

Within the music industry, Joan Armatrading is classified under what American radio stations call AOR: Adult-Oriented Rock. She has never been fashionable and appeals to older rock fans rather than teenagers. Since the early 70s she has put out an album a year, building a solid following and steady international sales. She works with ultra-competent session musicians and musically she is dependable, solid. All this suggests conservatism, yet it is this very position within the mainstream that makes Armatrading such a radical figure.

Armatrading loathes talking to the press but everything one reads about her suggests a solitary, shy but independent woman. Born in 1952 in St Kitts, she moved to Birmingham when she was seven. She is self-taught, and her bus-driver father opposed her interest in music so vehemently that he used to hide his guitar so she couldn't find it. At 14 she saw Marianne Faithfull on television and decided to write her own songs. Evidently the young Joan Armatrading spent a lot of time alone in her room, putting her songs

* and influences together in isolation.

* She became something unique. A black
* performer who operates in a white rock
I marketplace, a black female star who is neither a sex symbol nor a glamour figure; this is particularly interesting in that nearly all her songs deal with love and romance. And she is a performer who is liked by the most conservative disc jockeys, yet is also a heroine of the women's movement: lesbians identify with her, scan her songs looking for clues. From the beginning she has used a device that consciously radical performers are only now picking up on as a way of avoiding sexual stereotypes: addressing the lover as an ambiguous 'you'. Many of the endearments in her songs suggest the voice of a dominant, protective lover: 'little darling', 'my little baby'. At the same time many of these songs are about vulnerability and need: songs of pleading in sharp contrast with the sound of that deep, strong, authoritative voice.

Armatrading is not a soul singer, using her voice to recreate passionate experience; she is a rock singer in the singer-songwriter tradition of singers *reporting* on their experience: it is a confessional mode. Therefore although she adopts many roles in her songs — sufferer, aggressor, tender lover, the independent woman breaking free — the overall impression is that this is a portrait of one woman's experience. If you define 'male' and 'female' in traditional terms (male = aggressive, hard, freedom-loving, promiscuous, female = gentle, vulnerable, devoted) then the experience conveyed in her songs is

JOAN ARMATRADING Mary Harron



about switching back and forth between male and female roles.

Joan Armatrading's new album opens with lyrics that seem bizarrely out of character:

I love it when you call me names
I can't wait to see you again
I know you're gonna slap my face
You beat me up then beat me again . . .'

By the second verse the lyrics have switched to 'He loves it when she calls him names' and the meaning becomes clear. This is not a tale of female masochism, but the story of a 'big woman and short, short man', a dominatrix and her masochistic lover. It's presented as a relationship that works to their mutual satisfaction and Armatrading doesn't moralise, although she is careful to point out 'It's their way of loving, not mine'. (Decadence is certainly out of character and this song and *The Dealer*, a drug number, strike a jarring note.) The shock tactics in the first lines are obviously deliberate. She knows, that no one is expecting this from her, and the way in which she opens with a

virtual parody of traditional female masochism, only to reveal it as a man's voice, suggests that she has begun to use her role-hopping in a consciously challenging way.

But what seems most interesting are the lines in another song, *What do The Boys Dream*. The boys, she says, 'dream about living in a constant ecstasy/The boys dream about the same kind of things that the young girls dream.' It is a crucial point. Whatever backlash there has been to the women's movement, whatever inequalities still exist, male and female experiences have begun to cross over. The old certainties have suffered a massive haemorrhage.

Gender confusion was a feature of rock right through the 70s and not just in David Bowie's androgyny or the campiness of glam rock. Heavy metal bands, supposedly the last enclave of bedrock machismo, sang about devil women and groupies in high-pitched, castrati wails, shaking their long flowing hair and strutting across stage in tight satin trousers and high heels.

Clearly there was an element of co-option in all this, and the sad thing about gender confusion in rock is that most of the role-switching was going one way. There have been exceptions: female rock stars like Patti Smith and Joan Jett have successfully adapted masculine imagery without presenting themselves as carbon copies of men. But women have generally lost out on gender confusion because they don't like either role: the masculine image represents oppression, the female passivity. And so as many women retreated from fashion and from sexual display, men have been adopting female images.

One senses an element of insecurity in this co-option. The American singing team Hall and Gates warble 'she's a man-eater . . .' in sweet falsetto voices. The old masculine roles, which depended on their cultural opposition to feminine yielding and dependence, are under threat. But why worry about women when you can be one too?

Last year's most popular new teen idol, and symbol of his time, was Boy George, who sings in a sweet falsetto and looks uncannily like a girl. But little girls flock round him (when he arrived at the BBC it was the biggest crowd of fans the doorman had seen since the Beatles.) There is something sweet and benevolent in all this, and little girls have always gone for rather effeminately pretty, sexually unthreatening heroes. But whom do little boys flock round? Why does this role-swapping always work one way?

In the past women feared to express