

## C L O S E - U P

O N

## Madonna

Diana Simmonds

I see the movie, I listen to the records, I buy the book, I study the signs. They point in opposite directions simultaneously. 'From when I was very young, I just knew that being a girl and being charming in a feminine sort of way could get me a lot of things, and I milked it for everything I could.' And at the same time: 'I wanted to do *everything* everybody told me I couldn't ever do.' And she is. It is *alter ego* at work, to millions it is irresistible. It is one of the keys to Madonna.

Born with that name - who would have thought it up, along with the additional appellation Louise Veronica Ciccone, except strict Catholic Italian immigrant parents?

Madonna was brought up in Detroit along with three brothers, four sisters and a classic and urgent desire to make good. She is a good girl. Her mother died when she was eight, her childhood was spent taking care of the little ones. Now she is taking care of herself: mother dear - this girl just wants to have fun, as she might have sung to millions of teeny ears if Cyndi Lauper hadn't done it first. Not that the two, despite certain similarities, are interchangeable. Many - including Lauper herself - feel that of the two it is Cyndi who was the most likely candidate for pop stardom. On the other hand, Madonna is the all-round enhanced media personality: she sings (moderately), but was also pushing it as an actress, dancer and anything else likely to bring the heights within her grasp.

When Susan Seidelman cast the then New York-based and rather interesting cult figure as the desperately sought-after Susan, she had no real sense that she was hitching her film of that name to a rising tidal wave. But Madonna is a smart cookie, she knew what she was about and all along she was aiming at the ionosphere.

And this is no pop girl merely walking through a movie. It is a neatly constructed and assured persona (and at least her third movie appearance). It doesn't stop the putative star of the piece, Rosanna Arquette, being just a little pissed off. On the other hand, it does mean that

Rosanna is in an unpredictably huge general release smash instead of the star of a marginal arthouse hit.

But is Madonna really the Susan of the film? Is Susan really Madonna? Who cares? Certainly not the millions of 15-year-old Wannabe-Madonnas even now giving their mothers hysterics as they get themselves up as Times Square tarts with sludgy luscious lipstick, charcoaled eyes, massed streaked hair and the clothes - aaagh, good! The clothes! This is putting on the style in great dollops, this is Maybelline and Fabulash country, names not spoken in polite society since the equally over-made-up 60s. But it is one helluva lot more spunky than the '60s ever were: 'Get into the groove' goes her most recent single smash, 'you gotta move boy if you want my love'. Quite what she had in mind is open to several interpretations, at least one of them threatening: currently posters are being amended to 'Madogga - slag - cunt - tart' by boys who run away laughing nervously.

Between the 60s and now there has been women's liberation, of course - derided, ridiculed, but subliminally sunk into everyday life. A dangerous substance, ingested by osmosis, secretly and continually popping up in unexpected places. And then there was Patti Smith and Debbie Harry, Madonna's older sisters in the image and music business. Patti strutted the stuff of independence, actress Debbie created the look, they set the tone of



their times. Now Madonna does it for the 80s, but she has brought the two facets together.

That difference is yet another key. One that might hang jangling around her neck along with the rosaries and crucifixes of the good Catholic girl bent on subversion. Who literally obeys her daddy - on stage on the US tour which sold over 650,000 tickets - and has *married*, but who says: 'I can't conceive of living happily ever after for a long period of time with one person'. Whether Sean Penn will be able to put up with being Mr Madonna is probably the answer to that, however. Nevertheless, having committed the conventional she can still observe of the criticisms of her stage show and persona: 'Art and music can never be too permissive, especially if they act as an alternative to the reactionary attitudes of people like Reagan and the Moral Majority.'

Madonna - not Magdalene - despite the studied sleaze and unabashed sweat of strenuous physical performance, there is nothing really dubious here. There is wholesome flesh on her bones, not the sinewy strung-out twitch of Patti and Debbie, nor the anorexic 'slimness' of the fundamentally unsure. Despite what she does with the microphone, nothing nasty enters those pouting lips. Noxious substances haven't taken their toll of the highly energised and sensuously proportioned frame, this is a popcorn and pasta girl. And

that reveals yet another key: despite contradictory images, this is no Lolita. Soft porn it verges on, kiddyporn it ain't. Perm any one of three proffered birthdates (57, 58 or 59) and she is a canny, clear-headed young woman.

Her own hands are firmly on the wheel of Madonna Inc. responsible for the monster US tour; merchandising franchises in the Michael Jackson league; Madonna designer boutiques; and at least 12m albums sold worldwide (not singles - the computer is still whirling on those statistics). And that is the penultimate key: comparisons with Monroe and Goldie Hawn are more accurate than many realise in that Madonna is as clever and talented as both, as conscious of the power and origin of the fluffy-kooky-middlehead image as the former, and as in control of it as the latter. And she *plays* the contradictions for all they're worth.

She gets herself up like she escaped from a circus or a bordello and she is nonchalantly unconcerned. Yet she doesn't actually get to *drink* the triple Tequila Sunrise she orders in Susan and she doesn't actually engage in unpleasant, unlawful or unkind activities - people only say she does. The perverted bridal outfit she wears for her stage encore has to be the living end and a businessman's fantasy but, when it comes to it, she has clean nails, perfect skin and she shaves her armpits!

And that's the final key to anyone who is in any way seeking Madonna.