



SOUND BARRIERS

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There was a time, say as little as ten years ago, when you could gauge what was happening on all levels of the pop music hyperstore by looking through the charts each week and reading the results of the annual readers' polls in the music press. Today both are mere indicators, giving only a partial glimpse of what is happening. But that is hardly surprising, considering that the music press is still written largely by men for men, and the polls are a response to a diet of twelve months of their opinions.

The 1982 *New Musical Express* polls serve as a good example of women's semi-visibility in the music press. The most surprising omissions occurred in two categories: as songwriters and instrumentalists. Of the forty chosen instrumentalists, one was a woman, the deserving but not fantastic bass player with Talking Heads, Tina Weymouth. No women songwriters were elected, yet several of the vocalists not only write their own material but like Chrissie Hynde of the Pretenders, provide it for others (such as Grace Jones) to use. This area has traditionally been inhabited by women, from Carole King to Kate Bush and Joan Armatrading. Moreover, in the category of women singers, the twenty successful artists are more accurate as a guide to current male sexual fantasies than as a picture of the range of women singers. The list ranges from the hard-core sado-masochism of Siouxsie (of the Banshees) through the jailbait schoolgirl innocence of Bow-WowWow's Annabella, to the superclub exotica of Diana Ross and Randy Crawford.

The music industry itself has changed little. Women are still restricted to jobs-by-gender, and it remains a howling exception for women to work in the talent-spotting, taste-making Artist & Repertoire departments. They mostly still work as secretaries or, at the public interface, in reception, sales, press and publicity.

It is as consumers and producers of music

that the greatest changes can be seen. The top-selling music magazine now is the monthly *Smash Hits* which, according to their researchers, has a circulation of 260,000, and sells to equal numbers of girls and boys.

As musicians and performers, women's involvement is not comparable with that of ten years ago. 1976 was undoubtedly a turning point — not just through punk's rejection of traditional values and options — but also because of the challenges made by the women's movement on the restrictions upon women. This certainly resulted in an increase of confidence and demystified the instruments and technology of music-making both for women and men. It even dissolved some class and racial barriers for a while.

Possibly the greatest challenges were to the lyrics, changing the staple fare of thirty years of rock, heterosexual love and its problems, for subjects previously whispered in the schoolyard or at the bus stop. Polystyrene's songs for X-Ray Spex spoke for a generation of young women oppressed by parents, teachers and propaganda about body shape, body smells, spots and periods, as well, of course, as boys. The recent compilation album, *Making Waves*, produced and recorded by women, illustrates the variety of traditional musical styles being adopted but reveals little experimentation and disappoints by regurgitating accepted forms of popular music from recent decades including, unbelievably, heavy metal, that ultra-male of all forms of rock music. It is the lyrics: songs about lesbian love, sex on the new terms, and songs with nothing to do with love or sex, which leave their mark.

But punk has left a wake of confusion and complexity which surrounds us today, and can perhaps be illustrated by one internationally popular star, Debbie Harry, and two British bands — the now-demised Slits and the Au Pairs. Debbie Harry, image on

loan from Marilyn Monroe, was number one teen idol for two years and during the TV *Swap Shop* programme in which she appeared, every caller was a girl. For those girls, she hangs beside the John Travoltas and Stings on their bedroom walls. And yet, she is no dumb blonde, Debbie Harry is actively involved in the music too.

The contradictions with The Slits and the Au Pairs are more subtle. The Slits were always defiantly individualistic and anti-feminist. Their combination of utter confidence on stage, their don't-give-a-fuck attitudes and undisguised *pleasure* with their music, both endeared them and alienated them from their audiences, which always included more women than men. The Au Pairs, a two men, two women band, have always been heavily committed to anti-racist and anti-sexist campaigns. Their lyrics are about sexual and political issues and with the two women playing bass and lead guitar, they have upturned the rules of intra-group hierarchies. However, the Au Pairs' live performances reflect many of the complexities befalling women as rock music performers. At a recent London gig, the audience was fronted by a solid wedge of men ogling at Lesley Woods, the guitarist, clad in skin-tight trousers and leaping around the stage. This could only have been avoided at a women only event but their significant choice of being a mixed band precludes that possibility. Yet the slide show of public enemies and the lyrics apart, this was a good old-fashioned rock and roll act. And rock and roll is traditionally male and macho, and its performance is a sexual act. Trying to sidestep this tradition isn't just a problem for women — on stage you are objectified, like it or not, and off-stage, women are objectified too, so the problems for women performers are compound.

Once a woman on stage begins to take pleasure in her performance, to dress up and move to music, to perform, she is no longer judged by the music alone, and the complex codes of her chosen image intervene. A public exhibition of freedom and pleasure is threatening; the pressures on her to conform to standards of being a 'sex object' increase — Lesley Woods was voted as a singer, not a guitarist.

This pleasure versus puritanism dilemma is particularly relevant now during the anti-feminist backlash and return to commercially-sponsored glamour.

But it's too easy to be puritanical about this trend; glamour is back as an antidote to the distinctly unglamorous life most of us are forced to lead. Looking beyond the tits

and bums of *Top of the Pops* to the stage reveals a significant change in the numbers of bands where women form part of the line-up. The current hit parade has only seen one all-women band, the Irish singers, the Nolans, but a woman instrumentalist in a band is now commonplace. Abba still use the women for their glamour while Bucks Fizz (two men, two women) and Dollar (one man, one woman) use both sexes equally to create an asexual, cosy romantic theme.

Women are getting on with it in spite of their continued abuse — in record company ads and in the sexist content of a thousand songs. Certainly, there have always been

women musicians, persistent, tough, and even ambitious — but breaking through into the men's club which is the music biz requires that women musicians of today resist the pressures to conform and appeal as women, and, in order to transcend that, they must come up with the goods musically. It is difficult to shrug off three decades of well-sedimented pop music history which has given pleasure to both sexes, and formed part of women's collective consciousness.

But these histories must be challenged, subverted and even ignored in order for women to be freed from the unseen stranglehold of so many aspects of music.