. Lewis describes in some detail in *Gender Politics and MTV* and *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*. The false totalizing pessimism of both conservative and Marxist positions assumes that there is only one interpretation of images of sexuality and that it is negative. Even so perceptive a critic of music videos as Andrew Goodwin falls into the trap, which he criticizes throughout his book, of oversimplifying—in this case concerning the depiction of women in music videos. Relying primarily on Jhally, who commits the error Goodwin identifies of separating image and music, Goodwin damns "the routine denial of subjectivity to women in music videos and their repeated display as helpers, assistants, objects of lust, groupies, backup singers, and so on" (186). He even claims "the common comparison between MTV and

porn is in fact insulting to pornographers" (186). Not unrelated is Goodwin's similarly curt dismissal of postmodernism and music videos. He claims that "music video in general and MTV in particular both represent poor choices of case studies for advocates of postmodern theory" (17). Ignoring feminist music videos, Goodwin makes the familiar claim that postmodernism is apolitical (176). As the music videos discussed in this book reveal, however, feminism and postmodernism work together in some music videos. Feminism and postmodernism can even help feminists deal with sexuality, a topic fraught with conflict for feminists. Feminist music videos that deal with sexuality support Baudrillard's postmodern description of the power of seduction as "a power of attraction and distraction, of absorption and fascination, a power that cause[s] the collapse of not just sex, but the real in general—a power of defiance" (1990, 81). Used by female performers, then, an emphasis on the construction and performativity of sexuality challenges gender categories and roles.

In part the centrality of music videos in this debate has been produced by conservative groups like Parents' Music Resource Center and Marxists like Sut Jhally. While these critics of music videos are not completely wrong, neither are they exactly right. What this chapter does is to correct their excesses by examining music videos that resist the dominant exploitative depiction of women. Such music videos should be considered carefully, for airing as they do in juxtaposition with other videos, feminist music videos provide a far more challenging resistance to sexist depiction of women than do documentaries produced by conservative groups or university professors determined to damn the genre. Most important,

female performers draw on the postmodern decentering qualities of the genre and our culture to criticize old-fashioned patriarchal ideas about female sexuality.

What is needed is an assessment of the depiction of sexuality in music videos that considers the range of images appearing in the genre and the underlying issues of construction and performativity. This chapter provides a much-needed corrective to the slanted attacks against sexuality in music videos. The music videos discussed in this chapter demonstrate that the depiction of sexuality in music videos can be complex and, from my perspective, even empowering for women. What Parents' Music Resource Center and Sut Jhally do is a version of a critique of sexuality that can be traced back to nineteenth-century debates about the role of woman as either angel or whore.

This chapter's analysis of music videos examines the place of sexuality in feminism. The music video performers discussed here confront the problem of "how to be overtly sexual and still be a feminist" (Leland 57). Historically, sexuality has been seen as a danger to women, something that needed to be carefully controlled and circumscribed by women themselves. Sexuality was seen as a source of danger by many nineteenth-century feminists (see Gordon and DuBois), and this pattern continues into the twentieth century in the antipornography movement in feminism (Willis 1983). As Jacqueline Rose explains, in "the debate about sexuality . . . the cinematic image is taken as both the model of and term for a process of representation through which sexual difference is constructed and maintained" (199). Rose's acknowledgment of the postmodern frame for sexuality is crucial for music videos. The analysis of music videos

is one arena in which we can explore a conflict between two different feminist points of view. The "pro-sex" or anticensorship (Williams) perspective is represented by feminists like Ellen Willis and the feminists who edited a collection of pornography entitled *Caught Looking*. These feminists see an open expression and acceptance of all types of sexuality as central to the liberation of women. The other view is held by those like Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon who describe themselves as opposed to degrading pornographic depictions of women.³ Dworkin and MacKinnon might consider music videos pornographic, but anticensorship feminists can find much to justify their position in music video exposés of the construction of sexuality. Such a perspective requires the viewer to adopt a position on sexuality such as that enunciated by Carole S. Vance. In the introduction to *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, she writes that "to assume that symbols have a unitary meaning, the one dominant culture assigns them, is to fail to investigate" (15). She continues, explaining that feminism "must understand pleasure as life-affirming, empowering" and "insist that women are sexual subjects, sexual actors, sexual agents" (24). Her anthology contains numerous articles from the controversial Barnard conference on sexuality that serve to support her claims. This chapter will also demonstrate that women can act as sexual actors and agents in music videos. Indeed, music videos provide a site for the exploration of the ways in which female performers can deconstruct the dominant discourses of sexuality.

While some music videos attack the representation of sexuality by problematizing it, some feminist music videos deal with sexuality in a forthright, nonjudgmental,

and entertaining fashion. By depicting sexuality as something that women have a right to express and control, these music videos contradict the stereotypical and limited depiction of women's bodies in other music videos. In some videos, as Goodwin acknowledges, dancing itself becomes a way of communicating sexuality and sexual desire: "Dance as an assertive act linked to protofeminist lyrics may also work as 'access signs' or 'discovery signs' (to use Lisa Lewis's terms . . .) providing for female appropriation of male movements (Joan Jett, I LOVE ROCK 'N' ROLL) or a validation of female dancing (Madonna, INTO THE GROOVE, Pat Benatar, LOVE IS A BATTLEFIELD)" (69–70).

Dancing and sexuality can be used by female performers to assert feminist messages. For example, in Pat Benatar's "Sex as a Weapon," a lively and clever music video, she not only exposes the use of sex to sell products but also acknowledges her own previous involvement in this system. In a related vein, Salt 'n Pepa, a feminist rap group, appear in "Let's Talk About Sex" (1992), a music video that directly asserts both the right of women to express sexual desire and the right to decide when, where and how to have sex. Salt 'n Pepa make it clear that they believe that women have the right to say no and yes as they decide. Similarly, in M. C. Lyte's rap dialogue with Positive K, Lyte asserts her right to be sexual, but also to quote from her video, "I'm Not Having It" (1985), to the pursuing male.

In the more recent "Shoop" (1993), Salt 'n Pepa make an explicit role reversal in which they gaze at men's bodies and evaluate them. In a playful postmodern spirit of invention, "shoop" refers to sex, but Salt 'n Pepa coin a new word because the sex they describe is female-

centered. With a frank appreciation of the male body, Salt 'n Pepa sample romantic songs from the past, but reconfigure them in a female voice. Replacing male singers emoting as they sing "You taught me what to do" or "Don't know how you do the voodoo that you do," Salt 'n Pepa take turns parodying romantic music. Their postmodern pastiche also evokes a girlie show, as the group performs on stage with a neon "GIRLS, GIRLS, GIRLS" and a neon "X." But Salt 'n Pepa dance with men and other women on this stage, and they turn to gaze directly at the camera, making clear their awareness of sex as performance.

The stage scenes are cut with scenes of the women expressing sexual desire in everyday locales: a boardwalk, a basketball court, on the beach. Men are depicted and sung about as objects of female sexual desire, but the role reversal is not a complete turnaround; the music video depicts the men as active, and they are given a voice, in stark contrast to the standard portrayal of women as passive and voiceless in music videos such as David Lee Roth's "California Girls" or Robert Palmer's "Addicted to Love." "Shoop" is an explicit and engaging portrait of women acknowledging and naming their heterosexual desire.

As we saw in the last chapter, Jill Sobule's "I Kissed a Girl" (1995) wryly tells the story of kissing a girl for the first time. This music video is a rare but significant representation of lesbian sexuality. "I Kissed a Girl" may be a sign of change in the world of music videos. Broadcast television, in shows like "L.A. Law," "Roseanne," and "Picket Fences," has already featured lesbian characters and kisses. But while those shows deal with the lesbian character as a problem, this music video relishes the plea-

sure of the lesbian kiss. With a mock suburban setting—brightly colored cardboard house backdrops—the music video shows two female neighbors shyly discovering their attraction for each other. Like "Shoop," the music video plays with conventions of heterosexual romance, as the husband of one of the characters is played by Fabio, the male model featured on the covers of romance novels and on his own calendar. The video's use of fragmentation, pastiche, and self-reflexivity and its emphasis on the representations of sexuality make it a wry postmodern text.

In "Nasty" Janet Jackson also insists on the right of women to feel sexual desire, one meaning of the word "nasty," but she frames her sexual desire in terms of her right to control (*Control* is the title of the CD on which this track appears). In her new videos, Jackson explains that the theme of sexuality and a woman's control over sexuality continues. She describes the CD as being about "[a] woman who finally feels good enough about her sexuality to demand a man's respect. It's insulting to be seen as some object; he must call her by name. It's not a brazen demand—I didn't want to be obnoxious—but I wanted to be clear. Women want satisfaction. And so did men. But to get it, you must ask for it. Know what you need. Say what you want" (Ritz 41).

Jackson's attitude can be traced back to its historical roots in blues singers. In an article on black female sexuality, Hortense Spillers discusses blues singers and sexuality in terms that apply equally well to contemporary music video performers. "The singer is likely closer to the poetry of black female experience than we might think, not so much, interestingly enough, in the words of her music, but in the sense of dramatic confrontation

between ego and the world that the vocalist herself embodies" (Spillers 86). This sense of duality, of confrontation, is central to the female appropriation of the music video form, and it helps to explain why so many African-American female performers are in the forefront of this subversion. African-American female performers draw upon a tradition in which, as Spillers notes, the singer's "sexuality is precisely the physical expression of the highest self-regard and often the sheer pleasure she takes in her own powers" (88). Other feminists have explained more generally that it is rock and roll that liberates female sexuality: "[R]ock music . . . provided me and a lot of women with a channel for saying 'I want,' for asserting our sexuality without apologies and without having to pretty up every passion with the traditionally 'feminine' desire for true love and marriage and that was a useful step toward liberation" (Echols 227).

Looking closely at these videos' depictions of sexuality enables us to see that the portrayals are not exclusively oppressive, and that female performers are able to use their sexuality to promote images of women who have strong sexual desires and are not reduced to sexual objects. These performers draw upon what Audre Lorde describes in her essay "The Erotic as Power." Lorde criticizes "the false belief that only by a suppression of the erotic within our lives and consciousness can women be truly strong" (53). She describes the erotic as "an assertion of the life force of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives" (55). This reclamation and role reversal does, however, leave unchallenged the fundamental premise of sexuality as a simple, straightforward, natural instinct.

By revealing that sexuality is a construction and a performance (a postmodern view), other music video performers can direct the viewer's attention to the artificiality of gender roles. To understand how these female performers manipulate film conventions and traditions, we must first consider Laura Mulvey's ground-breaking and influential analysis. Mulvey began and defines the discussion of what she identifies as "the male gaze" in an article entitled "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." She describes how "unchallenged, mainstream film coded the erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order" (16). In her analysis, film inherently positions "woman displayed as the *leitmotif* of erotic spectacle" (19). "WOMAN AS IMAGE, MAN AS BEARER OF THE LOOK" has shaped much subsequent discussion of feminism and film. Feminist music video performers expose this tradition by reversing it, by appropriating the gaze for themselves, or by exposing the false unity of the male gaze as the only possible viewing position. Music videos use the male gaze and comment upon it in a variety of ways. The exposure and exploitation of the male gaze by many female and some male performers is more complicated and sophisticated than the overt appropriation of the male gaze for women, but both approaches challenge the dominant depiction of woman in film.

There are a number of ways in which music videos point to the construction and artifice involved in the representation of sexuality. The group En Vogue uses and exposes the male gaze in ways that emphasize the performance of sexuality. Madonna's infamous music video "Justify My Love" belongs in this discussion, for no other single music video performer has generated quite so much controversy about sexuality.

We should consider the ways in which female performers can manipulate their position as objects for a male gaze and, at the same time, comment upon "the male gaze." En Vogue, a popular all-female singing group, has gained much attention for their music videos, especially during the 1993 MTV Music Video Awards show, where they swept the awards. En Vogue's music videos are also available on their own documentary, *Funky Divas* (available at your local video store), which contains three of the music videos from the *Funky Divas* CD, as well as interviews with all four members of the group. In the video, the group discusses the significance of their use of the word "diva," which evokes Annie Lennox's appropriation of the term about the same time. En Vogue decided to use the title "Funky Divas" after "we looked up the word diva and it meant female lead vocalist in the theater." The women stress that they are all divas; each has a chance in the spotlight, and they are aware of and comfortable with the association of performance and staging that the word "diva" implies. Similarly, Terry Ellis explains that the group's goals involve more than fashion. "En Vogue means more than just in step with fashion. . . . It means being an African-American woman who projects a positive image" (*Ebony* 98). Their music videos are one way in which the group projects a positive image. In the documentary video, they are shown practicing for the music video production, and then we finally see the music videos themselves, which are interspersed between segments of the interviews.

The music video documentary *Funky Divas* and the group's acceptance speech during the MTV music videos awards both serve to underscore what is a theme of all their music videos: the construction and performativity

of female sexuality. While En Vogue's music videos all contain seductive moves and salacious costuming, in the interviews that break up the music videos, we see them clad in unglamorous practice attire: oversize T-shirt, shirt and loose skirt, plain leotards. Three members of the group have their hair back in tight buns; the hair of the fourth member is cut short. This image presents a startling contrast to the elaborate costumes and wigs that they wear in their music videos. Similarly, when they speak directly to the camera, as they do throughout most of the video, we see close-ups of their faces and their own hair rather than the dramatic wigs that they wear during the music videos. Their faces are hardly made up at all, and they wear a range of different clothes and accessories: Terry Ellis has on an African hat and coin earrings, Cindy Herron a shiny blue sweat outfit, Dawn Robinson a loose white blouse, and Maxine Jones a denim shirt, and her short hair sticks straight up. The juxtaposition with their appearances in the music videos is dramatic and shocking, their "natural" selves contrasting with those other extreme and revealing styles. In a similar vein, as my Colby College student Sally Reis pointed out, when they were telecast from Milwaukee (where they were touring) during the MTV Music Video Awards show, they appeared again in plain attire, not made up, backstage. In itself, these contrasts are not particularly shocking; what is fascinating is how they underscore a theme already present in the music videos themselves: the performativity, construction and artificiality of feminine sexuality.

In their performances, the members of En Vogue skirt a fine line between exploitation of their bodies and an assertion of their right to have, display, and enjoy their bodies. Like Madonna, En Vogue appears to enjoy playing

with the tensions surrounding female sexuality and the female body. Their first music video from *Funky Divas* is "You're Never Gonna Get It." As the title suggests, the singers taunt not only the male character who is Maxine's ex-boyfriend, but also the male viewer, represented by a male dancer who is sheathed in plastic that obscures his features, suggesting his symbolic function as a stand-in for all men. The lyrics laud women controlling their own sexuality and rebuke the misbehaving lover, who is informed that "you had your chance to make a change." The rebuke is depicted physically as well as verbally: in one brief scene, a woman, attired in a formfitting dress and high heels, meets a man in an apartment, slaps him in the face, and then nudges him with her shoe before walking over his supine body. Interspersed in this scene are shots of the male dancer reacting as the woman strikes the man, again suggesting that the male represents all men. We don't see the male actor's features, just the back of his head and his crumpled form. What is being denied him is clearly the singer's sexuality: "My loving—you're never gonna get it," sings Maxine. Dawn provides backup support, singing, "What makes you think you can just walk back into her life?" Then all four women together harmonize, "Never gonna get it." The lyrics make it perfectly clear where the lover failed: "Maybe next time you'll give your woman a little respect." With this line, En Vogue echoes a theme present in the work of many feminist performers, from Aretha Franklin to Janet Jackson and Annie Lennox.

The images in the music video play with the lyrics, but also assert the sexual desirability of all four singers. The way that the women stride and posture together also underscores their support for each other and their

unanimity about their right to control their sexuality. Clad in identical silver sheaths, they glide out seductively, emphasizing their sexual attractiveness and what is lost by failing to give your woman respect. Their dancing exemplifies the possibility of "dance as an assertive act" (Goodwin 69). Similarly, they appear in black tights and identical curly wigs. In one shot, Terry affirms Maxine's pronouncements—"hmm-hmm—that's right," she declares. Their seductive images provide them with a source of power over men and control of their own sexuality. This idea of women having power because of their sexual allure is not overtly feminist, but it does provide an antidote to the voicelessness and anonymity of so many other female bodies in the backgrounds of music videos produced and performed by men. The strength and power of women controlling their own sexuality is emphasized by Maxine's performance. Several times, she throws her head back defiantly as she declares, "You're never gonna get it." Her intonation deepens as she emphatically repeats "not this time." The performance makes the message of feminine strength clear and unequivocal. At the same time, Maxine's assertion of the right to control her own sexuality and the support she receives from the other members of the group constitute a depiction of women working together to make the erotic their own.

In between this video and the next are scenes that deconstruct "You're Never Gonna Get It." We are shown the music video being filmed from different angles, the blue backdrop that is filled in with special effects in the final version, and the group practicing their moves. Then we see earlier scenes of En Vogue practicing in a studio. Here they appear in unglamorous plain attire. They are

shown being coached by a man in synchronizing their lips to the music; then we see the slate being slammed shut, signifying the beginning of a filming sequence. These scenes make the performativity of music videos and femininity clear. The emphasis on performance is elaborated in the first frames of "Giving Him Something He Can Feel." In shots strongly reminiscent of those in Annie Lennox's "Why," the viewer sees makeup—eyebrow color, eyeliner and lipstick—being applied. The extreme close-up emphasizes the construction of feminine sexuality, which is the theme of "Giving Him Something He Can Feel."

This music video makes clear the contrast between female empowerment and male powerlessness by including not just one male character, as in "You're Never Gonna Get It," but dozens of them in an audience. In "Giving Him Something He Can Feel," even the title is ironic. En Vogue is depicted as actually performing at a club—perhaps a version of the new "gentleman's clubs" that feature strippers, for there is not a single female in the audience. The performance, however, is not about feeling but about seeing. En Vogue appears on a raised stage and a red velvet curtain goes up. The pull-back camera shots reveal that there is considerable distance between the group and the men. As they perform, they demonstrate the creation and the construction of sexual desire.

Clad in skin-tight red dresses with cups in the tops and long black gloves, the performers sing sultrily and dance seductively. The audience of well-dressed African-American men responds instantly and electrically to the performance. They are obviously both overcome and discombobulated by En Vogue. The men's heads follow the performers' every move, and the various male characters

quaff champagne, loosen a tie, wipe sweat from a brow. In a clear reversal of the traditional expectations, it is a male character who evokes the suggestion of a striptease, loosening his tie and finally removing it and tossing it aside. Members of the audience wring their hands, nervously wipe sweat from their upper lips, repeatedly fan themselves with their hats. One man removes his wedding ring and places it in his suit pocket. The men are sitting at least ten feet from the stage, a distance that is revealed through several shots from the back of the room and from behind the stage. They all lean forward, following the singers' moves. The extreme nature of the audience's reaction, the fact that the audience is entirely male, and the computer enhancement of En Vogue's bodies make it clear that the video is exposing the performativity of feminine sexuality in a male-dominated society.

The music video "Free Your Mind" makes this exposé of the construction of sexuality explicit. The first shots show a camera sliding over the models' runway. Rows of fashion photographers repeatedly take pictures, emphasizing the power of the image. A similar move shows the women wearing wigs. As one sings "Don't blame me if I have straight hair," she pulls on a braid that is obviously false. The women parade down the runway wearing highly stylized and bizarre outfits, giving another version of their performance of femininity.

The lyrics reinforce this reading of the text, being explicit about the male gaze: "I can't look without being watched." The right of women to assert their bodies is claimed in the first lines of the song: "I wear tight clothing and high-heeled shoes; it doesn't mean that I'm a prostitute." As they stride down what they themselves describe as a futuristic fashion show platform, En Vogue

again makes it obvious they are performing female sexuality. They assert their right to date men of any color. In an explicit address about both race and sexuality, they declare, "Before you can read me, you got to learn how to see me." They dance with each other and wave their cloaks, dramatically emphasizing the lyrics. Their reclamation of the fashion show platform and the endowing of models with voices are ways of appropriating fashion and allowing women to express their opinions about race and gender and sexuality. As Terry says, "You see us looking different ways because we like to free our minds and just do different things. To us it's an attitude." "Attitude" in music video terms requires that we take seriously *En Vogue* and their emphasis on performing sexuality.

More than any other music video performer, Madonna has revealed the construction and performativity of sexuality. In her many commentaries about sexuality, there are similar messages about control and about controlling and exposing the male gaze. But because Madonna is a solo performer, the solidarity and strength provided by a group of four women is missing from her work. The message of solidarity is, however, conveyed in Madonna's representations of many femininities through her self. Her work presents a more radical challenge to patriarchal definitions of sexuality because she positions not only female sexuality as a construct but also male sexualities. Ellen Willis praises "Madonna's bravura performance," in which she uses "the pervasive eroticism of [American] mass media . . . to attack . . . its virulent anti-sexual moralism" (xxxv). She describes Madonna's approach as "turning all the stock pop-sex images of women into weapons of the self-willed, protean, sexual female, exaggerating femininity till it suggests impersonation, insisting

that sex is an artifact, a wholly constructed fantasy, but no less primal for that" (1992b, xxxv). Willis's description of Madonna emphasizes her postmodernist approach to femininity and its focus on the construction of gender and sexuality. Unlike any other mainstream performer, she moves from heterosexuality, absolutely unquestioned in most music videos, to other forms of sexuality.

Like Julie Brown's "The Homecoming Queen's Got a Gun," which provoked a great deal of controversy and media attention, Madonna's performances must be taken seriously because they attract so much attention. She forces us to examine and rethink conventional pieties about gender roles and sexuality. Madonna has already been the subject of numerous articles and books, including Mark Bego's *Madonna: Blonde Ambition* and Susan McClary's *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender and Sexuality*, but she belongs in this discussion of sexuality and music videos because no performer has dealt more explicitly with sexuality. The music videos "Express Yourself" and "Open Your Heart" depict Madonna in the role of sexual subject but one who escapes the confines of the role. Madonna's most daring and controversial music video, though, is "Justify My Love," which was banned from MTV and then sold in an almost unprecedented fashion, as a single music video at a cost of \$9.95.⁴ "Justify My Love" demands consideration, because, in this video, Madonna depicts a wide range of possibilities for sexuality, a number of rooms in that hotel. The hotel stands for illicit sexuality, outside the domestic sphere, as a totally commercial space, and it functions as a gateway, a stop on the journey of sexuality. As Richard Goldstein describes it, in "Justify My Love," Madonna evokes "the breakdown of sexual categories." Goldstein also praises

the music video's "dissident attitude toward gender and sexuality" (52).

We first see Madonna carrying a suitcase, with her hand to her brow, looking tired and exhausted. Then, through an open door, she sees staring out at her a woman with cropped short hair, wearing long pearls, black strips of cloth, and black gloves. The next shot reveals a man turning on a bed. Madonna then declares, "I want." When she crouches down, viewers see a set of stockings and garters, and then the camera flashes to other scenes of sexuality: a man posing and gyrating, a man watching Madonna being kissed by an androgynous figure, a couple watching themselves in a mirror. Madonna's first partner appears attired in a leather harness, and one androgynous character draws a moustache on another similarly ambiguous person. Throughout, in a soft husky voice, Madonna makes demands: "Talk to me," "Love me—that's right." She exits, with her hair tousled and her hand only partially covering her gleeful smile; then she laughs. The music video ends with these words on a black screen: "Poor is the man whose pleasures depend upon the permission of another."

The music video's many plays on the indeterminacy of gender stress the construction and performativity of sexuality. Goldstein explains that "whatever her intentions, Madonna has made a political statement. 'Justify My Love' is wrong for MTV because it threatens the sexual order of music video. I mean the image of men as masters of street and strip" (52). Much of the fun of watching the video relies on guessing the sexuality and gender of the actors. Madonna herself has played this game on the public stage for years, in her well-advertised ambiguous relationship with Sandra Bernhard

and her excursions to lesbian bars. The fragmented quality of the music video and its many scenes suggest that sexuality is constructed from pieces. Its performative aspects are stressed by the attire that her partners wear and the drawing of the moustache on one character's face by another. This changeability gives to the music video a compelling ambiguity. As Goldstein says, "In this video, gender is as mutable as costume will allow, and no one's permanently on top" (52). What gender and sexual orientation are they? It's not clear, but that is part of the video's message. The two characters who gaze longingly at each other in a mirror emphasize the male gaze and the performance of sexuality for an audience. As in other music videos, the mirror functions to remind the viewer of self-reflexivity: we are watching people watching people. The transformation in Madonna's appearance makes it clear that the various sexualities are pleasurable and that her sexual desires have been satisfied. At the beginning of the video she is downtrodden; at the end, she is triumphant and laughing, clearly revelling in what she has seen and done. "The implication is that sex can overcome the roles life sets for us, or compensate for this tyranny by allowing men and women to play out their dreams. Sex makes it possible to imagine a world where the suspension of power can be hot" (Goldstein 52). Even the concluding line must be ironic: who is the man? Is there the suggestion that women's pleasures do not depend upon another's? In any case, the music video clearly mixes up gender and desires in a way that points to the complexities of the representation of sexuality.

Both *En Vogue* and Madonna reveal the performativity of socially constructed gender roles, and both emphasize the possibility of women's control of sexuality. *En*

Vogue is more trapped in what the writer Adrienne Rich has described as compulsory heterosexuality—the closed system in which heterosexuality is presented as the only sexual option—but Madonna presents a spectrum of possibilities, including sadomasochism, homosexuality, and bisexuality. What *En Vogue* and Madonna have in common is the acknowledgment of the male gaze and the attempt to use it, to captivate and control it. Thus, through their use of a postmodern sensibility and style, they both expose and manipulate the notion of a male gaze.

Chapter Four

“Alternative Nation”: Alternative Music, Feminism and *Beavis and Butt-Head*

The essence of the sickness in this culture that
I'd like to capture —Courtney Love

The term “alternative music” does not refer exclusively to a specific musical style but to an attitude or positioning of a rock group. Alternative music does generally use “neopsychedelic elements over a guitar grunge and strong bass guitar/drum rhythm section” (Weinstein 79–80). But this format leaves a great deal of room for individual musical style and performance, as the music videos discussed in this chapter reveal. In certain garage or grunge band subcultures, even signing with a major record label, instead of with an “indie” or independent label, is viewed as a sellout. (The term “grunge” itself refers to the scruffy, unwashed, rebellious look sported by band members. The use of the word “garage” reflects the outsider quality of this music, bands being as likely to play in a garage as in a posh club.) Explaining the use of “alternative music” as a marketing label, Amy B. Mohan and Jean Malone write, “‘Alternative music’ is used by the music media and the recording industry to categorize the work of musical groups with one or a combination of the following characteristics: unique musical styles, affiliation with an independent or non-corporate record labels and exposure through college radio and local venues rather than mainstream radio” (285).