

SEXISM IN ROCK-AND-ROLL LYRICS

"Woman is the Nigger of the World" John Lennon

Rod Cohen

Dans ce passage sur le sexisme dans les paroles de musique rock and roll l'auteure dit que si nous oublions le talent du guitariste, la musique qui prend et les voix parfaites, nous découvrons une attaque directe contre la femme que même les auditeurs ignorent.

Le groupe AC/DC dépasse les bornes dans sa haine contre les femmes. par contre John Lennon est un cas unique: son attitude de phallocrate reconnu a changé grâce à sa femme Yoko Ono.

Rock-and-roll can be summed up with accuracy by the title of a James Brown song, "It's a Man's, Man's World." Very often rock lyrics are degrading and/or malicious towards women and, like all other forms of media abuse to the female gender, are generally overlooked. In fact, sexist attitudes are used to sell the music.

There are many reasons why the lyrics of pop music are not criticized by the fans, critics, rock journalists, and disc jockeys. Peer pressure ensures that, even if rock fans have doubts about the validity of what they hear, they will keep those doubts to themselves.

However, many listeners may be just as sexist as the musicians and disc jockeys who refuse to play these records might lose their jobs.

Just as in motion pictures, many "super stars" have developed in rock-and-roll. The Beatles, the Rolling Stones, the Who, Bob Dylan, and Jimi Hendrix, all have reached stardom and their records will sell for generations to come. Such success does not mean necessarily that these performers were blatantly sexist in their climb to stardom. Some stars, however, have abused females through their male-chauvinist writing. For instance, the Rolling Stones, considered by most to be the quintessential rock band, have constantly exhibited sexism throughout their eighteen-year career.

One might think that as society supposedly gets more liberal, there would be a trend towards equality of the sexes in the lyrics, but such is not the case. In fact, rock lyrics have, in some cases, become more blatantly anti-woman. "Hits," well-known songs, and songs that fill out albums can all contain strongly sexist content.

Why are rock artists praised and endorsed by the paying public with little reaction to this lyrical violence against women? There are a number of possibilities, most of a sociological nature, which suggest an un-

spoken agreement by fans to accept these attitudes. Most fans will argue that the music is the message, not the words: "I couldn't care less what they are saying; it is the beat, the music, the guitars I am listening to." Still, the writers are debasing women and getting rich in the process.

The Rolling Stones' "Under My Thumb" is a classic example of a sexist rock lyric. The song is about a

1965, is a "classic" piece of rock-and-roll.

John Lennon's "Run For Your Life" is about a man singing of his feelings for his "girlfriend" but his love is rather difficult to comprehend. The song portrays male "piggishness" and possessiveness. It begins by calling for sympathy; if the girl does him *wrong* then he is finished. There is no idea of a mutual understanding between two

Under my thumb, her eyes are
kept to herself,
Under my thumb, well I can still
look at someone else.

man who appears to have been "dominated" by his female mate. It goes on to describe how he has turned the situation around; he is now in full control. There is, of course, no mention of her feelings, needs, or wants in the relationship. The line "it's down to me" displays the speaker's "macho" desire to dominate his woman. Other lines confirm his "control" and assert that that is how *it should be*. Here is a prime example of the sexist double standard:

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He gloats over the control he possesses. The woman becomes a "squirm dog," who has had her day and who has changed her way *for him*. His disassociating her from intelligence and independence takes place in lyrics that refer to her as a "Siamese cat of a girl." This line is not so bad in itself except that the Stones follow it with "the sweetest PET in the world." The woman has lost all identity and is now his pet. Yet this particular song, written by Mick Jagger and Keith Richard in

adults. Then Lennon threatens the woman: if she does not do what he wants, then *he* will be lost. Instead of working out the problem, he places the responsibility for his sanity on her shoulders. In other words, he blames her for his lack of control. He confesses that he is "a wicked guy with a jealous mind" but he does not criticize himself for this. She has to accept the way he is or else. Next he says that he cannot spend his life waiting for her to realize and accept that he is inconsiderate, selfish, and chauvinist and that she should be content to become his possession. He refers to his "lady" as "little girl," a degrading term for anyone who should be his equal, and commands her to be like an ostrich, to admit her guilt and shame for doing him wrong. The song does not make clear in the end whether the pair remain together or not, but either way the song is a final confirmation of his control and superiority, because, even after their relationship is over, she must still be concerned with his wellbeing and not live a life of her own. Lennon is a unique case, though, because under the influence of Yoko Ono, he admitted his sexism and guilt about

his relationships with women. However, his ingrained sexism was something which, at the time of "Run For Your Life," he was himself not able to notice. The chauvinism Lennon displayed in this song was and still is considered a normal attitude. Anything different exhibits "deviance and radicalism" opposing the normal societal beliefs.

"Heavy Metal" rock is, however, historically the worst offender. It is a very loud and aggressive musical style, with lyrics rarely mentioning anything but fornication and "women hatred."

"Sweet Talker" by Whitesnake is one long putdown of women; it consists of very bland, stereotypical statements about women: "...by the way you walk..."; "you give it away by the way you talk"; "...long legs and a black girl sway." Such lines say nothing except that we are supposed to possess the writer's ideas about women. Line 5 mentions "giving away her school-girl name." In other words, whatever her educational level, this girl is a sexual tease. The only role such women have is to satisfy the singer's sexual desires and fantasies. The chorus also makes anti-women statements to finish off the song. The phrase "bad daughter" is another derogatory comment about females. There is no indication of a relationship, or even acquaintance, with the female in question. Thus the line is just a hateful stab at women in general. The song ends with a senseless comparison of a woman to a canine awaiting fertilization.

The Australian band AC/DC could claim the right to wear the crown of women-hatred. They sing crudely of fornication and put down women with unadulterated crassness. Their song "The Jack" begins in classic fashion with the woman giving herself to the singer for no apparent reason. He then degrades her by relating her consent to her "promiscuity." Then he makes her cry and scream. He thinks he is the "victim" of her past, her supposed lie to him about her "purity," and the "shame" *he* will bear as a result of her reputation. The most ridicu-

lous statement of the song follows: he falls in love with the "dirty little bitch." The beat is great but this man hates women!

"Squeeler" is another example of AC/DC's attitude towards women. The singer again finds a sexually inexperienced woman and imagines that he will initiate her into a supposedly very warm and beautiful experience. He builds a picture of "breaking in" the unsuspecting female to her life as "slave" to her sexually potent male. Instead of using warmth, sensitivity, and love, he is violent in his *rape* of the woman to the point of "...fixing her good," so that she will never again enjoy the beauty of a true sex-

"set up all the pretty babes" in the position he would most appreciate: "Bottoms Up." Again, as in other lyrics, there is no feedback from the recipients of his yearnings; they are like chess pieces to be set up for his entertainment and use (or abuse). The women here have no personhood or identity. The song is sexist, tasteless, and demeaning, but typical of too many lyrics in rock.

This study shows the humiliation and degradation of women in the lyrics of rock music. Such lyrics are not representative of the entire world of rock music but do represent a very large element that is often ignored even by enlightened listeners. Perhaps, if all critics were

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I used to be cruel to my woman,
I beat her and kept her apart from
the things that she loved.

Man I was mean,
but I've changed my scene,
and I'm doing the best I can.

Getting Better, 1968

ual relationship. This song is the most violent and vicious writing I have ever found in all my readings of rock-song lyrics (and I use the term "lyric" hesitatingly). The song finishes with a decree of dominance that makes clear the necessity of women's battle to be equals on a planet that is controlled by many uncaring and prejudiced males.

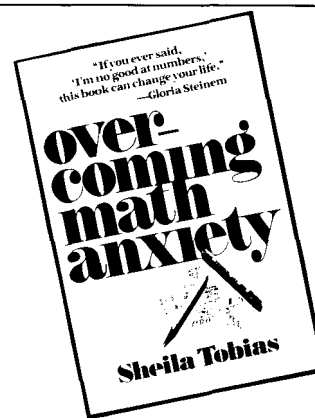
Van Halen's "Bottoms Up" exemplifies the plasticine, inhumane image of women put forward by a great number of rock bands. The singer goes to a night club for the evening, to have fun, to sing and to dance, and he chooses a "babe" whom he would like to share in his enjoyment of the festivities of the evening. But, later, he becomes like a commander ordering his crew to

sensitive, responsible, and non-sexist, and if all disc jockeys made critical comments on the blatantly sexist content of such music, more people would look past the talented guitar playing, the impressive production methods, and the accomplished vocals and realize that such music is nothing more than a mass-media attack on women.

Fortunately, John Lennon provides a contrast to such sexism and hatred:

I use to be cruel to my woman,
I beat her and kept her apart from
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GETTING BETTER, 1968



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