

“Rip Her to Shreds”: Women’s Music According to a Butch-Femme Aesthetic

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“Rip Her to Shreds” is the title of a song recorded in 1977 by the rock group Blondie; a song in which the female singer tacitly criticizes another woman. It begins with the female “speaker” addressing other members of her clique by calling attention to a woman who obviously stands outside the group. The listener likewise becomes a member of the clique, forced to participate tacitly in the act of criticism. Every stanza of merciless defamation is articulated by a group of voices who shout a chorus of agreement, enticing the listener to join the fray.

{spoken} Hey, pst pst, here she comes now.

Ah, you know her, would you look at that hair,
Yah, you know her, check out those shoes,

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She looked like she stepped out
in the middle of somebody's cruise.

She looks like the Sunday comics,
She thinks she's Brenda Starr,
Her nose-job is real atomic,
All she needs is an old knife scar.

CHORUS:

(group) Oo, she's so dull,
(solo) come on rip her to shreds,
(group) She's so dull,
(solo) come on rip her to shreds.¹

In contrast to the backstabbing female which the Blondie song presents, so-called "women's music" emphasizes solidarity and affection between women, and reserves its critical barbs for men and patriarchal society. Women's music is a term used by both the recording industry and feminists to refer to a genre of popular music ideally written, performed, and produced by and expressly for women. Portraits of women as critical of one another and the exclusionary social world of female cliques painted in "Rip Her to Shreds" rarely appear in women's music. Feminists, moreover, have been in turn surprisingly uncritical with regard to women's music, which has long been a mouth-piece for the feminist movement and thus manifests the ideologies and aesthetics of a "grassroots" feminist theory. Sue-Ellen Case (1989) has argued, however, that to date the feminist movement has assumed a heterosexual and patriarchal context for women. To assume this context is to prevent true ideological change by perpetuating the perception of women "in terms of men and not within the context of other women" (p. 283), giving rise to reactionary and therefore restricted ideological and artistic responses. Thus the feminist musicologist ought to examine closely and evaluate the artistic and ideologi-

1. Deborah Harry and Chris Stein (Jiru Music/Monster Island Music, 1976), recorded on *Blondie*, Chrysalis Records Inc., 1977, CHR 1165.

cal merit of the music which purportedly expresses feminist ideals.

In popular usage, the term "women's music" refers either to music whose lyrics convey an explicitly lesbian or feminist message, or to recorded music commercially released by a women-owned and operated label such as Olivia Records. Women's music blossomed in the mid-1970s and owes its existence to the contemporaneous blossoming of radical feminism.

According to Sue-Ellen Case (1988, 64), radical feminism teaches that the patriarchy "has formed a male culture" that privileges men and oppresses women. The notion that gender and culture were biologically determined and therefore linked to one another lay at the heart of the radical-feminist "thought and practices" that dominated feminism in the 1970s and persist today. This essentialist ideology prompted efforts to create an alternative women's culture, and precipitated a strong but somewhat uncomfortable alliance with the nascent lesbian movement.² Radical feminists idealized if not cultivated separatism by theorizing and promoting an essentially female sensibility.³ "Woman-Identified Woman" became a slogan which not only advertised one's political and social alliances, but also implied the belief in and the pursuit of an underlying "authentic" and "natural" femaleness which bridges homosexual and heterosexual divisions.

Women's music was one of the most successful and powerful products of the alliance between feminists and lesbians and their shared agenda to create an alternative women's culture.⁴ In order to distinguish women's culture from that of the pa-

2. See Weitz 1984, 236-37, 242-43 and Tilchen 1984, 289. In the late 1960s and early 70s many feminists opposed lesbianism, charging that the lifestyle was sex-centered and male-identified. Alice Echols explains that "lesbian recognition was achieved by locating the discourse within the already established framework of separatism" (1984, 55). Members of the lesbian movement began to define lesbianism as a political choice and an act of resistance, thus championing themselves as the true practitioners of radical-feminist theory. See also Case 1988, 76.

trierarchy, feminist artists tried to imbue their art with signs of this authentic female sensibility. An important aspect of feminist art was the dual artistic intentions of personal expression and propaganda, as the popular slogan “the personal is political” advertised. Case observed that “radical feminists focus much of their critical and practical work on identifying either male-gender oppression or female-gender strengths” (1988, 64). Thus women’s music and literature, on one hand, attempted to unveil the ills of the patriarchy through realistic portrayals of women’s suffering, and, on the other hand, promote an alternative, women-only utopian vision which featured a narrow concept of female nature as “nurturant, tender, and egalitarian” (Echols 1984, 53). However, this idealization of femaleness down-plays women’s critical faculties with regard to themselves and, consequently to the products of “women’s culture.” For women’s music, the result has been the acceptance of awkward, unimaginative lyrics (see below), poor singers, and a uniform musical style.⁵

3. Echols (1984, 51-2) chooses to call this particular brand of feminism “cultural feminism” rather than radical feminism, citing a drastic change in the beliefs of radical feminism which took place in the mid-1970s. “Early radical feminists,” she writes, “believed that women’s oppression derived from the very construction of gender and sought its elimination as a meaningful category...what we have come to identify as radical feminism represents such a fundamental departure from its radical feminist roots that it requires renaming.” For Echols, the notion of femaleness emphasizes gender as a meaningful category and thus completely contradicts the original goal of radical feminism. I am choosing to follow Case (1988) and popular convention, however, in labeling the essentialist ideologies described above as radical feminism.

4. See Nogle 1984, 11-2; Lont 1984, 95-6; Tilchen 1984, 287-88.

5. In her review of the second annual National Women’s Music Festival, Georgia Christagau (1975, 40) writes, “As an audience they were among the least discriminating ever...rock fans...know it’s their right to boo someone who’s out of tune. Here, such a judgement was considered indelicate.” By all reports, there has been little change in the last fifteen years.

I heard Cheryl and Mary say
There are two kinds of people in the world today,
One or the other a person must be,
The men are them, the women are we,
They agree it's a pleasure to be a lesbian...⁶

The stylistic roots of women's music lie in the leftist urban folk music genre epitomized by the songs of Woody Guthrie, and Pete Seeger. The privileging of this musical idiom stems from the close ideological connection between radical feminism and the left-wing social movement of the 1930s which flourished in New York and other urban areas. Like radical feminism, this political movement romanticized rural life and advocated the creation of "a new social order" and a "new folk community" based on communism and egalitarian ideals (Denisoff 1972, 114). In order to communicate and express these ideals, musician/propagandists such as Woody Guthrie co-opted the musical idioms of rural and traditional communities and used politically explicit lyrics to instill class consciousness in middle-class intellectuals—in the words of Serge Denisoff, a "Folk Consciousness" (1972, 107). The result was the creation of a genre best described as "urban folk music" (Denisoff 1972, 106). In the 1950s and '60s, this breed of folk music came to represent not only idealized rural life but also an alternative to pop and rock whose mass-consumer success had diluted their political potency.

The politically tumultuous 1960s saw an explosive revival of Folk Consciousness and urban folk music. Thus in the 1970s, folk music—then replete with political connotations—provided an appropriate musical idiom for the inception of women's music. Maxine Feldman, Alix Dobkin and Meg Christian, the pioneering artists who first recorded songs with explicit lesbian and feminist lyrics, began their careers as leftist folk singers, gradually narrowing the purview of their songs to

6. Alix Dobkin, "View from Gay Head," (Women's Music Network 1974), recorded on *Lavender Jane Loves Women*, Women's Wax Works Aooi.

women's issues, and to the expression of a "female sensibility" in keeping with the essentialist ideology of the radical feminist movement. For folk artists, unamplified instruments and simple strophic tunes stemmed from a populist ideal and became emblematic of political forthrightness. For women's music artists, acoustic instruments, in addition to their implications of political protest, stood in opposition to the amplified and electrified sound of male-dominated, sexist rock-and-roll, typified by the Rolling Stones and dubbed "cock rock" by feminists (see Stein 1991, 29).⁷ Thus acoustic instruments and folk music were seen as indigenous to a women's culture and as projecting an "essential femaleness."

Folk music provides both the musical aesthetic and the conceptual foundation for women's music. It is within the conceptual framework of folk music that all other styles of music are understood and permitted as women's music. Although the idiom of folk music represented female authenticity, black women musicians soon began to consider the exclusion of rock and jazz as a racist prohibition against their African-American musical heritage.⁸ Women's music labels then strove to become truly egalitarian, including black artists who specialized in rock, pop, and jazz, as well as artists and music representing other ethnicities—proclaiming all styles as valid under the banner of multicultural *traditions*. These artists, however, sold less well than their urban folk-music sisters (Stein 1991, 29), and by

7. Theorist Robin Morgan (1977, 181-2, 209) and critic Marion Meade (1972) both focus on the sexist, male-oriented lyrics of rock songs in their attack on the entire rock "culture" as degrading to women. The Rolling Stones receive the most criticism, although Meade (p.175) also points a finger at Bob Dylan ("Like a Rolling Stone," "Just Like a Woman"), Jim Morrison ("Light My Fire") and John Lennon ("Why Don't We Do It in the Road"). Another view held that rhythm- and instrument-based music such as rock and even jazz were inappropriate musical idioms for women because, on the one hand, they have been traditionally closed to women, and, on the other hand, the musical and lyrical conventions of rock and jazz divert attention from or do not allow for the expression of women's issues. See Pollock 1988, 18 and Carroll 1972, 7.

the 1980s, women's music found itself permanently attached to the folk music section in record stores.

Regardless of the musical idiom, all women's music does, in fact, adhere to a fundamental axiom of "folk music," namely the primacy of lyrics. As Simon Frith (1981) has observed, "the folk emphasis was on lyrics and their plain presentation. The central musical instrument was the voice and it was by reference to vocal conventions that sincerity could be judged" (pp. 28-9). Even the feminist jazz ensemble *Alive!* uses a singer instead of wind instruments in order to present lyrics "with specific feminist content" (Pollock 1984, 61). As previously mentioned, women's music conveys the agenda of radical feminism. Lyrics either describe the oppression of women and the trials of lesbian love, or celebrate women's naturalness, honesty, and political activism. Descriptions of women highlight female-identified values such as acceptance, caring, trust, mutuality, and respect.⁸ The audience of women's music is expected to pay close attention to lyrics and their message or narrative content. Recordings of women's music usually include printed lyrics, and sometimes feminist propaganda or a brief history of the performer and the women-run label. This emphasis on the lyrics of the songs stands in contrast to rock albums where lyrics are often unintelligible and not printed.

Emphasis on textual content, however, also brings with it an impetus to maintain formal and musical simplicity to achieve maximum accessibility. This aesthetic again stands in

8. For example, questioned as to how much of her music was traditional, Linda Tillery, a black woman's music artist, responded "I aspire to carry on the musical traditions I grew up with. My parents had a lot of records, mostly blues, rhythm and blues, and big-band jazz..." (Pollock 1988, 14). Later in the interview she responds "I get extremely angry when people tell me that rock—what they're talking about is rhythm-based music—is not a good way for a woman to go. The music that I grew up with and that I understand most is music created by my ancestors, my family. Blues, rhythm and blues, and jazz are part of our tradition..." (p. 18).

9. For discussions of the prevalent themes in women's music see Nogle 1984, 69-87; Lont 1984, 93-4; Stein 1991, 28.

opposition to the trend toward long, formally ambiguous and "contentless" guitar and keyboard solos in rock music of the 1970s.¹⁰ Women's music, on the other hand, suffers from chronically prolix and prose-like lyrics bound to standard folk or pop melodic clichés, often resulting in awkward and sloppy text settings in which the flow of syllables is slowed or accelerated in order to fit unequal lines of text into equal musical phrases. In "You Bet" (music by Meg Christian, lyrics by Holly Near) the following block of text (shown below as printed in the record insert) is set to two identical strains of music. The musical strain repeats at point in the text where I have placed a double bar—in the middle of a syntactic unit, which itself is in the midst of a lengthy run-on sentence.

If I only had a dollar I'd spend it with the women
 Who live the lives, the fighting lives
 The lives that inspire // the songs of women working
 Fighting for our senses courageously
 Preparing me for battles that are yet to be won.¹¹

The text is set to a quick waltz meter in which the primary beats are occasionally subdivided into two. These subdivisions occur randomly in order to accommodate the text, and are not consistent between the two strains of music. Furthermore, important words such as 'women' and 'fighting' are not set in a consistent manner (see table 1.).

Even the comparatively new lesbian music group Two Nice Girls, who promote themselves as philosophically rebellious and musically tied to rock, still adhere to the "folk" declamatory practice characteristic of women's music.¹² In "Sweet Postcard," (words by Barbara Hofrenning, music by Gretchen

10. For example the music of Jimi Hendrix, Cream, and art rock bands such as Emerson, Lake, & Palmer and Yes.

11. Holly Near and Meg Christian (*Hereford Music/Thumbelina*, 1978, recorded on *Imagine My Surprise*, Redwood Records, RR 401).

12. See Phoenix 1991b.

Table 1: Holly Near and Meg Christian: "You Bet," Stanza 2

beats	(3)	1	2	3	1	2	3
	(If)	I	only	had a	dol-	lar	I'd
		spend	it	with the	wo-	men	Who
		live		the	lives,		
				the	fighting	lives	The
		lives	that	in-	spire	//	the
		songs	of	women	work-	ing	
		Fight-	ing	for our	sen-	ses	cour-
		a-		geous-	ly,		
				Pre-	paring	me	for
		bat-	tles	that are	yet	to	be
							won...

Phillips¹³ the lines excerpted below, taken in succession from stanza 2, are set to the same two phrases of melody in quadruple meter:

I could lick your cheek and bite your nose
Ev - ry at - om of your be - ing
Is ap - pre - ci - a - ted by me...

13. Barbara Hofrenning and Gretchen Phillips (*Slumber Party Serenades* 1988, recorded on *Two Nice Girls*, Rough Trade Records Inc., 1989, US 59 CD).

The setting of text to the same melody spotlights the words, in this case emphasizing their already awkward and somewhat insipid nature.

The music, in women's music, is rarely treated as anything more than a vehicle for the text whose job is to convey the message in a forthright, transparent form so as to leave the message unmitigated by artistry or artifice. The impetus behind the avoidance of artistry and artifice, and the favoring of content over form, stems from the essentialist ideology of radical feminism and an underlying propagandistic agenda for art. Such an agenda privileges confessional and realistic descriptions over metaphorical or symbolic expressions. However, this attitude toward text and music shows, in fact, the assumption of a heterosexual and patriarchal context.

Sue-Ellen Case (1989) argues that both realism and essentialism are oppressive and authoritarian. Realism, "by the authoritarian claim to realistic representation" (p. 197), destroys the seductive merits of art by disallowing free association and semiotic play, furthers the confinement of women by focusing on their degradation or their isolation within the patriarchy, and reinforces essentialism by continually presenting the dominant culture's patriarchal view of women as traditionally/biologically passive and weak. Essentialism prescribes behavior and defines women and their art as much in terms of what they could or should *not* be (i.e. masculine) as in terms of what they ought to be. Case pinpoints the current stagnation inherent in feminist theory's preoccupation with the female subject and her "inherited subject position that is marked with masculinist functions and history" (p. 282):

[M]ost of the work on the subject position has only revealed the way in which the subject is trapped within ideology and thus provides no programs for change.

For feminists, changing this condition must be a priority. The common appellation of this bound subject has been the "female subject," signifying a biological, sexual difference, inscribed by dominant cultural practices. (p. 282)

Case proposes a *feminist* subject who "unlike the female one, can be outside of ideology, can find self-determination, can change" (p. 283). The feminist subject position must be "located among women, outside the ideology of sexual difference, and thus the social institution of heterosexuality" (*ibid.*). Case suggests the lesbian butch-femme relationship as the model for a new feminist subject position. She argues that the feminist movement, because of moralistic and social pressures, has never been receptive to this aspect of lesbianism—butch-femme role playing—that offers women and feminist theory liberation from the assumption of a heterosexual and patriarchal context. A butch-femme relationship provides an arena for women to explore freely aspects of traditional male and female gender relations with little threat of violence and degradation.

An important feature which underpins butch-femme role-playing is *camp*—a potent combination of artifice and irony. Both a sensibility and a style, camp provides the nuance which distinguishes role-playing from reality. Through a perception of oneself and the world in terms of irony and artifice, the butch-femme couple achieves liberation from the heterosexist "rule of naturalism or realism" (Case 1989, 287) which necessarily marginalizes them. With their camp sensibility, the butch-femme couple regards both gender and the patriarchy as artificial. This ideal vantage point provides room for feminist theory to bypass separatistic value judgements and appraisals of women in terms of their comparison with men. Camp style and sensibility also produce complex meaning in actions and art through a semiotic play between the appearance of assimilation and the powerfully seductive subtext of subversion.

In order to provide an antidote to the essentialism and realism in feminist theory and art, Case constructs an aesthetic in accordance with the ideal vantage point or subject position of the butch-femme couple. Thus the butch-femme aesthetic advocates the use of camp to create an ideal fiction concerning gender roles and identities—a fiction which includes gender

conflation or gestures of assimilation saturated with irony. Case summarizes: "these roles *qua* roles lend agency and self-determination to the historically passive subject, providing her with at least two options for gender identification and, with the aid of camp, an irony that allows her perception to be constructed from outside ideology with a gender role that makes her appear as if she is inside of it" (p. 292). Of course Case is not advocating that all women become lesbians, but rather that women and women's art have at their disposal a "multiplicity of roles and narratives" (p. 295) which advance a perception of women as actively "inhabiting the camp space of irony and wit, free from biological determinism, elitist essentialism, and the heterosexist cleavage of sexual differences" (p. 298).

Case adopts this butch-femme aesthetic in her critique of realistic theatre, where the audience attends to a visual and verbal portrayal of gender and gender relations. Consumers of popular music likewise attend to gender portrayal through a combination of visual, verbal, and musical means. Record covers, live performances, videos, reviews, and interviews communicate politically charged ideas and images which, like the biography of classical composers, offer information for interpreting the music and lyrics. Thus it is appropriate to extend the purview of the butch-femme aesthetic to the field of popular music criticism, and to use the aesthetic to formulate a much needed redefinition of "women's music." I will focus on two popular women artists: Phranc, a butch lesbian folk-singer, and Deborah Harry, the ultra-femme lead singer of the now defunct rock group Blondie. Both musicians consciously use irony and gender conflation in their music and image, but present opposing extremes in musical style and visual portrayal of female gender.

The extreme images of Phranc and Deborah Harry have common origins in the use of irony by American punk bands and the anti-establishment philosophy of British punk bands. Both trends allowed women to parody or obliterate traditional

feminine images.¹⁴ In contrast, radical feminism's authentic female avoided both an ultra-feminine image which was regarded as male-constructed, as well as a mannish or butch image which was "long synonymous with lesbianism in popular culture" (Stein 1991, 29). Punk rock surfaced in the mid 1970s, contemporaneous with women's music, and in many respects, stood in direct opposition to the ideology and aesthetics of radical feminism. Arlene Stein observes that "punk's appeal to androgyny and its embrace of brash, rhythmic music, was at odds with the notion of woman-identification at the base of women's music" (*ibid.*). Given this opposition, it is surprising that Phranc played in several hardcore punk bands before going solo as a folksinger.¹⁵ Phranc's image presents a radical change for women's music. On her first album *Folksinger* (1985), Phranc appears as the epitome of visual Butch and gender conflation. The cover shows a black and white close-up profile of Phranc with a flat-top haircut—now emblematic—and heavy eye makeup. Also included in the picture is an old-fashioned microphone, positioned an inch away from Phranc's closed lips. Her eyes are half-shut, but her expression is blank, emotionless. Phranc's image here is not just lesbian-butch, but also male-popstar androgyny. Heavy eye makeup and stern or blank expressions were trade marks of post-punk and new wave artists of the early 80s, such as Gary Numan. Her name plays upon sexual ambiguity—phonetically sounding a man's name, but spelled with a soft *ph* and a hard *c*. The phonetic name 'Frank,' in conjunction with the old-fashioned microphone and the use of black-and-white film also invoke the image of Frank Sinatra and other crooners of the 1940s. Phranc's second album (1989) again shows a campy play with images of gender and nostalgia typography. Here she is situated in a fabricated suburban backyard, full of fake flowers and fake grass. The picture is shot in soft focus with artificially intensified colors. A

14. See Steward and Garratt 1984, 30-31; Greig 1989, 186-87; Stein 1991, 29.

15. Sullivan 1986b, 12-13.

1960s stereo label appears in the corner, and in her right hand Phranc holds a glass of milk. That glass of milk, that flat-top haircut, and the title of the album, *I Enjoy Being a Girl*, create a wonderfully ironic tableau which lends itself to multiple readings. One can read irony in the fact that Phranc does not look at all like the "girl next door," but rather like the "boy next door." Or one can see Phranc's image as working against the nostagia typography and the feminine symbols that surround her. Can she, a butch lesbian, enjoy being the type of girl conjured by these symbols? To what exactly does the word 'Girl' refer? To the reality of the butch lesbian—the only 'Girl' pictured—or to the feminine constructs of her environment, such as the glass of milk or the flowers? Is not Phranc's image also a construction? The message of this album cover seems clear: what appears on the surface is illusory and artificial.

Does Phranc's music match her visual image which so perfectly expresses the butch-femme aesthetic? After her stint in punk rock, Phranc became, as she announces herself in live performances, an "all-American Jewish Lesbian Folk singer." In interviews Phranc has related that she opted for acoustic guitar accompaniment so that the lyrics of her songs might be better understood, and she cites various folksingers (Allen Sherman, Pete Seeger, Bob Dylan and Alix Dobkin) as influences.¹⁶ The contents of her first album, entitled *Folksinger*, seems to exaggerate or overstate her folk music allegiance with visual and musical cues. The back cover shows a photograph of Phranc in jeans and cowboy boots with a battered guitar slung over her shoulder, and the recording features not only a cover of Bob Dylan's "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll" but two clearly Dylan-inspired ballads: "Mary Hooley," a song about a female murder victim, and "Carolyn," a lesbian love song—as

16. See the following interviews and profiles: Phoenix, "A Phranc Interview," Deneuve 1 (May/June 1991): 16-19; Sullivan, *Melody Maker* 61 (22 February 1986): 28; ibid., (5 April 1986): 12-13; "Phranc's turn on the MM Psychoanalyt's Couch," ibid., (2 August 1986): 15.

well as a protest song ("Female Mudwrestling") which features audience participation. Phranc's music does not escape the musical aesthetics of radical feminism, nor do her lyrics offer new themes to women's music. Most of her songs either glorify women—particularly women athletes—or rail against the figures and circumstances of dominant culture, ranging from global to neighborhood-level injustices. However, many of Phranc's songs, as well as her clever album covers and gender-bending image, betray a use of irony which deserves some scrutiny. Two such songs, "Ballad of the Dumb Hairdresser" and "Handicapped," do indeed comply with the tradition and agenda of women's music, yet are surely comical. "Ballad of the Dumb Hairdresser" attacks female stereotypes:

The woman that I see
in the barbershop, on the corner of my street,
she's not stupid,
she is no dumb cookie.

CHORUS:

She's so much more than a dumb hairdresser,
No she is not a dumb hairdresser.

And just because she surrounds herself
with rat-tail combs,
you seem to think
that she has no intelligence.

CHORUS:

Well you're wrong, 'cause she's much more
than a dumb hairdresser.
She is, in fact, a real smart barber.

When I see all her bottles and jars and
buzzers and dryers,
it makes me realize that it's not easy to be
a good hairdresser
(spoken) it takes time and talent,

patience and skill,
and she must have nerves of steel...¹⁷

"Handicapped" stands within a long tradition of association between the women's movement and advocacy for the disabled:

Yes I know it is convenient,
but you know it's not your place,
so don't go park your car in that
handicapped parking space 'cause

you can drive your car
a couple of times around the lot,
and if you do your affirmations,
a spot might open up so
unless you are disabled,
go find your car another stable,
and don't go parking in that
handicapped parking space.

Yes I know it is convenient,
(spoken) but it's also inconsiderate,
and you could get a ticket
so don't park there,
come on, let's be fair
don't park in that handicapped
parking space. (spoken) Don't park there.¹⁸

Both songs use stereotypically blunt lyrics and realism to illuminate the ills of dominant culture. But these songs also communicate irony, with their surfeit of sincerity, awkward lyrics, surprisingly mundane subjects, and moralistic tone. These songs can easily be read as parodies of women's music, as could her emphatic "folk" persona and butch image be read as an

17. Phranc (Folkswim music 1985, recorded on *Folksinger*, Rhino Records Inc., RNLP 856).

18. Phranc, *Folksinger*.

ironic wedding of essentialism and constructionism. But are we laughing with Phranc or at Phranc? Are we all laughing? Phranc has managed to confuse both her critics and her audience. In 1985, Kris Kirk of *Melody Maker* panned Phranc for her awful lyrics and cloying sincerity only to rescind the comments after seeing Phranc in concert, playing to a mixed male and female crowd. Kirk writes "As I suspected, but didn't dare presume...[she] has her tongue firmly planted in her cheek." But Kirk goes on to say "some of her material still sounds like toe-curling stuff to me, particularly the glorification of pectorals and hamstrings that permeate many of her love-songs, plus her tendency to be a Singing Leaflet."¹⁹

Judging by this critic's response, it would seem that Phranc's irony depends in part upon the combined visual and verbal rendition of these songs. The gender and politics of the audience, as well as their expectations, however, play an equally important role in the communication of humor. Kris Kirk describes the audience as sparse, with "a number of beer-bellied, bellicose bozos at the bar who couldn't believe their eyes or ears" (*ibid.*). In October of 1990 I saw Phranc perform in San Francisco to an audience comprised mostly of lesbian women, who were probably familiar in some way with women's music in general and Phranc in particular. When performed, "The Ballad of the Dumb Hairdresser" elicited silence, not laughter; "Handicapped" received tentative chuckles from certain sectors of the audience. I was convinced, however, that these two songs were satirical. Why the confusion? To answer this fully one must address both audience expectations, and Phranc's particular brand of humor. In songs such as "Handicapped," Phranc directs her irony not toward dominant culture, as might be expected, but rather toward the genre of women's music itself, and the sacred cow of the women's movement—advocacy. Could Phranc's irony be read as a critical response to women's

19. See Kirk review in *Melody Maker* 60 (7 December 1985): 7; and Kirk, "Phranc, the Mean Fiddler," *ibid.*, 61 (5 April 1986): 16.

music? This interpretation is contradicted by her serious songs such as "Mary Hooley," and her "conversion" from punk rock to folk music, both of which show that Phranc has bought into the aesthetics and categorical imperatives of the very genre she parodies. Thus in the course of a concert, Phranc both bolsters and undermines the audience's expectations for and preconceptions of women's music. An audience expecting women's music expects to attend to the words, encased in a suitably unchallenging strophic musical setting. In songs such as "Handicapped" and "Dumb Hairdresser," Phranc asks her audience to listen more abstractly—to attend to the formal aspects of the words, and to be *critical*.

But even if Phranc's humor is received, it is not altogether liberating. For Phranc, "coming out" in the pop-music world meant becoming a folk singer—donning not only the long-time aural badge of women's music but also its essentialist ideology and self-imposed musical restrictions. Phranc's chief lyrical weapon is an in-your-face realism, a "phranc-ness," so to speak, which may or may not be played for laughs. However, she does not combine artifice with her irony; she does not engage the semiotic significance of music or words in order to play upon *their* underlying gender coding. In her conversion from Punk to Folk, Phranc retreated not only from 'masculine' music, but also implicitly condemned artifice. Thus her songs do not liberate women from their heterosexual and patriarchal context; Phranc does not construct an ideal fiction, but rather dresses the old essentialism in butch clothing.

In direct opposition to the legacy of essentialism and realism in women's music stands the male constructed fantasy of women and teenage love projected by the "girl groups" of the early 1960s. Girl groups, such as the Ronettes, were the instruments of male producers and contract song writers—the "group" had little or no creative freedom. Every song celebrated love by celebrating The Boy who was, as Greil Marcus explains, "the central mythic figure in girl-group rock." (1980, 160). A

decade after its zenith, the 60s girl-group "ideology" and sound re-appeared as objects of play in the music of the rock-group Blondie. Although they did not intend to create women's music, Blondie used camp and gender conflation in a way which resonates with the butch-femme aesthetic, and which may prove fruitful for a new conception of women's music.

In the mid-1970s, concurrent with the rise of women's music, Blondie emerged from the New York underground punk scene, which was greatly influenced by Andy Warhol through his involvement with the Velvet Underground. In her recent book on girl groups, Charlotte Greig compares Blondie to Warhol's Campbell soup cans—both were "immediately recognizable and accessible" (p. 183) with an emphasis on fun, but not lacking in social commentary. As the name Blondie implies, Deborah Harry, with her good looks and trademark platinum blonde hair, was the centerpiece for the band. Blondie presented a living pop icon of the objectified blonde—the girl who had more fun, and whom "gentlemen prefer." Her image stood as an ironic gesture of assimilation or conformity to the pop clichés of male desire, as Greig comments:

Debbie Harry provided a classic blonde sexbomb image with the vital ingredient that it was not quite perfect. There was a tackiness about her bleached blonde hair with its black roots, her cheap mini dresses, and her big sunglasses that was an ironic comment on the sex goddesses of the sixties....She was quite candid about her role as sex kitten in Blondie; when asked about it in a *Melody Maker* interview she replied, "Yes, it's a cheap trick, isn't it?" (p. 184)

As with Warhol's soup cans, Blondie's image and sound blurred together progressive art and blatant commercialism. In their first two albums the band mixed 1960s musical nostalgia with a campy, unsentimental edge. As Debra Rae Cohen (1979) has explained,

They pioneered a reverse-twist musical archivism that's antiromantic rather than escapist: instead of digging at intact nuggets of nostalgia,

Blondie went at pop tradition with a ball peen hammer...familiar fragments conjure up classic fantasies—a series of teen dreams and B movies...Harry modeled pop images, then ripped them to shreds. (p. 63)

In girl-group rock The Boy was irresistible—the *raison d'être* for the female subject and “her” music. In their camp of 60s rock, many of Blondie’s songs present The Boy as a blunderer, and love as a meaningless recreation in the eyes of a sassy and cool femme. The mock-surfer song, “Love at the Pier,” presents a female subject who, refusing to be objectified (and backed by a chorus of stuttering male voices), blames her infatuation on “the heat” or some intoxicating element other than The Boy himself. Love is reduced to “sharing a beer,” and is discarded in the end, along with The Boy.

We fell in love down at the pier,
 you were sunbathing, I was around
(round, round, round, round, hangin' around)
 soon we were sharing a beer,
 fell in love at the pier.

I'm not a sentimental slob, so don't think I'm queer.
 you've got something baby and it ain't just my rear.
(r r r rear, rear)
 Well maybe it's the hot pants, or maybe the heat
 or was it the sneakers you kicked off your feet...

I sat under my umbrella
 to keep my pearly skin,
 you change your oily body looking like fi—*(sh sh sh sh...)*.
 Soon I was sweatin' and I wanted to leave,
 you slip into the water from too much peace.

I saw you yellin', I just couldn't hear,
 so I screamed back at you, 'Honey, keep the beer!'
(bu bu bu beer bu bu bu beer...)

We never once made it, our outside love affair,
 too much oil and water, too much hot air.
 What a tragic end, two loves love's lost,
 we would have stood a chance had we met in the frost but:

(slower) We fell in love down at the pier,
 you were sunbathing, I was around.
 Now I go to beaches with my girl friend,
 no more love-splinters in my rear-end.²⁰

While "Love at the Pier" offers a liberating revision of the traditional power play between men and women, some of Blondie's songs go one step further in camping male-dominated rock. In the songs "Rifle Range" and "No Imagination," Deborah Harry—a self-styled femme—appropriates the male voice and the male point of view, or rather the point of view of The Boy. The song "Rifle Range," with blatant phallic imagery, combines the male subject-position with the characteristic sound of girl-group rock—two or three female voices backing a female solo:

BACKING VOCALS: SOLO:

(*At the rifle range*) I lost my heart
 (*At the rifle range*) I could not start
 (*At the rifle range*) She left me so hot
 (*At the rifle range*) I heard her shot...²¹

The female cues of the music and voice are combined with the male cues of the gendered pronoun "she" to produce a piece of aural gender conflation which renders the objectifying lyrics absurd. This song also presents another revision of the power play between men and women. Here the mythic figure is a girl, or rather a femme fatale—a woman with a "gun."

The song "No Imagination" offers a vision of The Boy grown up and looking for a young female one-night stand. The song's musical style has "grown up" as well. "No Imagination" features a texture which juxtaposes piano and synthesizer, the

20. Deborah Harry (Jiru Music Inc./Monster Island Music 1977), recorded on *Plastic Letters*, Chrysalis Records Inc., VK 41166/DIDX1446.

21. Chris Stein and Ronnie Toast (Jiru Music Inc./Monster Island Music 1976), recorded on *Blondie*, Chrysalis Records Inc., CHR 1165.

latter used for ominous and pompous interjections, recalling the bombastic, keyboard-heavy art-rock bands of the 70s. Despite the absence of gendered pronouns, the rhetoric of the text—aggressive, patronizing, and egotistical—is identifiably masculine within the context of rock and roll.

Eyes that tell me baby,
you don't need no invitation.
Let me smoke another cigarette
before I make a move.

I can see me in the morning
losing my directions,
deep inside my overcoat,
looking for the door.

I don't want to stay with you,
I just want to play with you.
One sweet abbreviation
sleeping like the dead.
You think you're pretty,
well so do I.
You came to me, but passion lies.
Got no imagination to clutter up my head.

Eyes that mirror innocence,
and cannot sense the changes.
Let's have another drink, dear,
before we get derailed.

I can see me in the morning
avoiding your detection
slowly down the staircase
looking for the door...²²

The performance of this text by a woman—especially a woman who reflects the pop clichés of male desire—produces

22. Jimi Destri (Jiru Music Inc./ Monster Island Music 1977), recorded on *Plastic Letters*, Chrysalis Records Inc., VK 41166/DIDX1446.

a critique of the primitive egocentrism found, for example, in songs by the Rolling Stones; the chorus line: "Got no imagination to clutter up my head" serves to punctuate the irony. The effective stratagem of appropriating the male voice has never been pursued by women's music artists, given the prohibitive essentialism that has informed the genre.

In 1978 Blondie topped the charts and achieved mass appeal as a result of their Warholian co-optation and ambiguous parody/exploitation of the current musical trends, in this case disco. Debra Rae Cohen writes,

With each LP, Blondie has updated their musical mosaic by assimilating another chunk of pop history...The repackaging and refinement of last year's [album] *Parallel Lines* helped reduce Blondie's we-know-better-now perspective from the larger than-life campiness of their early work to a subtler, eyebrow irony: a level of detachment perfectly calculated to let the group play it both ways with a discoified song like "Heart of Glass." (1979, 63)

"Heart of Glass" combined the latest craze for synthesized musical effects and slick production with a wispy, emotionless vocal and subtly subversive lyrics about gullibility and distrust.

Once had a love
and it was a gas,
soon turned out had a heart of glass.
Seemed like the real thing
only to find,
mucho mistrust
Love's gone behind.

Lost inside, adorable illusion and I cannot hide
I'm the one you're using,
please don't push me aside,
we coulda made it cruising, yeah...

Once had a love
and it was a gas,
soon turned out to be a pain in the ass

seemed like the real thing
 but I was so blind
 mucho mistrust
 Love's gone behind.²³

With "Heart of Glass" Blondie donned the fashionable clothes of disco, and so appeared to be operating from inside the ideology of the dominant culture. However, the emotionless vocals and lyrics (which beg to be read as a comment on the disco craze itself) betray, to paraphrase Sue-Ellen Case, a point of view or perception constructed from outside dominant culture. Thus even Blondie's most popular song can be regarded as a "field of symbols" or a "camp space of irony and wit" (Case 1989, 298) which seduces or frustrates the attentive listener by placing into question the artist's sincerity (read: authenticity). "Heart of Glass" is not just a disco song; it is an artificial disco song. As with "Love at the Pier," "Rifle Range," and "No Imagination," musical style, the female voice, clichéd narratives of love, and male desire are all reduced to symbols which become objects of artifice and play.²⁴ In what could be construed as a summarizing act of camp and gender conflation, Blondie's last tour in 1982 featured as an encore a cover of the Rolling Stones' song "Start Me Up"—a virtual celebration of female objectification and uncontrollable erections. Deborah

23. Deborah Harry and Chris Stein (Rare Blue music, Inc./ Monster Island Music 1978, recorded on *Parallel Lines*, Chrysalis Records Inc., CHE192).

24. Two things provide further support for my reading of "Heart of Glass" as an artificial disco song. The original title given to "Heart of Glass" was "The Disco Song" (Bangs 1980, 430) which points out the group's conscious affecting of that musical idiom; and the video accompanying "Heart of Glass" shows the group "playing" the song in a vacant disco with Deborah Harry swaying awkwardly to the music. At one point the ubiquitous mirrored ball appears in the hands of one band member, and is treated as a functional mirror by another who fixes his hair from his fractured reflection. Thus the very symbol of the glamourous disco nightlife is literally taken down and reduced to its ordinary components (*Best of Blondie*, Polygram videos 1981, VHS 081-411-3).

Harry, clad in a skin-tight outfit, performed the words with occasional smirks, shrugging shoulders, and raised eyebrows:

If you start me up, if you start me up I'll never stop.
I'm runnin' hot, you got me steaming so I'll blow my top.
You make a grown man cry...you make a dead man come...²⁵

One may well ask whether Blondie's camp and semiotic play is received, and who receives it. Female critics such as Debra Rae Cohen and Charlotte Greig appreciate Blondie's sly commentary, but, in contrast, male critic Lester Bangs, in his book *Blondie* (1980), criticizes and bemoans Deborah Harry's detached vocal style and artifice, revealing in the process his own intimidation, and nostalgia for the girl-group "ideology," sparked by Blondie's seductive evocation yet frustrating resistance to that ideology. In a chapter entitled "On the Merits of Sexual Repression" he writes:

Listening to the Shangri-La's sides, you might find yourself laughing and crying at the same time. And the Spector stuff...the *urgency* [italics original] in those girl's voices spelled pure sex, distillate of every scene between a boy and a girl...all that frustration got channeled into rock...you wouldn't dare line one of [Blondie's] cuts up next to a Spectator or Shangri-La's production because it would sound downright pallid...the music seems to have no emotions in it, and what emotions do surface occasionally...are invariably almost immediately gutted by futilades of irony, sarcasm, camp... (p. 70)

The reception and appreciation of Blondie's humor does not simply follow lines of gender, however. Indeed, the majority of Blondie's audience, especially at the height of the group's popularity, probably did not pay much heed to the lyrics or to their delivery. This does not point out a failure of the music which, unlike women's music, achieved substantial commercial success, but rather points out a failure of the audience to read

25. M. Jagger and K. Richards (transcribed from *Blondie Live!*, MCA Home Video Inc., 1984, VHS video tape).

beyond the surface assimilation which Blondie's image and music fashioned—to read the entire musical, textual, and visual presentation. Thus the humor of Blondie is lost on a mainstream audience, just as Phranc's humor is lost on most feminists. But feminists are exactly the audience who should be attending to the semiotic play in "Love and the Pier," "No Imagination," "Rifle Range" and "Heart of Glass." Part of the challenge and seduction for feminist listeners and critics must be in paying attention to and decoding the play of musical, textual and visual stimuli which any professional musician presents, regardless of the genre.

The "women's music" record bins, consistently appended to the folk music section in record stores, not only illustrate the entrenchment of a certain musical style, but also the hegemony of the musical categories promoted by the record industry which categorizes music in terms of industry standards and target audiences. The categories of music defined and provided to the public by the recording industry are a powerful commercial tool but also a segregating device. It is just this ideology of rigid categories which the butch-femme aesthetic challenges.

In this study, I hope to have provoked feminists into examining the music which purportedly expresses their ideals and which the recording industry promotes as *their* music. The music of Blondie, as the butch-femme aesthetic advocates, forms a repertory in which the female performer displays her freedom to use a "multiplicity of roles and narratives"—both female and male—thus demonstrating a point of view constructed from outside divisive ideology of the dominant culture. Women's music, however, currently refers to a genre with prescribed instrumentation, subject matter, and point of view which calls attention to sexual differences and women's second-class status within the patriarchy, thus perpetuating the very ideology which oppresses women. I propose to redefine "women's music" as a body of music, selected from diverse genres and regardless of the performers' explicit political intentions. Redefining women's music in such a way would open the field to

unusual and unlikely candidates, and encourage critical thought and dialogue in order to evaluate the artistic and ideological merit of a performer. The butch-femme aesthetic provides a conceptual basis for examining provocative new artists such as Madonna, k.d. lang, and underrated older artists such as Grace Jones. Does Madonna create an ideal fiction with her aggressive sexuality, or does she only present a model for how to succeed within dominant culture by catering to the male gaze? To what extent does Madonna engage musical style in her presentation of gender? What about gender conflation in the image and music of Grace Jones? k.d. lang? The challenge will be to find compositions which engage music, text, and image equally in a play of symbols, thus freeing women from the patriarchal constraints of realism, and demonstrating the multifarious interpretations of gender and gender roles available to all women who seek ideological change.

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