

BARRY MANILOW - OPIUM OF THE MISSUS

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If Barry Manilow's career is on the wane, you'd never have guessed it from last summer's grandiose Concert At Blenheim Palace, when 40,000-odd pilgrims, preponderantly female though including Culture Club's Boy George, journeyed from all corners of the country to hear the bashful 37-year-old guide them through another nostalgic round trip of 'The Old Songs'.

What does the dapper, unpretentious Mr Manilow do to bring these folks so far? What makes him different from the Neil Diamonds and Billy Joels of America's MOR Olympians? Apart from the fact that more of his tunes stick in the brain, that he can write in virtually any style, and that he is a superlative arranger (even Robert Palmer of the *New York Times* conceded that he had an 'exceptional ear for melody'), what sets him apart from the rest?

Manilow's skill is not the sole reason for the freak success he has enjoyed in the easy-listening market. His appeal to women of three generations tells us more about Western society than that people like romantic ballads. Something in his whole manner and appearance distinguishes him from the great heart-throbs, the Sinatras and Presleys: his *gentleness*. There is an unspoken, soft-focus sexuality about Manilow that seems to bring women together under one giant banner.

It's tempting to suggest that worshipping Barry is a sort of refuge for spinsters, that he's loved precisely because he is not a sex symbol. I don't buy that; it's unlikely that Manilow fans gather to discuss fantasies of undressing him, but there is no doubt that

he is discerned to be beautiful. Yet what I believe he represents is not lust but rather a transcendental, angelic maleness. As one fan puts it,

'He is every woman's sweetheart,
Every mother's son,
Every little girl's big brother,
And every man's best chum.'

The way Manilow's fans talk about him argues that he is nothing less than a god, a spiritual power. Countless women claim to have overcome post-menopausal loneliness through his music. Flying to Las Vegas periodically to see Manilow perform proved cheaper for one shrewd husband than a year's tranquiliser prescriptions. And he doesn't seem to make men jealous either.

Manilow's secret is his pleasantly casual reticence. Not having been groomed as a star—his background was in jingle-writing and TV arrangement—he will only play up to his fans' adulation by way of humour, as part of the effortless control he exercises onstage (he held my attention a lot longer than David Bowie or the Rolling Stones have done at similarly sized gatherings).

If his audience is the romance-starved Mills & Boon market, he is precisely *not* the swarthy, sexually dangerous fantasy figure that tends to be the hero of those romances. If anything, he frees female

desire from the hold of that archetype, that threatening (and ultimately raping) sexuality which keeps our model of sex itself so inflexible.

As an individual man, Manilow might not be terribly sexy; as a mass icon, his gentleness—however 'plastic' it appears—makes him a god. 'When I'm listening to him', say the fans, 'I believe he's singing every word for me personally.' His sentimentality—the nostalgia of 'Memory' and the 'The Old Songs'—encourages not swooning self-pity but calm and solace. He gives loneliness a mass identity: 'you don't have to be lonely all alone.'

I find it rather moving.

