

## Introduction to 'Gender and Sexuality' special issue

Academic work on popular music has had a difficult and intermittent relationship with work on gender and sexuality. Bursts of intense debate have been followed by years of scholarly silence, and questions that were raised in the early days of rock writing remain unresolved today. Is rock a male form? And if so, is this achieved through the gender of the performers? of audiences? through the sexuality of the performance, or the discourse of the songs? Is rock's 'serious' status guaranteed by its binary definition as the opposite of 'pop', seen as 'for the girls'? And if a rock/pop divide now seems absurdly outdated, do we not see its gender divisions reconstituted *within* the new forms? On the other hand, what happens to these divisions when boys, too, decide they 'just want to have fun'? And why have musicians been so much happier 'flirting' with gay identities than coming out as gay?

Earlier questions around the representation of women and gays in mainstream media have in turn been unsettled by questions raised by 'postmodern' feminism and 'queer studies'. Simple political generalisations about 'women being oppressed by men' were disrupted by interventions from Black and Asian feminists, by working-class and lesbian women, all of whom pointed to the differences *between* women as alternate axes of oppression. Such moves to deconstruct an 'essential womanhood' coincided with a backlash of younger women who reclaimed femininity (difference) as something pleasurable denied them by an older generation of feminists, masculinised in their pursuit of equality. These developments on a political level intersected with the 'linguistic', or 'postmodern' turn at the level of theory, which looked at power relations as constructed in language through difference and opposition. Meanwhile, queer studies was rediscovering old sociological insights about gender as a performance – as an act we (must) put on which can in turn be parodied – and extending this to thinking about sexuality and sexual orientation, and to producing 'queer' readings of cultural texts.

Popular music was not an innocent bystander to these developments. Indeed, our staging of them as happening 'somewhere in Academia' belies the extent to which popular music was actually moving and shaking these ideas along. How can we talk of gender as play and performance without acknowledging the songs and videos of Annie Lennox or Madonna in the early and mid-1980s? How theorise 'camp' or 'drag' without citing the work of British male pop stars, from Bowie to Suede? How talk of young women and femininity without talking of the role of pop music in their lives? or of gay culture without talking about music, dance and clubs? And if all this might put pop music on the side of liberation from the rigidities of tradition and 'ascribed roles', what of the more negative side of the 'postmodern turn'? If postmodernism has been attacked by critics, including several feminists, for denying any political reality to material inequalities, pop music must seem part of the *unreality*. Indeed, any simple break between modernist ideas (understood as the struggle *for* representation) and post-modernist ones (play *among*

representations) in popular music would be hard to define. Where else have gender and sexual identities been so explicitly and exhaustingly *performed* as on the pop stage and dance floors of the twentieth, now twenty-first century?

The articles in this special issue span and interweave these concerns. The questions around representation of women performers have not gone away, as Cynthia Mahabir's article on women Calypsonians in Trinidad, or Helen Davies's piece on rock journalism in the UK show. Yet the certainty that a performer 'is' a woman is already being upset by explicit combinations of technology with the body and the self. Kay Dickinson discusses the gendered history of the 'vocoder' and its use by Cher in this vein; while Susana Loza's writing itself mimics this technologisation of the 'posthuman' body in electronic dance music. The gendering of these manipulated voice/bodies as female is, however, ubiquitous, and while we may decry the alignment of male/techno/wizardry around the 'diva loop', the question of to whom to attribute agency in the accomplishment of 'Cher' as ageless diva remains a tricky one. Why do we talk about Cher's 'use of' the vocoder? And is she the victim or the success-story of her own 'project of the self'?

Anthony Giddens has described how in late modern society, the self becomes 'a reflexive project, for which the individual is responsible. We are, not what we are, but what we make of ourselves' (Giddens 1991, p. 75). This idea of constantly reconstructing ourselves in relation to the narratives we articulate of our past selves is contained in numerous therapy programmes and self-help manuals. Reflexivity also extends to the body and is manifested in regimes for diet and exercise, such as Cher herself has been associated with, as we become 'responsible for the design of our own bodies' (*ibid.*, p. 102). But one aspect unnoted by Giddens is the extent to which technology can substitute for this 'self-work', so, paradoxically, tending to remove the agency from the self doing the 'work' towards the masters of technology. So Cher's use of the vocoder sonically highlights her use of plastic surgery, used by (or using?) women globally in pursuit of the 'normality' of white middle-class femininity; and her distorted voice in 'Believe' hits us with 'robot' connotations and codes her metallic clothing and ever-youthful-body as the 'fembot' of male sci-fi fantasy.

But the smile, Cher's personality, and her 'normal' voice contrasting with the 'robot' one, persuade us somehow of her (semi-)humanity, even as she slides in and out of fembot mode. Not so with Loza's disembodied diva loops of electronic dance music, where the personality of the star is not allowed to intrude with this reassuring, if disconcerting 'normality', and we have only a similarly disembodied text to somehow pin meaning on the sounds as 'electronically eroticised'. Loza's use of the Club 69 song, 'Drama', in this respect is telling, with the ample scope of this metaphor for not only the performance, but the parody of gendered, sexual roles. This song makes a reappearance in Stephen Amico's ethnographically grounded account of a gay-male dance club in New York. He discusses the trend towards the 'masculinisation' of gay behaviour in this setting – the emphasis on a muscular, physical ideal being pointed up sonically by the huge popularity of the track 'Muscles' (also by Club 69) on the dance floor. But within this masculinisation, Amico confronts the paradox of the use of stereotypically 'feminine' emotion by gay men in their constructions of self – hence the recurrence of Kim Cooper's vocal in 'Drama' again. This brings us also back to Cher, since Dickinson ends her paper with a discussion of Cher's self-presentation in 'Believe' as 'camp', and the appeal of this particular kind of parody to gay men.

We might deduce from these three articles that the preferred 'listener-position' offered by dance music is that of the active, gay male dancer. Even the 'electronically eroticised' (female) voice of 'Drama' becomes, for Loza, that of 'a gay-coded queen on the verge of a hissy fit', with Kim Cooper herself a 'de facto techno-transvestite'. Fred Maus's piece on the Pet Shop Boys provides an interesting test of this thesis, since a core part of his focus on 'ambivalence' is the ambivalence of the group as appealing to both gay and 'straight' fans. Subscribers to an email fan list repeatedly discuss whether it matters if the two members of the group are gay or not, with the discourse of the list oscillating between – and sometimes managing to combine – a desire to see the group as an authentic expression of gay culture, and the desire for commercial success to validate the group more widely. Maus also provides musicological analysis of the group's harmonic ambivalences, and we should remind ourselves that 'ambivalence' has been seen as a central feature of modern society (Bauman 1991), hence is capable of multiple meanings for listeners. Nevertheless, it would be difficult to see the metaphor of the 'ins' and 'outs' of gay experience as anything other than central for understanding the Pet Shop Boys' commentary on more general, modern ambivalences. One question raised by Maus's argument is whether acknowledging this core meaning of gay ambivalence must ultimately mean relegating non-gay fans to a 'dumb' sector, that does not 'get' the in-jokes and musical references accessible through male, gay culture. However, if we accept the idea of a preferred listener-position that is constructed by music independently of the sociological make-up of its audience, then we are also offered the possibility that we all *can*, with a bit of help from our friends, enter into male-gay discourse, and so get the 'in' (or even the 'out') meanings of the group and their songs.

It should not be inferred from this argument that the fluidity of listener-positions with regard to both gender and sexuality is something peculiar to dance music of gay, male communities. On the contrary, Mark Duffett's article on male Elvis fans looks at the way the meanings of Elvis's sexuality and of his gender have been reworked by his fans in ways that are at odds with much of the critics' writing on Elvis. A predominantly working-class Elvis convention at a seaside resort on the East coast of England at first sight has little in common with the 'cool' of gay, New York 'house' clubs. Duffett's interviews reveal men who are grappling with the insecurities and difficulties of their own lives and masculinity through the figure of Elvis, whom they construct as similarly insecure and in a way far-removed from the mature sex-god of his stereotyped image. Their search for a 'friend' in Elvis, and the touching account of these middle-aged, British men tentatively holding hands as they dance through the night, has obvious differences from, but also some similarities with the flamboyant display of 'muscles' in the New York 'house' club. In particular, the two male communities seem to have something structurally in common in their search for the emotional within masculinity, and in relationships with other men. Differences are evident, in that the British working-class men seem more open to the 'feminine' side of emotion and friendship, even in their relationship to the male icon, while the US gay men pursue an emphasis on macho muscles and sex, their incorporation of the 'feminine' being more at the level of camp and parody. Nevertheless, both accounts present communities that seem 'homosocial' in their apparent ability to do without the awkward realities of real women.

Homosociality also characterises rock journalism in Britain, according to Helen Davies' account, though here the male community seems less effortlessly self-

sufficient, more aggressively defensive against the perceived threats and encroachments of women and femininity. Here we encounter the actual male club, absorbing women journalists only if they become more macho than the boys themselves in upholding the seriousness of rock and indie against the potential encroachment of female musicians, or worst of all, pop. And we also find a discursive homosociality in the way women musicians are written about, epitomised in the description of Cerys Matthews (at that time lead singer of Welsh band Catatonia) in laddish Britspeak, as a 'Really Nice Bloke'. Those that do not conform to this type of working class masculinity are disqualified from serious consideration through strategic use of the 'mad' (angry, feminist) and 'bad' ('slut') discourses that ensure social control of appropriate femininity.

If Davies meticulously documents the depressing sexism of rock journalism, Diane Railton provides an interesting contrast with her look at the world of pop and its representation in pop magazines (again mainly in the UK). This dreaded underbelly of rock is celebrated here as the modern corollary of the traditional carnival time, when accepted values (including gender and sexual roles)<sup>1</sup> were/are overturned. For Railton, rock has commandeered a modern 'public sphere' of serious, very masculine, intellectual exchange, projecting onto pop all the humour ('fun') and bodily excess (female sexuality) that this excludes. Pop magazines revel in this carnivalesque sphere, oblivious of the serious genres and categories from which their stars and fans alike are excluded. Railton analyses the impossible position in which this leaves their girl readership, defined as much by their age and the fact that this is a phase that they 'must grow out of', as by their femininity.

In large parts of the world, of course, Carnival and other festivals are still major social, cultural and economic activities for communities, often interacting with modern, commercial means of diffusion. Cynthia Mahabir's work on women calypso singers resonates with the reversal of roles in the Trinidadian Carnival. If historically it had been men who dressed up as women in Carnival, women had been afforded a place on the streets as raunchy dancers and singers of the *cariso*. And if calypso itself developed as a male chauvinist form, using women as the butt of sexual humour, women from the 1960s on were able to adopt the political-humorous discourse of calypso to initiate comment and discussion on the treatment of women in Trinidadian society. Since the 1970s this has developed into an assertive series of feminist questions and 'replies' to the sexist discourse of mainstream calypso, which has contributed to feminist politics and also raised important issues around intersections of gender and ethnicity in Trinidad.

'Assertive' is a word used several times by Mahabir to characterise the lyrics and personae of the women calypsonians she writes about. And it is also a key word in the development of feminist 'projects of the self' in the last two decades. Women have been encouraged to be assertive as a way of forming a sense of self in a society which has taught them only self-denial and nurturance of others. 'Assertiveness training' was proposed as an alternative to unproductive anger and self-destructive behaviour. It has been taken up not just by career management consultants, but by networks of community and working-class women's groups, who have used it to learn to value, to work on, and to develop projects for 'the self'.

Sassy assertiveness has for long been one type of disclosure available to women in response to sexist genres of song. It can be found in the direct 'answer song' format, ranging from the forthright country assertiveness of Kitty Wells' 'It Wasn't God Who Made Honky-Tonk Angels' or Etta James' R'n'B 'Roll With Me

Henry', to Roxanne Shanté's 'Roxannes' Revenge' in the rap sphere, and also in more generic 'reply' discourses, from Lesley Gore's 'You Don't Own Me' down to the Spice Girls' 'If You Wanna Be My Lover' (from 'Wannabe'), where the 'you' addressed is a man who in some way or other, needs to shape up.

Assertiveness is often contrasted with anger, and is even seen as an alternative to it and means of controlling it, in some self-development literature. But other strands of feminist writing, in tandem with musical genres such as Riot Grrrl, have reclaimed the right of women to feel and express anger (Jaggar 1989, Valentis and Devane 1995), despite the powerful constraints exercised by labels such as 'aggressive' and 'formidable'. If punk in Britain is best known for its parody of the anger of class warfare, it also opened up an important space for women to express anger, a space that has subsequently be occupied by a variety of women musicians to express a range of concerns, often centring on the self and abuse. The category of 'angry women punk rocker' became, as Mark Mazullo shows in his article on PJ Harvey, one into which critics were keen to slot women musicians. Mazullo reveals this as a stereotype that limits our understanding of Harvey's work, and instead plots another trajectory of her career, more in the line of 'art rock', and exemplifies this through an analysis of *Dry* as a 'concept album'. The concept he uncovers is that of the 'drowned virgin turned whore' a figure that he traces back to the Greek poetess Sappho, through multiple reappearances in 'high' and popular culture. For Harvey, this becomes, we could say, her narrative of the self, and one which relates clearly to earlier feminist theory about the impossibility of the female self within patriarchal society or phallogentric discourse. This 'I who wants not to be' of Kristeva's (1974) essay on female suicides conflicts with the happy assertiveness that assumes that we can retrain our selves, and sets up a powerful undertow of feminist nihilism.

If this clash of positivism with psychoanalysis brings us back somehow to the questions from which we set out, it is at least evident that the kind of music produced by an artist such as PJ Harvey would have been unthinkable at the time when the questions around rock music, gender and sexuality were first raised. Changes there have been, and Sheila Whiteley's book, *Women and Popular Music*, reviewed in this issue by Lori Burns, looks at the work of some of the most important of this new wave of women musicians, whose anger, and their ability to express it, undoubtedly separates them from their 1960s and 1970s forerunners. Yet continuities there have also been, and the tensions between self-doubt and self-project in Joni Mitchell's music as analysed by Whiteley are not a million miles from Harvey's anxieties.

If it is the musical idiom that best points up the difference between Mitchell and Harvey, we are reminded here of Neil Nehring's (1997) thesis that emotions, including anger, in music, are always meaningful, despite the tendency of many critics to disqualify angry music as 'meaningless'. Perhaps Mazullo's piece can be read in this way as rehabilitating Harvey's anger as meaningful, and emotion as a serious part of art in popular music. If recent women musicians' anger has centred on the self and on sexuality, music has provided another language through which to articulate these personal narratives and to experience the new selves envisaged.

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This collection of articles was put together through an Internet 'call for papers', rather than, as sometimes occurs, through a focussed conference. Given this, it is perhaps surprising to find so many common threads and themes running through

the articles. We hope very much that their publication will stimulate not only replies and debate, but also further research. It is notable, for instance, that much of the recent work on audiences, including that in this issue, has concentrated on dance, or dancing, audiences, and there seems a real need for more work on how audiences experience and understand 'listening music', which after all occupies a much larger part of our musical lives (whether in cars, through headphones, bedrooms or living-rooms). The relative hidden-ness of lesbian, musical lives as compared to those of gay male musicians and audiences is also painfully obvious in this issue. But we raise these areas, not to point up 'gaps' in some impossible whole, but rather as areas of research that are *suggested* by the articles here collected, and in the hope that this special issue will help to make gender and sexuality more central themes in the discussion of popular music than they perhaps have been in the past.

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### Endnote

1. I cannot help remembering here my last visit to Lircay, Huancavelica, Peru, in 1997 for the fiesta of the Virgin of the Candelaria. As we performed the endurance feat of drinking and dancing through dusty streets under Andean sun for days on end in honour of our sponsors and the Virgin, the task was made almost intolerable by a drunken woman who charged aggressively at our backsides wielding a pair of brass bulls' horns, with which she was not afraid to draw blood from the dancers. This of course reverses the normal association of men, male sexuality and bulls – Andean bull-fighting also figuring prominently in this fiesta (BB).

### References

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