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Essay Review: Getting into the groove?

***Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender.* Edited by Sheila Whiteley. London and New York: Routeledge, 1997, 353 pp.**

Sex, sexuality and articulations of gender are well-established components in the production and performance of popular music. Hence, *Sexing the Groove*, edited by Sheila Whiteley, is a very welcome addition to this vital and growing area of popular music studies and cultural theory more generally. The collection reflects the reality that studies of gender and sexuality in popular music are born of a hybrid lineage; accordingly the book approaches its subject from a range of disciplines such as sociology, cultural theory, media studies, psychology and musicology, and as such is a vibrant mix. Despite its relative diversity, the book's structure and progression is fluent and focused.

Sexing the Groove is a collection of articles centring on sex, sexuality, eroticism and gender as primary expressions in popular music. It concerns itself with style, representation and how gendered identity are both informed by and produced within popular music. The book is constructed in four parts; 'Rock music culture', 'Masculinities and popular music', 'Femininities and popular music' and 'Music, image and identity'. Issues raised within sections cross these imposed headings, but this does not detract from the strength of such groupings. The first section offers four perspectives on 'the cultural mapping of gendered identity and the ways in which popular music [. . .] operates both as a form of sexual expression and as a form of sexual control' (p. xvii). In the opening chapter, 'Sizing up record collections: gender and connoisseurship in rock music culture', Will Straw offers an enlightened insight into the gendered role of record collecting. Interestingly, Straw sees collecting and connoisseurship as having an 'uncertain relationship to masculinity'; but ultimately he locates record collecting as a fundamental part of music's homosocial nature. It is clear that men share knowledge/skills with other men. Situations where information is shared between men have been traditionally situated to exclude women. Female alienation and lack of participation/power in music can be partly accounted for by males sharing and circulating knowledges exclusively within male communities.

> Record collections are seen as both public displays of power/knowledge and private refuges from the sexual or social world; [. . .] as material evidence of the homosocial information-mongering which is one underpinning of male power and compensatory undertakings by those unable to wield that power. (p. 4)

Straw ends the chapter with a sad (but unquestioned) observation that '[. . .] female rock musicians frequently describe how, having learned to play guitars and play them loud, women find that the lines of exclusion are now elsewhere' (p. 15).

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The question that immediately springs to mind must be: Why are women constantly in a position of following/imitating rather than leading/creating?

The next two articles in the section use the common methodology of empirical data to form and articulate the relationship 'between experience, practice and the power structure inherent in rock culture' (p. xviii). Sara Cohen's article, 'Men making a scene: rock music and the production of gender', identifies how a local rock scene is dominated by men and by certain types of masculinity. Cohen is meticulous in placing her research locally, socially and culturally; male domination of the music scene in Liverpool generally is explored through its larger institutions, networks and studio environments, but also through personal relations, emotions and rituals. Mavis Bayton's research is also based on empirical data, namely ethnographic fieldwork undertaken in the 1980s and 1990s. Her chapter, 'Women and the electric guitar', attempts to explore possible explanations for the absence of an 'Erica Clapton or Jenny Hendrix' (p. 37). In commenting on this article I should declare a very personal and direct interest in that I am a rock guitarist who has performed and taught for about thirteen years. Bayton puts forward a range of reasons why women fail to take up guitar playing, but her argument is weakened in a number of ways. Part of the chapter asserts that the design of the electric guitar (by men, for men) 'remains decidedly phallic' (p. 45). Bayton asserts that a female musician 'risked her health' (p. 45) by playing her guitar in a low slung position; this may be true, but women guitar players are no more at risk from tendonitus, repetitive strain injury, back and shoulder problems, than men. Without wishing to demean the individual testimony quoted, parts of the article seem to reinforce the most negative stereotypes: women too delicate to pick up a guitar because it hurts to play it. The extent to which this fact is true seems to depend on individual physicality, and this applies to men and women. The simple fact is electric guitars are relatively big, bulky instruments and, regardless of gender, the player has to try a number of different instruments until a comfortable match is found. Unquestionably, female guitarists are discouraged and discriminated against in, what feels like, an infinite variety of ways. Perhaps the most universal is one which Bayton mentions only briefly; male domination of any field relies on knowledge and ritual; women are most often excluded from sharing, participating, gaining or circulating musical skills and knowledge.

The first section is concluded with a chapter by Norma Coates: '(R)evolution now? Rock and the political potential of gender'. Coates attempts to understand/contextualise women's involvement in rock music from the premise that rock music is at its most compelling when it is most misogynistic and macho. The increasing number of women who inhabit the traditional male rock music space, threaten to expose its artificial gender boundaries. In an effort to contain the 'threat' of female rock performers, the music media neutralises them by ignoring them or comparing them to men, or by condemning them to a number of other restrictive categories. In conclusion, Coates suggests that the often divisive category 'women in rock' should be embraced because, although it is a term used to contain and marginalise women, it is also the only way for women to denude the unspoken 'men in rock'.

The next two sections of the book explore masculinities and femininities, as represented and given meaning through music. Sheila Whiteley's chapter, 'Little red rooster v. the honky tonk woman: Mick Jagger, sexuality, style and image', opens the debate on constructions of masculinity with a detailed investigation of Mick Jagger's evolving image and performance style. Whiteley explores Jagger's

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changing image through analysis of performance and text. She concludes that in Jagger, 'the flaunting of sexuality is present throughout [. . .] As singer songwriter he voices a male perspective, but at the same time his male/female persona serves to eroticise the songs by making him both titillating/submissive woman and the male perpetrator of violence.' (p. 94). Whiteley's cogent analysis highlights the potential for blurring of genders and sexuality, in even the most apparently macho of performers. In Jagger, she locates an artist who expresses for himself, and his male fans, a range of heterosexual and homosexual expression. Gareth Palmer's chapter, 'Bruce Springsteen and masculinity', focuses on issues that place masculinity and authenticity as central to rock aesthetics. Against the background of a 'crisis of masculinity' evident since the mid-1970s (p. 100), Palmer explores the powerful perception of Bruce Springsteen's work 'promoting and signifying masculinity'. Through a mix of specific textual analysis and readings of Springsteen's visual performance, his work is seen as 'holding onto the traditional icons of masculinity in the monument valley of rock' (p. 108). To his fans, Springsteen's authenticity lies in his image being that of the 'all-American boy next door': he is one of them. Stan Hawkins' chapter, 'The Pet Shop Boys: musicology, masculinity and banality', provides the antithesis to Springsteen's encapsulation of blue-collar American masculinity. Hawkins' 'musicological critique opens out the debates surrounding the politics of the image, and how expressions of sexual difference function through the codes of musical sound' (p. xxiii). The Pet Shop Boys' work is offered as reflection of and reaction to the social crisis in 1980s Thatcherite Britain. Hawkins states that although there is a strong gay subtext to much of their work, the duo's guarded stance on being gay has allowed them to be accepted into mainstream pop. This aspect, mixed with their deadpan, (in)sincerity and cultivated air of Englishness, makes for an aesthetic and text which 'remind us that music can function as a key vehicle in deconstructing fixed notions of gendered identity in everyday life' (p. 118).

By far the largest section of the book focuses on femininities and popular music and comprises some six chapters. The chapters are arranged to suggest a chronology of the ever-developing choices available to women from the 1950s to the 1990s. David Sanjek's chapter, 'Can the Fujiyama mama be the female Elvis?: the wild, wild women of rockabilly', uncovers a range of female artists who were active, but ultimately silenced, during the 1950s. Sanjek combines rigorous research with a passionate plea for a reappraisal of the era. His inclusion of an extensive discography leaves little excuse for any exclusion of women's contribution to rockabilly. Charlotte Greig's chapter, 'Female identity and the woman songwriter', is less convincing. Greig attempts to explore how female singer–songwriters have assimilated identifiable female issues (particularly pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood) into their work. A 1960s revival of a traditional British folk song, 'Gathering Rushes in the Month of May', is used as a clear example of women's issues depicted categorically. Greig then goes on to find similar examples in women's music via headings such as 'The British Folk Tradition', 'American Country Music' and 'The Pop Mainstream'. However, these sections give little sense of the many women working in any of these areas. In addition, it seems astonishing that Greig fails to even mention women like Kate Bush, Joan Baez, k.d. lang, Tori Amos, Ani de Franco or Joan Armatrading whose outputs all have articulated issues which affect and define women. The scope of the work seems restricted, a fact supported by a one-reference bibliography, which is actually a previous work by

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the author. Greig cites Joni Mitchell as the biggest talent to emerge from the 1960s/1970s counter–culture. However, she then describes her as:

> narcissism and self-indulgence personified [. . .] I don't think it ever crossed Joni Mitchell's mind that she was part of a community of women who shared the same problems and dilemmas [. . .] [her dilemmas] were probably more likely to be about whether to buy a mandolin than whether to have a baby. (p. 174)

This criticism seems unfounded if one considers Mitchell's actual output. A few pertinent examples are 'Little Green', a song which outlines Mitchell's grief after giving up her daughter for adoption; 'Chinese Café', a song which revisits this issue and the prospect of becoming middle-aged, without children or a husband; 'Not to Blame', an anti-rape song, or 'The Magdalene Laundries', a song about unmarried women in Ireland, who were punished for becoming pregnant by being sent to a convent, which was actually a prison-cum-sweatshop. These are all songs that articulate female experience. Greig's criticism that Mitchell's songs are often 'self-indulgent' echoes sentiments much used by a macho music press often uncomfortable with a female voice that speaks in the first person. Mitchell is a woman who has found difficulty fitting into stereotypical patterns of domesticity, and surely her experience resonates true for many women.

The next two chapters in this section focus on specific artists: 'Sinead O'Connor – Musical Mother', by Keith Negus, and 'Mannish Girl: k.d. lang from cowpunk to androgyny', by Stella Bruzzi. Negus gives specific insight into how an artist's identity is constructed/projected via a range of media (lyrics, musical style, CD covers, videos, posters and media representation). Bruzzi's chapter raises issues of androgyny, homosexuality and queer politics. In this chapter, which follows a similar arc to Whiteley's research on Mick Jagger, she charts k.d. lang's evolution from 'female Elvis' to 'mellifluous crooner'. Bruzzi feels that lang's lesbianism is masked through overemphasis on her androgynous image: 'By deciding to blur rather than accentuate sexual and gendered difference the gap is closed, and something radical (though messy) has been lost.' (p. 193) This exploration of gay issues neatly leads to the following two chapters which focus on the riot grrrl movement: 'The Missing Links: riot grrrl – feminism – lesbian culture', by Mary Celeste Kearney, and 'Rebel girl, you are the queen of my world: feminism, ''subculture'' and grrrl power', by Marion Leonard. Both these contributions are well researched and provide insight into the media containment and manipulation of the movement, as well as the real politics that motivated the music specifically, and the movement generally. Kearney's summary of the impact of riot grrl philosophy can leave no doubt as to its wider cultural importance.

> By providing girls with a collective confidence, riot grrl's revolutionary counter-culture and radical political activism empower female youth to liberate themselves from the rampant commercialism, misogyny, ageism, racism and homophobia they experience in their everyday lives. (p. 225)

The last section of the book, 'Music, image and identity', provides three approaches to the reading of music videos. The methodologies applied here are distinct and varied. Sheila Whiteley's 'Seduced by the sign: an analysis of the textual links between sound and image in pop videos' mixes Barthes's codes of narratology with musical analysis and questionnaire data, which she then applies to a reading of 'Justify My Love' by Madonna. 'Feeling and fun: romance, dance and the performing male body in the Take That videos', by Paul McDonald, wrestles with

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the validity of applying film-based theories to music video. He explores the way in which the male body/physicality is used as central spectacle, but concludes that it is used in a number of modes (narrative, yearning, party and dance) and not simply as a projection of phallic power. Like McDonald, Sean Cubitt warns against the direct application of film theory onto readings of music video in the last chapter, 'Rolling and tumbling: digital erotics and the culture of narcissism'. His research employs a complex mix of film theory and the psychoanalysis to explore the ways in which sex, gender, sexuality and eroticism are constructed and reflected in music videos. Through the medium of music video he locates a future for human communication which holds the potential for:

> [. .] other communications, other selves, other organisations of the self that will allow for other and more complex relations with our fellow humans, relations perhaps at last freed of the tyranny of sexual division. (p. 315)

After reviewing this collection, my main concern is its unwavering white Anglo-American rock music focus. There is an insistence that popular music is so important because it is global/international and crosses cultural and social boundaries. Many would assert that the book evidences constant bias with reference to white artists, which is unreflective of popular music generally. This fact should have been stressed, or at least recognised, as a limitation, as a specific parameter, within which the contributors mapped sexuality and gender politics.

As Whiteley summarises in her introduction, 'There is nothing natural, permanent or immovable about the regime of sexual difference that governs society and culture. Femininity is a construct; masculinity is a construct [. . .]' (p. xxxv). I would add that society is also a construct, and that perhaps a flaw in this collection is that it takes for granted its socio-cultural context: white, Christian Anglo-American. Sexuality and gender relations are constructed and located differently for many distinct groups within any society. For example, taking British society alone, sex and gender representation and meaning will be experienced (and indeed constructed) differently for, say, an Asian female or a black male of West Indian origin. Race and ethnicity have multiple implications for any understanding of sex, sexuality and gender constructions. If the collection had included discussion of some black artists, the imposed context would automatically have been highlighted and critiqued.

Despite this reservation, the book is a valuable contribution in this area. Since it was first published in 1997, it has been a key text in my lecturing work, and has proved itself to be an excellent starting point for student work. This is an academic text which is useful to researchers, yet in its style is easily accessible (and relevant) to a much wider readership. The 'Sources for further reading and research' section is a practical addition. Notably, many students express surprise that the book is a discussion of representations of gender, both male and female. Clearly, many still hold the stereotypical image that 'Gender Studies' is actually 'Women's Studies'. My students' naïve expectations are a measure of the reputation of gender studies, to be purely a task undertaken by women, about women. The obvious strength of this collection is that it addresses notions of sex, sexuality, representation and meaning, as relevant to *both* sexes. Moreover, it suggests a broader division than the usual binary gay/straight presentation of sexuality. It emphasises a blur, which embraces the whole world of sexualities that exist in-between. This collection places representation of women and sexism as a vital part of a wider study of genders

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and sexuality and therefore avoids potential marginalisation. Research that seeks to identify restrictive representations of women and sexist constructions of femininity is the more powerful when located within a discipline that includes men/masculinity within the same socio-cultural construction.

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