

Bad Reputation: Joan Jett and Questions of Canon

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this project is to identify and examine the reasons for which American singer, songwriter, and guitarist Joan Jett has been widely excluded from critical musicological study and discussion. The overall aim is to create a discourse around the problems of canonizing popular music and the subsequent marginalization of artists who do not conform to the standard identity associated with a particular genre. The thesis focuses on three songs from Jett's career as the foundation for in depth analysis of her musical contributions and career as well as discussions about gender and authenticity in the music industry to establish Jett's musical credibility and historical relevance in popular music studies.

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

In *Gender and the Musical Canon*, Marcia J. Citron argues, “Which music is deemed canonic says a great deal about the image a society has of itself.”¹ Canons are created in many fields to denote and even define a particular era, style, or genre, and identify the dominant characteristics of that group by isolating common themes or ideologies. In music, the canon has been heavily applied to every commonly studied era of music to facilitate discussion and learning in an academic setting; from early in their education Musicology students are all taught that the Baroque era is typified by Bach, and the Classical era is embodied by Mozart. For little more than the sake of brevity, a musical canon enables one to form a precise and succinct overview of what defines the artists of any given genre, formed by analysis of a carefully selected group of exemplary individuals.

Joseph Kerman articulates a number of arguments against the idea of canon, focusing on the idea of the canon as an un-musical concept, for the musician thinks in terms of a repertory rather than a canon. He explains, “Repertories are determined by performers, canons by critics – who are by preference musicians, but by definition literary men or at least effective writers about music.”² A historical musical canon objectifies music, and removes it from the realm of activity and process through creating a written record. It is the academic objectification of music, drawing intellectual boundaries around an expression-based medium. The

¹ Citron, Marcia J. *Gender and the Musical Canon*. (USA: First Illinois, 2000): 3

² Kerman, Joseph. “A Few Canonic Variations.” *Write All These Down: Essays on Music*. (California: University of California Press, 1994): 37

focus is then removed from the music itself, and is placed on any number of external societal factors.

The canon acts as a narrative, an informative account that instills an identity in an era or genre for academic analysis and for future generations. In consulting the two quotes around which this discussion is focused, one can conclude that the musical canon that defines any given society is not chosen by the performers of music or even necessarily those who appreciate the music – it is determined by a select group of intellectuals, and propagated by editors of publications, who have been granted the authority to define the symbolic characteristics of a society, as demonstrated by artists' expressions.

In addition to the problematic practice of leaving a generation's musical legacy in the hands of a select group of individuals, however qualified they may or may not be, comes the problematic nature of canonizing genres and causing the subsequent marginalization and exclusion of some artists. Where the aim of a canon is to identify artists whose work most aptly demonstrates the common characteristics of a set genre or era, many artists who arguably deserve to represent their generation can be ostracized from historical accounts if their musical product does not necessarily embody the spirit and ideology that a small group of intellectuals decided should be preserved for and promoted to future generations.

This is the issue that will be explored through this paper by exploring the problematic nature of the canon explicitly as it applies to popular music genres of the past fifty years. Where more classical canons focus on the music produced during a given time period or stylistic era, popular music has been divided into a

number of genres within each time period as there was not a singular musical voice that could represent any given culture as has been retroactively applied to the previous eras. As recording technology advanced, more genres became well known and sub-genres developed as individuals had access to both produce and listen to more music than ever before, without the need for long-distance travel.

Although the genre-based canon allows for a more varied representation of a generation, it may arguably amplify the problem of marginalization. If an artist can be placed in a canon in an exemplary way, they will be examined and remembered for their contribution to music through the canon, whether it is pop music, rock and roll, country, or R&B among many others. When dealing with so many categories for classification, there are bound to be artists who experiment and blur the theoretical lines created by a canon. Instead of being celebrated for ingenuity or innovation, many of these artists risk becoming lost in historical accounts merely because they may not fit the ideal definition of a strictly determined genre.

For the purpose of this argument, my focus will be on the pop, rock, and punk music canons from the mid-1970s until present day, using female singer, songwriter, and guitarist Joan Jett as a prime example of the historical marginalization created by canonizing popular music.

Though punk music is commonly seen as opposition to rock and roll and its commercial and elitist reputation, many punk musicians cite classic and early rock as a main influence on the musical structure. In "Dead Kennedys and Black Flags" Crispin Sartwell describes punk as "neoclassical rock"³ in that it strips away the

³ Sartwell, Crispin. "Dead Kennedys and Black Flags." *Political Aesthetics*. (USA: Cornell University

polished maturity and seriousness found in contemporary rock music with the popularity of bands like Pink Floyd or the Eagles and returns to the sound of early works by The Rolling Stones. The aim was not for virtuosity or greatness, it was to create the sound of urgency with basic rock and blues progressions by playing with pure unadulterated emotion and importance. Punk relies on accessibility, and aimed to create a community where anybody could be a musician if they had something to say, sing, or scream, and punk eschewed ideas of professionalism in favour of amateurism as it was the expression that mattered most. Punks formed communities and focused on autonomy, where the alternative was undoubtedly commercial and traditional. Dick Hebdige identified punk as a subculture, a youth movement born out of opposition to the established social, political, and economic structures and a dissatisfied working class.⁴ The intention of these disenchanted youth was to create an environment that welcomed the unwelcome and accepted anybody who felt marginalized by mainstream society. The sound of the music was rough, aggressive, and fast, and the dominant image became a young white male, in tattered and deconstructed clothing with offensive hair, piercings, and tattoos that accompanied a foul mouth.

The rock canon also focuses on the white male as the dominant purveyor of the form, but traditionally the heroes of rock music were made by their accompanying personal stories of struggle and triumph. A rock musician needed to earn his – and occasionally her – spot in rock history through demonstrations of authenticity to endear them to the fans and create a persona with which any fan can

Press, 2010): 105

⁴ Hebdige, Dick. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. (USA: Routledge, 1979)

identify. Though rock music is tightly bound to consumer culture, a true rock star, as seen through the canon, seeks liberation from the commercialism and places the most importance on the music itself. Their carefully constructed or propagated biographies and personae greatly affect their reception as authentic or inauthentic, and create a foundation upon which their music can be evaluated. On the other side of the rock canon are those who embrace and celebrate the music's role as a sexual liberator, who create music for enjoyment and to push social boundaries on matters of sex and sexuality through music and performers. Theodore Gracyk identifies this sexual liberation as being founded in sexist intentions, arguing, "Most rock reinforces the most repressive gender roles."⁵ He also explains that rock music, unlike punk music, has generally developed in tandem with mainstream culture rather than against it, perhaps indicating the rock canon's true potential for really reflecting society through selected works.

The pop music genre is entirely different from rock and punk, as the nature of the music itself eliminates the potential identification of a canon. Pop music has garnered a reputation as being overly polished, manufactured, inauthentic, and unworthy of serious attention or discussion. Performers in pop music are generally identified as singers, and are rarely afforded the title of musician. It is commonly viewed as having been fabricated for the masses to enjoy but without any real emotion or message, and many musicians who attempt to enter the rock genre but aren't taken seriously are relegated to the pop sphere. Simon Frith identifies pop music as aimed at teenagers and made to be instant hits in contrast to rock music,

⁵ Gracyk, Theodore. "Sign O' the Times: Ideology and Aesthetics." *Rhythm and Noise: An Aesthetics of Rock* (USA: Duke University Press, 1996): 210

which is made for adults and to be appreciated. He explains that pop is “...what’s left when all the other forms of popular music are stripped away... From this perspective pop is defined as much by what it isn’t as by what it is.”⁶ The music is meant to be easily digestible and ephemeral because it is created to appeal to particular generational demographics without the intention of created a lasting musical work. Because punk and rock are largely ‘boys clubs’ in music, many women are by default labeled as pop as they aren’t commonly granted acceptance as more serious musicians, in part because there is no pop music canon for them to be placed in for future generations to study. This is not to say that some pop musicians aren’t granted longevity in their careers or aren’t retrospectively studied for their contributions, but that there is no established group of performers or songs that are established as representative of the genre.

Gender is a constant topic of discussion in musicology and in music journalism, as few performers with eccentric or different personas have been able to truly separate themselves and their music from standard conceptions of appropriate gender performance. Women in male-dominated genres are first and foremost identified as women rather than musicians, and whether it is to celebrate their achievements in an unconventional genre or to sympathize with their struggles, it ultimately undermines their credibility. It seems nearly impossible to provide an in-depth discussion of a woman in music without any analysis of her gender performance or mention of adversity she has faced due at least in part to her gender. Similarly, men who perform pop songs or in genres dominated by feminine

⁶ Frith, Simon. “Pop Music” *Taking Popular Music Seriously*. (USA: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2007): 95

performers, find that their masculinity is called into question and scrutinized, and their musical contributions largely downplayed or ignored. Whether an artist's marginalization from any musical canon is based solely on their gender or on other aspects of their performance, an analysis of gender often lends critical insight into understanding and evaluating their music and career.

Joan Jett's presence in musicological discussion is minute at best. She is seldom discussed in scholarly terms, and the number of published texts dedicated to analyzing her career in depth could easily be counted on one hand. In the majority of the published works I have consulted while researching this topic, Jett is mentioned by name but without much explanation of her importance, though the mention alone would indicate some level of relevance. Gillian G. Gaar's book *She's a Rebel: The History of Women in Rock & Roll* features a photo of Jett dominating the cover, but only includes a brief overview of her career without any analysis of her importance.⁷ Marion Leonard's *Gender in the Music Industry* limits the discussion of Joan Jett to a portion of a paragraph, discussing only her relatively unique performance of gender as basis for expansion of the discussion of live performance.⁸ Simon Reynolds' *The Sex Revolts: Gender, Rebellion, and Rock 'n' Roll* also limits the discussion of Jett's career to her performance on gender.⁹ Theodore Gracyk's *I Wanna Be Me: Rock Music and the Politics of Identity* goes slightly further and mentions her attempt to be taken seriously as a musician,¹⁰ her unique identity as a

⁷ Gaar, Gillian G. *She's a Rebel: The History of Women in Rock & Roll* (New York: Seal Press, 2002)

⁸ Leonard, Marion. *Gender in the Music Industry* (USA: Ashgate, 2007)

⁹ Reynolds, Simon and Joy Press. *The Sex Revolts: Gender, Rebellion, and Rock 'n' Roll* (USA: Harvard University Press, 1996)

¹⁰ Gracyk, Theodore. *I Wanna Be Me: Rock Music and the Politics of Identity*. (USA: Temple University

female guitarist rather than just as a singer,¹¹ and how her career has exposed the inaccuracy of common conceptions of musical creativity in rock being exclusive to men.¹² She is important enough in musical history to be mentioned, yet there is no established study that focuses on her contributions. In some bizarre twist of analytical fate, one of rock and punk's most famous and iconic female images is dismissed – her dues, rather than defining her and cementing her place in those realms, were paid to little end regarding her legitimacy. Her career is worthy of scholarly discussion, and that the problematic nature of the canon in popular music is part of the story of her exclusion.

In this paper, I will examine Joan Jett's career beginning with her first successful single as a solo artist, 1981's "I Love Rock 'n Roll" and work through to her 1999 album *Fetish*. In examining several distinct periods in her musical life, I intend to bring critical awareness to the many aspects of her career that should place her in popular music canons, and highlight the reasons she has been excluded from those same canons. Jett's lack of adherence to standard genre definitions allowed her to create a musical legacy that has stood the test of time and evolved to suit her developing musical, personal, and political maturity without abandoning her roots or alienating her dedicated fan base.

Press, 2001): 75

¹¹ Ibid 172

¹² Ibid 205

CHAPTER 2 "I LOVE ROCK 'N ROLL"

Early Career

Joan Jett was born Joan Marie Larkin in 1960 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. An early love of music led Joan to begin playing the clarinet in school, but by the age of 12 she realized that traditional music education didn't resonate with her, as she greatly disliked reading sheet music, and preferred to learn by ear. She abandoned the clarinet and began to develop her appreciation for rock and roll music through bands like Led Zeppelin and Black Sabbath, receiving her first electric guitar as a Christmas gift from her parents at the age of 13. After meeting great resistance from a guitar teacher regarding her request to learn rock and roll music, she walked out of that first guitar lesson and never returned to formal music instruction. She purchased a chord book, and began teaching herself by listening to records and learning the progressions by ear.¹³

In 1974 Jett's family relocated to Los Angeles where she became a regular attendee at a number of under-age clubs like Rodney's English Disco on the sunset strip. It was here that Jett began to hone her own personal style after being introduced to and becoming familiar with the English glitter and glam rock scene through musicians like David Bowie and Suzi Quatro. Through the club scene she was introduced to Kim Fowley, a local manager and producer who would help her in her goal of forming an all-girl band, and in 1975 The Runaways were formed.

The Runaways began creating music at a time when they could capitalize on the rising popularity of punk music and culture. The punk movement was largely

¹³ Jett, Joan and Todd Oldham. *Joan Jett*. (USA: Ammo Books, 2010): Chapter 1-2

built by socially dissatisfied youth who performed and supported music driven by emotion rather than proficiency or more importantly, professionalism. Punk music was raw and aggressive and rebelled against the music that preceded it, making it an ideal outlet for youth expression as adolescents began to rebel against the conformity idealized by their parents. The Runaways were a perfect fit for the punk mold, as their name alone implied rebellion, and their young ages enabled them to authentically propagate the messages of punk while performing without any allusion to corporate or commercial professionalism.

Jett and Fowley wrote many songs together for the band, which consisted of three other girls as young as Jett herself, and Fowley garnered himself quite the reputation as a Svengali with a number of acts he managed. The Runaways' singer Cherie Curie has publicly identified him as controlling, manipulative, and abusive, while Jett has consistently stood beside him and acknowledges him as playing a pivotal role in her career.

Whether or not Kim Fowley abused and manipulated the young girls is clearly arguable, but his manipulation of the image of the band is undeniable. He relied heavily on the girls' gender as a base for marketing them, playing up the then-shocking idea of an all-girl band that played hard rock like the men who dominated the rock industry. The band was given little attention from critics and faced backlash from a number of men in the industry who attended their shows. They were considered jailbait, a term attributed to girls under the age of consent, for their sexualized and aggressive performances at such a young age.

In the 1970s, sexualizing young teenage girls was not only less objectionable than today, but it was also a relatively common theme in popular culture. The sexual revolution of the 1960s encouraged women to take control over their sexuality, to be more aware of their physical selves, and explore sex as pleasurable rather than strictly reproductive. This sexual liberation also applied to young women, barely past puberty. Young women were not only sexually available to (and perhaps exploited by) male rock stars; they were often the subject of infatuation and desire in songs. In 1968 Van Morrison sang “Nobody stops me from loving you baby, so young and bold, sixteen years old” in “Cypress Avenue,” Chuck Berry sings that he “Got my eye on a little girl”¹⁴ in his song “Almost Grown” on the soundtrack for 1973’s *American Graffiti*, 1978 saw the Beach Boys sing “Hey little tomboy, sit here on my lap” in the song “Hey Little Tomboy”¹⁵, and in 1980 Benny Mardones sang “She’s just sixteen years old, leave her alone, they say.”¹⁶ Both KISS and Ringo Starr romanticized sixteen-year-old girls in their own songs, and perhaps not so coincidentally, sixteen was the age of most of the girls in the *Runaways* when they began to gain mainstream recognition.

Matthew Waites identifies the age of sixteen as historically, psychologically, and legally pivotal in the history of sexual consent. Since the late nineteenth century, sixteen has been recognized as the age at which female innocence and childhood ends and a female is recognized as a woman, based largely on physical and physiological maturation. In the 1970s, the Royal College of Psychiatrists in

¹⁴ Berry, Chuck. “Almost Grown.” *41 Original Hits from the Soundtrack of American Graffiti*. MCA, 1993. CD

¹⁵ Beach Boys, The. “Hey Little Tomboy.” *M.I.U. Album* (Reissued). Capitol, 2000. CD

¹⁶ Mardones, Benny. “Into the night.” *Benny Mardones*. Curb Special Markets, 1990. CD

association with the British Medical Association argued that at the age of sixteen an adolescent was psychologically mature and competent to make decisions. This decision lent medical support to an age already culturally identified as the age of maturity, which aided in creating the legal age of sexual consent for a female as it was widely recognized in Western society.¹⁷

The age of sixteen could therefore be identified as and as an age of cultural fascination because it represents the merging of innocence and maturity. It is an age when young women are still impressionable and arguably pure, unhardened by years of romantic, professional, and social struggles, but when they are also expected to take control over their sexuality and be responsible for their own decisions.

In film, the 1970s saw many productions that added a visual element to the story of seducing young women, in many cases creating films that defy socially adopted standards of what is an acceptable way to perceive girls. Stanley Kubrick directed *Lolita* in 1962, telling the story of a middle-aged professor who becomes infatuated with a fourteen-year-old girl. In 1976's *Taxi Driver* a young Jodie Foster played a preteen prostitute. In 1978, Brooke Shields portrayed a young girl living in a brothel at the age of twelve in *Pretty Baby*, and was featured in an accompanying cover story in *Playboy* magazine declaring the film to be the naughtiest of the year. In both, she appeared nude in an obviously sexual manner, with no illusion of innocence.¹⁸

¹⁷ Waites, Matthew. "The Age of Consent and Sexual Consent." *Making Sense of Sexual Consent*. Ed. Mark Cowling and Paul Reynolds. (USA: Ashgate, 2004): 79

¹⁸ Hatch, Kristen. "Regulating Images of Adolescent Girls." *Sugar, Spice, and Everything Nice: Cinemas*

According to Kristen Hatch in her chapter “Regulating Images of Adolescent Girls,” many blamed the sexual revolution and women’s liberation for the increase in sexualized young girls, claiming that as women became more independent and aggressive, men turned to young girls to regain their control in sexual relationships. Kubrick’s 1962 adaptation of *Lolita* was socially more acceptable than Lyne’s because the sexual acts were subliminal and not openly or graphically shown on screen where Lyne consciously showed the acts. Though the material was the same, Kubrick’s became quite popular while Lyne’s was widely banned and deemed too controversial to be marketed or profitable. Even young girls were held responsible for acting precocious and presenting themselves sexually, and if anything the blame was placed on their upbringing rather than the older men preying on them.¹⁹

It was not only in mediated popular culture that young girls became objects of sexual desire. In 1970, Peter Yarrow of the band Peter, Paul and Mary was accused of, and pled guilty to, charges of taking advantage of a fourteen-year-old-girl.²⁰ Led Zeppelin’s Jimmy Page has been exposed for having a sexual relationship with fourteen-year-old Lori Maddox in the 1970s, whom he kept hidden from public view to avoid statutory rape charges.²¹ Perhaps most famously, director Roman

of Girlhood. Ed Frances Gateward and Murray Pomerance. (Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 2002)

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Orr, Floyd. *Timeline of America: Sound Bytes from the Consumer Culture*. (USA: IUniverse, 2006): 196

²¹ Hardeman, Simon. “Led Zeppelin: There Was a Whole Lotta Love on Tour.” *The Independent* (December 7, 2007) Available online at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment>

Polanski permanently fled from the USA in 1977 after he confessed to having a sexual encounter with a thirteen-year-old girl.²²

This abundance of mediated representations of young women and girls as sexual objects, or at the very least as being sexually available for men, promoted a cultural understanding of young women as being appropriate outlets for sexual expression in lieu of the perhaps “harder to get” age-appropriate women who were embracing feminism and women’s liberation. This perception was encouraged in the industry by the rise of the groupie in the late 1960s. The groupie, as discussed in Lisa Rhodes’ “The Birth of the Groupie,” is a woman, or more commonly a member of a group of women, who makes herself physically available to any number of desirable male musicians. Many of these women are viewed as sexually aggressive and open to experimentation, and are by reputation quite promiscuous. Rhodes explains that many of these women pride themselves on the number and caliber of musicians they have been physical with, while many would seek to begin their sexual experimentation by losing their virginity to rock stars. These groupies are as sexually aggressive and trophy-minded as many men, only they are often regarded as disposable and cheap for their conquests, where men would garner flattering “playboy” reputations for their high number of sexual partners.²³

There was not a lot of room for sexually aggressive women in the music industry in the 1970s, so they were largely relegated to the realm of the groupie, firmly placed in music’s seedy underground. To understand the backlash against the

²² Smith, Merrill D. (Ed.) “Celebrity Rapists.” *Encyclopedia of Rape* (USA: Greenwood Press, 2004): 37

²³ Rhodes, Lisa. “The Birth of the Groupie.” *Electric Ladyland: Women and Rock Culture*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005)

Runaways, an understanding of 1970s rock culture and of mediated representations of sexual young girls can't be ignored. Kim Fowley marketed these young women as rebels, always placing emphasis on their young age while drawing attention to their strong personae. In a 1977 interview, he identified their age as the determining factor in their sex appeal, explaining, "When we play we get the wankers on one side of the stage, and the guys who love guitar on the other side. I mean, a lot of people want to screw the Runaways, and they're ready to do the dog... They are ready to do the dog if the right guy walks by!"²⁴ Their age, in this case, was not a detriment to their appeal and availability, it meant quite the opposite as Fowley explained their age as meaning they weren't tied to a husband and were therefore open to any intimate encounters. The media took their cue and continued to identify the Runaways as young and sexual, taking clues from their songs like "Cherry Bomb" and "School Days." The band members did not hide their young ages, and, unsurprisingly given the cultural climate of the 1970s, instead of being recognized for their efforts in creating aggressive rock music such an unlikely group of rockers was given little respect from the audience they aimed to please.

Steve Waksman argues that the age of the girls was central to the way they were marketed, with a target audience that might potentially be more excited by the idea of a group of girls alone rather than by a group of girls who could play rock music. He also identifies it as being an important factor in evaluating their authenticity, as they truly were as young as they were promoted to be.²⁵

²⁴ Robertson, Sandy. "Runaways: A Primer for the New Runaways." *Sounds*. (September 10, 1977)

²⁵ Waksman, Steve. *This Ain't the Summer of Love: Conflict and Crossover in Heavy Metal*. (California: University of California Press, 2009): 108

In an interview with the Runaways, Chris Salewicz asked the girls if they were involved in the groupie scene, explaining that even he, as a fan, was led to believe that the girls were groupies before musicians.²⁶ Though critics did not take the music very seriously, the band always spoke of their music as being the most important aspect of their group. They tried to market their music to hard rock audiences, composed mostly of men who were used to listening to rock music by other men and to being able to personally identify with the subject matter and performer. As a result, they were perceived by male audiences more as an all-girl band gimmick than as a serious musical act, and were recognized more for their lingerie-inspired stage costumes.

The Runaways' fan base mirrored them, being made up largely of young females. Where men did not take them seriously, young women could identify with their lyrics and look to them as young powerful girls who were making it in the music industry. Critically, the Runaways were regarded even less seriously as a rock act, because females were not typical fans of rock music, but were more typical of pop music. Their biggest success was in Japan, and they were moderately successful in the UK, with a relatively small following in North America. The lack of a male fan base that appreciated them for their music rather than their sexualized image gave them little credibility in the rock community despite their struggle to be taken seriously with their rock music, as they learned to take the verbal abuse and dodge the items thrown at them by aggressive crowds. In a review of one of their concerts, music journalist Phil Sutcliffe explains:

²⁶ Salewicz, Chris. "The Runaways: And I wonder... I Wah Wah Wah Wah Wonder..." *NME* (July 24, 1976)

Heavy music pulls blokes. When the musicians are, as usual, male they are a macho mirror to their fans who worship them like a corporate Narcissus ogling himself. But when the musicians are female, it's no mirror, it's the real thing, the challenge of a relationship rather than a solo jerk-off – so the Runaways don't get any shadow boxing, they are in for the championship every time they go on stage.²⁷

Sutcliffe's observation contextualizes the battle fought by the Runaways in a male-dominated industry, emphasizing their inability to get by on laurels or simply go through the motions of rock stardom based on their gender.

After the Runaways disbanded, the members went their separate ways and began their own careers. Jett's career was the most successful, thanks to her unwavering commitment to her music and her determined attitude. For critics and music industry insiders, however, the "girl band" foundation for Jett's career would negatively shape opinion on her musical contributions, as many would look to her time in the Runaways as a reason to exclude her from serious consideration as a musician.

Although her time with the Runaways has perhaps stood as a detriment to her credibility as a serious rock musician, Jett has never tried to distance herself from her musical beginnings. She still publicly defends the Runaways as being a great band, and one solely focused on creating music despite the commercially constructed manner in which they were promoted. Throughout her solo career that followed the demise of the Runaways, Jett maintained the persona she established

²⁷ Sutcliffe, Phil. "The Runaways: Newcastle City Hall." *Sounds* (November 19, 1977) available at <http://www.rocksbackpages.com/article.html?ArticleID=8775>

within the group, keeping her physical appearance and performance style consistent from the very beginning of her career, lending strongly to her credibility as an authentic performer. Where many contemporary performers who begin their careers in similar fashions, with less “respectable” beginnings more associated with pop music, try to distance themselves from their established personae to be taken more seriously, Jett has appeared consistent to her fans, looking the same at age 50 as she did at 15.

“I Love Rock ‘n Roll” Background

Joan Jett’s solo career began after her work with the Runaways, and her first foray into music as a headliner was with Joan Jett and the Blackhearts with their single “I Love Rock ‘n Roll” in 1981. In an attempt to distance herself from her Runaways persona, Jett placed an ad looking for male band members to complete her musical lineup, and the three men she found became the Blackhearts. After being turned away by a multitude of record companies, Jett enlisted the financial and professional aid of songwriting partner Kenny Laguna and formed her own record label, Blackheart Records, from which she released the band’s self-titled debut album. Boardwalk records signed Joan Jett and the Blackhearts, and re-released the independent album under the title *Bad Reputation* after it garnered local attention through live performances and Jett independently selling copies of the recording they financed themselves. Their first recording for the label was the album *I Love Rock ‘n Roll*, named for the single of the same name, and it put Joan Jett and the Blackhearts on the popular music charts.

“I Love Rock ‘n Roll” was written by Alan Merrill and Jake Hooker²⁸ and was originally performed by the London-based band The Arrows in 1975. While on tour with the Runaways in the UK, Jett was exposed to the song while watching The Arrows perform on a local television show. The Arrows never achieved mainstream success in the USA, where the song is more strongly associated with Joan Jett. The version performed by The Arrows embodies the spirit of many rock and roll songs, as it tells the story of a man pursuing a young woman in a bar as he celebrates his love for the rock music being played and seduces her, presumably with the help of the music. Where rock is traditionally a masculine genre, many rock songs are intended to resonate with masculine desires and activities, sexual conquest often coming at the top of that list. Therefore, hearing this song performed by a man is truly representative of standard rock songs.

Jett originally recorded this song with ex-Sex Pistols Steve Jones and Paul Cook, after Jett set out to work with them once their bands had broken up. Jett has frequently professed her appreciation for the Sex Pistols’ style of punk music and performance and calls herself a fan; she was often photographed wearing a Sex Pistols t-shirt in publicity for the Runaways. The trio recorded three songs together in total, and “You Don’t Own Me” and “Don’t Abuse Me,” the other two songs, were featured on both Jett’s original self-titled independent release, and the 1981 re-release, where Cook and Jones were also credited as producers. After the formation of the Blackhearts, Jett and Laguna reclaimed the rights to her collaborative

²⁸ Jett, Joan. Liner Notes from *I Love Rock ‘n Roll*, Joan Jett and the Blackhearts. Blackheart Records, 2004. CD

recordings with Jones and Cook, and recorded them again with the new band to create the version of "I Love Rock 'n Roll" that would top the charts.

The Sex Pistols are major figures of the punk canon, and Jett's collaboration with this duo from the band is an impressive feat for a woman largely dismissed as a gimmick and little more than a pop act. The Pistols are historical figureheads of the punk movement, who publicly heralded the anarchic message of their music, and stand as the definitive persona of punk as it is recognized in popular music history. Their aggressive introduction into the music scene heralded the rise and strength of the punk music movement, and their demise coincides in many historical accounts with the death of punk music. Led by the dynamic personas of Johnny Rotten and Sid Vicious, the Pistols were messengers of anarchist ideology, and propagated the image of masculine aggression in music. Formed in the UK at a point of high political distress and working-class dissatisfaction, they represented a generation of oppressed youth. They were visually an idyllic image of the punk identity, non-conforming and examples of individual expression. They created the image and idea of punk as it is widely recognized in popular music history, and are synonymous with the punk canon.²⁹

The collaboration between Jett, Jones, and Cook shows that members of this seminal punk band saw the validity of Jett's musical efforts and abilities, raising more questions as to why Jett is so widely excluded from the punk canon. This partnership could have represented a historic merging of fan bases and the introduction of a young female into the inner circle of punk, but instead it is widely

²⁹ Simonelli, David. "Anarchy, Pop and Violence: Punk Rock Subculture and the Rhetoric of Class, 1976-1978." *Contemporary British History* 16:2 (2002)

ignored and unknown and did very little to increase Jett's inclusion in discourses surrounding punk music and culture. Knowledge of this collaboration also gives further insight into the punk aesthetic that can be heard in "I Love Rock 'n Roll," and helps to construct a discussion of the song as punk-inspired rather than being simply a cover of a rock song.

Musical Analysis

Musically, "I Love Rock 'n Roll" represents the aesthetic of the early punk movement, where raw, direct sincerity defined the harmonic structure of many songs. One of the defining images of the punk scene was an illustration in the punk magazine *Sideburns*, that depicted 3 chords, A, E, and B7, with the tagline "Now form a band."³⁰ Though "I Love Rock 'n Roll" does not feature those exact three chords, the song follows the same basic three chord progression in the key of E-major repeatedly cycled in a standard I-IV-V progression very commonly seen in classic rock music.

Classic rock music has important roots in blues music, with many rock guitarists strongly influenced by blues musicians, and with the 12-bar blues remaining a standard study for practice with beginner guitarists. This form utilizes those same three chords, I, IV, and V, to create harmonic momentum that constantly cycles and repeats. This tradition was adopted by garage rock bands in the 60s, and served as inspiration to the punk rockers of the 1970s who idealized the simplicity of such limited harmonic possibilities, partially because it so starkly opposed the

³⁰ Heylin, Clinton. *Babylon's Burning: From Punk to Grunge*. (London: Penguin Books. 2007): 193

more commercial music being released in the 1970s. The progression is seen in songs like The Beatles' "Twist and Shout" and any number of older Rolling Stones songs.

Michael Hicks identifies the I-IV oscillation commonly found in punk songs as deriving from many Memphis soul recordings, used most commonly to mimic mechanical motion without any resolution or harmonic goal.³¹ Adding the dominant chord into this oscillation recreates the cyclical nature of the 12-bar blues, and rounds out the oscillation. These three chords are also of course the only major triads occurring in the major scale, therefore solely using them reduces chromaticism and the aural inclination towards modulation. Through those three chords, all tones of the major scale are present, allowing for melodic lines that don't need non-chordal tones, and eliminating dissonance that may bring more attention to the music than to the lyrics or message of a song.

In Joan Jett's version of "I Love Rock 'n Roll," the power chords E5, A5, and B5 are accented with non-chordal Gs and an E-minor pentatonic guitar riff, all taken directly from the original Arrows' version. A short guitar solo follows the second chorus and leads into the third verse, showcasing Jett's aggressive and unpolished guitar sound and vocal growls.³² A constant sharp snare drum line is present throughout the song and the percussion keeps the song perpetually moving through the verses with sparse guitar and bass and drives the chorus.

³¹ Hicks, Michael. "Avant Garage" in *Sixties Rock: Garage, Psychedelic, and Other Satisfactions* (USA: University of Illinois, 1999): 34

³² Merrill, Alan. "I Love Rock 'n Roll." Joan Jett and the Blackhearts. Blackheart Records, 2004

The Arrows' performance is firmly situated in the classic rock genre, and featured songwriter Merrill singing the song in an audibly trained and refined vocal timbre. It also includes a more virtuosic guitar solo than is heard in Jett's interpretation, with all of these factors contributing to a more polished sound to the recording.³³ Despite the difference in nature and the resulting attitude, Jett's cover version is rhythmically identical to that of The Arrows, featuring the same tempo. However, Jett brought a louder sound to the song than the three-piece Arrows by doubling the guitar part to suit the four-piece Blackhearts ensemble, and leaving the bass and drum parts as is. The resulting sound is heavy and aggressive, with an aural impression of unrefined studio editing, where the lyrics, message, and energy of the song take precedence over the quality of the recording itself.

Content and Music Video

In Jett's cover of the song, the only lyrical change is to the pronouns, shifting the story from the gender normative tale of male pursuit and conquest to one that is quite unique. Jett takes on the character of a powerful and confident woman who is enchanted by a young boy and seduces him. While it is a relatively common theme in rock songs for men to idealize the innocence of a young woman, males are most often still perceived as boys rather than men at the age of 16, making Jett's attraction to the boy even further outside the norm in mainstream culture. She is assertive and demonstrates many characteristics typical of masculine behaviour, with desire not based in romance, but in pure carnal interest, an unusual position for a woman in

³³ Merrill, Alan. "I Love Rock 'n Roll." The Arrows. Glam / 70's, 2004

any cultural context. This single established Jett's aggressive and no-nonsense public and stage persona, and the music video that accompanied the song's release served as a physical representation of the attitude and performance style she is known for.

The video features Jett clad in leather with roughly chopped black hair and dark make-up, nearly always holding onto her guitar, fully performing the song for the audience in the bar. Viewers can observe her aggressive performance style, crouched low with the guitar slung between her legs, climbing onto the bar itself and encouraging audience participation and involvement as they all throw their fists into the air.³⁴ Playing with her male band members to an audience of both men and women, in this video Jett promotes an environment of perceived equality where both genders could sing along and express themselves. Though Jett's persona is largely an inoffensive image and not shocking in nature for the 80s audience, it is still a rare scene in the male-dominated genres of punk or rock. Jett performs in a way traditionally demonstrated by men in rock music, and is therefore perceived as masculine, from her posture to her gestures and attire. However, she does not downplay her gender or mask her femininity while adopting this masculine stance; she does not look physically like a man, nor does she dress or present herself as a man. From this very early point in her career, Jett was already presenting herself with the image for which she is most widely known for: one that was definitively feminine but overtly masculine. Her image, much like her music, straddles the boundaries of socially accepted norms or classifications.

³⁴ *Real Wild Child: Joan Jett Video Anthology*. Directed by Jack Edward Sawyers. USA: Blackheart, 2003. DVD

Many recent scholars and writers agree that gender roles are not natural or genetically dictated. In Simone de Beauvoir's venerable work *The Second Sex*, she explains:

One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine.³⁵

Judith Butler agrees with this idea of social gendering, theorizing that gender is in fact an unstable idea situated in and varied by generational differences and built by a "stylized repetition of acts."³⁶ The idea of a natural gendering of the sexes is actually constructed and reaffirmed through social norms and dominant culture, as individuals act the part of their gender rather than it representing a natural function. These repeated acts are continually cited and performed with variations interpretations, and the cycle of "mis-citation" calls into question the established gender norms, providing insight into their fabricated nature without straying too far from dominant "acceptable" gender behaviour. In Jett's case, the characteristics she performs are not typical of female gender norms, and she demonstrates the degree to which masculine behaviour can be inserted into a feminine personality without threatening gender binaries, but simultaneously undermines the idea that masculinity and femininity are natural forces. Jett proves that a woman can make and appreciate "masculine" music despite her physical gender.

³⁵ Beauvoir, Simon de. *The Second Sex*. (USA: Random House Inc, 1989): 267

³⁶ Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *The Feminist Philosophy Reader*. Ed. Alison Bailey and Chris Cuomo. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008): 97

Musical taste and performance is intrinsically linked to established gender roles, with some musical genres represented as being attributed to and appreciated by men and some by women. It is seemingly quite difficult to find a genre of music that is strictly all-inclusive and not dominated by one specific gender.³⁷ Susan McClary, an influential scholar in feminist musicology, explains that when women perform or appropriate musical genres and characteristics that are dominantly male, they are often perceived as too aggressive, and the aspects of their femininity that are inserted into the masculine expression are paradoxically identified as too feminine or weaker than the norm.³⁸ This lends some clarity to why Jett is not considered to be a part of the rock canon, as she is by nature a woman and more feminine than her male counterparts, yet she is simultaneously too aggressive to be considered a pop music act.

Judith Halberstam identifies masculinity as being, in fact, constructed in part by women. If we are to assume that 'masculine' is meant to identify that which is male or represents maleness, it only exists in contrast with the idea of the feminine, as propagated by women in society. Therefore, when a woman appropriates that which has been deemed masculine, she is threatening masculinity itself. While she explains that heterosexual female masculinity, when a female adopts masculine practices and behaviour, is prevalent and to some degree threatening to male masculinity, it is to a degree acceptable within a woman's expression of aggression. Halberstam argues that only once this masculinity is coupled with homosexuality, in

³⁷ Gracyk, Theodore. *I Wanna Be Me: Rock Music and the Politics of Identity*. (USA: Temple University Press, 2001): 167-173

³⁸ McClary, Susan. *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality*. (USA: University of Minnesota Press, 1991): 17-19

that the woman is engaging the role of the masculine in sexual practice, is it truly threatening to gender conformity and masculinity.³⁹

Though the object of Jett's interest is, in this song, a boy, the fact that she is adopting the stereotypical role of an older man infatuated by a young girl shows that she is appropriating what would traditionally be a man's role in a socially accepted relationship. The gender of the adolescent is almost irrelevant, as she is not only performing a masculine identity but adopting the masculine role in a sexual way, while preying on a young adult with sexual intentions. Jett's adoption of this traditionally masculine behaviour in addition to her disregard for socially accepted feminine conduct defies cultural norms and could be perceived as threatening to male masculinity as well as familiar notions of femininity by crossing those lines. She has not only chosen to perform in a masculine way, but is doing so while performing "I Love Rock 'n Roll," a song meant to encourage masculine behaviour while being performed by the Arrows, a group of men.

Patti Smith and cross-gender cover songs

"I Love Rock 'n Roll" was not Jett's only recorded cover of a song initially performed by a man. Also covered on the 1982 album is Richard Berry's "Louie Louie" as a bonus track, and Tommy James and the Shondells' "Crimson and Clover" in which Jett once again takes on a song performed by a male group. In this situation she does not change the pronouns or gender roles as she did with "I Love Rock 'n Roll". In the style of Patti Smith's cover of Van Morrison's "Gloria," Jett puts herself

³⁹ Halberstam, Judith. "An Introduction to Female Masculinity" in *Female Masculinity* (USA: Duke University Press, 1998): 28

in a position where she is singing lustfully about a woman. She even goes so far as to imitate Tommy James' breathy singing tone and verbal inflections, emphasizing that her adoration is perhaps romantic or sexual rather than appreciative, as is often found to be the case in gender-altering covers of songs. This begins to infringe on Halberstam's theory of a homosexual masculine woman as being more threatening to established gender norms, and results in further disestablishing the dominant gender roles.

Though Jett is quite well known for performing songs originally recorded by men, she is not the only female singer to do so. Patti Smith is a prime example of another female performer who sings covers of masculine songs without changing pronouns, and is in fact widely recognized as the "Godmother of Punk." Where Smith built her career in New York and Jett's began in LA a few years later, the two did not often cross each others' paths though each was aware of the contributions the other was making to rock and punk music. They are also retrospectively connected for their inadvertent feminist personae and their similar physical portrayals of gender. More than a decade separates their ages, but they both had airs of rebellion and non-conformity, just expressed from different stages in life.

The way in which Smith challenges conventional perceptions of gender and sexuality by simply covering a song initially sung by a man about a woman without altering any pronouns is echoed in Jett's performance of "Crimson and Clover," and also acts to contextualize Jett's heterosexual and therefore less threatening cover of "I Love Rock 'n Roll."

Though Smith's music does not audibly resemble the loud, brash, and aggressive music widely associated with punk, her persona, performances, and style aligned her with the punk ideology of New York in the early 1970s. Coming from a strictly religious upbringing and liberal art school background, Smith began to establish herself as a poet and then as a musician. Smith's music reflected a male-constructed art, as she developed her own style of beat poetry, a traditionally male-dominated genre, to apply to her music. The content of her poetry and musical lyrics addressed women from an outside perspective rather than an introspective or self-reflective one, as she commented on women without applying any personal insight or anecdotes. This was accomplished through her referencing of the struggles of minority groups in modern society, whether female or racial, rather than through a first person account of gender-centric struggle. She was one of the first and arguably most recognized female performers in the rock genre to present herself androgynously, in both her music and her appearance. Rather than admire or adore her male role models, she chose to emulate them, further blurring gender lines in her self-expression. Attracted to the Rolling Stones' Mick Jagger from the band's inception, she famously stated that her attraction to him was not born of any sexual or romantic desire, but in fact it was because she wanted to be him.⁴⁰ To further this desired emulation, she mirrored Keith Richards' iconic haircut, specifically trying to look like the rocker as much as her appearance would allow despite the difference in their gender.

⁴⁰ Smith, Greg, " "And all the Sinners, Saints": Patti Smith, Pioneer Musician and Poet." *The Midwest Quarterly* Winter 41,2: (2000): 173-190

Smith identified strongly with minority groups and their struggles, and often sang not of her gender repression, but of the repression of other socially rejected groups. Smith sought to defy gender definitions in rock music by expressing herself in a gender-neutral manner. Her lyrics were full of her repressed “feminine” emotions through an overt expression of musically common hyper-masculinity, striving for an all-inclusive feel of humanity above any sentiment of love or sexual expression.⁴¹

Perhaps most definitive of her gender-neutral artistry is Smith’s cover of Van Morrison’s “Gloria”. The subject of the song is the singer’s attraction to a woman and her ultimate control over the singer through her sexuality, a conventional subject for a male singer to write and perform. Quite notably, Smith does not change the pronouns in the lyrics, leaving the song as a tribute to a seductress from an admiring lover.⁴² The song was written to express passionate appreciation for a woman, and now rather than being sung by a man, it is a woman expressing lustful sentiments directed at another woman.

In her performance of “Gloria”, Smith adapts even more of a masculine identity than usual, imitating the leering vocal quality originally used by Morrison in the original. Her performance removes the song from the realm of male rock performance, and places it a more ambiguous realm, exposing the song for its macho content but creating a different sexual interpretation.⁴³

⁴¹ Raha, Maria. *Cinderella’s Big Score: Women of the Punk and Indie Underground*. (USA: Seal Press, 2005)

⁴² Smith, Patti. “Gloria.” *Horses (Remastered)*. (USA: Arista Records, 1996)

⁴³ Shuker, Roy. *Understanding Popular Music Culture*, Third Edition. (New York: Routledge, 2008)

In her particularly jarring performance, Smith is not only adopting the identity of a male performer, but is purposefully showing the woman in the song as still being an object of desire, in the role that women have traditionally filled in rock music. Smith reinforces the idea of the woman as muse, though this song does place the woman in the position of power and influence. Smith does not position herself as homosexual, but through this song strengthens her position as a female who finds her own musical identity more in sync with a masculine performer. The same could be said for Jett, who keeps her sexual preference and persona private in favour of presenting her music as her muse. Although both women wish to be recognized for their music above all else, the question of how they should be appreciated as creative musicians when they are performing the works of other musicians remains.

Blackheart Records and Autonomy

Though “I Love Rock ‘n Roll” has become synonymous with Jett’s musical legacy and remains one of her most iconic contributions to the musical landscape of North America, the nature of the song brings about debates of authenticity. Joan Jett is arguably as autonomous a figure can be found in the commercial music industry. She is a songwriter who performs her own music and releases her musical product from her own record label. With Blackheart Records she became the first female artist to own and operate her own record company.⁴⁴ In an industry that is widely male-dominated even to this day, Jett’s label ownership sets her apart from most contemporary female performers. Though many of Jett’s albums were also released

⁴⁴ Biography. *Joan Jett and the Blackhearts*. [Http://joanjett.com/index.html](http://joanjett.com/index.html)

by labels other than Blackheart, from Epic Records to Warner Brothers, she created an outlet for releasing her own music, allowing herself freedom with regards to her sound and content. She has also signed a number of performers to her label over the years, and has acted as a producer for many of them. It wasn't until the early 1990s, with Madonna's Maverick Records and Ani DiFranco's Righteous (now Righteous Babe) records, that more women in popular and rock music began taking ownership of record labels to promote their own music and the music of other artists they appreciated.

The female performers who preceded Jett in popular music were generally defined by the role of the singer-songwriter, representing traditional female characteristics like sincerity, delicacy, and introspection. Many women in 1970s rock were strongly identified with the softer side of genre as an authentic representation of their gender. Authenticity in music is most commonly linked with a musician who performs music that is an extension and representation of their real personal lives, who could therefore perform their own individual personae on stage rather than a constructed identity.⁴⁵ The concept of authenticity is frequently debated and defined in a multitude of ways, ranging from solidly established definitions to the very abstract and theoretical. Authenticity is in no way required to create a successful music career or to gather a fan base, but in rock criticism the authenticity factor is held in high regard, especially when considering ideas of canon and defining genres. In discussing popular music through the perspective of a fan or critic, much of the authenticity debate is focused on expression through

⁴⁵ Auslander, Philip. *Performing Glam Rock: Gender & Theatricality in Popular Music*. (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2006): 13

performance, linking the theory directly to the individual rather than focusing on the music or product exclusively, and to a greater extreme only to the individual while they are in a state of performing rather than their personal identity.

This focus on performance and energy rather than on refinement is a strong component of punk music and culture, and one that can be traced back to the genre of folk music as it experienced a strong revival in the 1960s, and perhaps even much farther back to the Romantic era. Though music and especially rock journalism have made it fairly common to connect a performer's personal identity to their music in order to help the listener develop a relationship with the music and to quantify their authenticity, this practice was a particularly important and relatively new concept with the folk revival. Oral narrative connects the performer, the lyrics, and the social context of the performance for a better understanding of the music, beyond what is possible with anonymous recordings. It allows a fan or critic to evaluate music beyond the audio component and emphasizes the importance of the performer to the appreciation of music. It is the connection between the performer and the music, and also between the music and audience, in which the audience and the performer bond over their shared expression.

A performance understood through oral narrative gives a personality to the literature and lyrics, which is defined or altered by the performer, as well as the audience that receives the performance in any given context. The essence of music is therefore not found through the reading of lyrics, but through understanding and identifying with performances. In turn, the process of understanding a performance

is a fundamentally social practice.⁴⁶ The social context and performance style of Jett's cover version of "I Love Rock 'n Roll" is undisputedly different than the Arrows original version, allowing Jett to re-create the song so it could be re-contextualized and communicated to a different audience. In this particular case, Jett's audience is not only perceivably more rebellious, but the nature of the song encourages more women to participate as fans as identify with the song. Jett's personality in her performance is understood to be uniquely different from Alan Merrill's, and is interpreted by her fans in a very different way, creating a new understanding of a covered song.

Appropriation of authenticity to the individual rather than to the product creates a potential paradox of artificial authenticity, where the performance takes precedence over the musician and the music. It becomes easy to perform the part of an authentic musician through a carefully constructed persona. Performance is of pivotal importance in popular music and its reception, and particularly in its evaluation of authenticity. A performance can demonstrate a number of key social elements that act to affiliate the performer with a given social group. Performance can prove the authenticity of a performer as an individual, as they perform an aggrandized role of their individual personality and self. Staged and expressly artificial personae can even be perceived as authentic within certain social groups, as Michael Albrecht explores in his analysis of Ben Folds. In this particular case, Folds, a star of the hipster music scene, covers an aggressive rap song by Dr. Dre. Dre's original version acts to establish an authentic portrayal of the lifestyle

⁴⁶ Bauman, Richard. *Story, Performance, and Event: Contextual Studies of Oral Narrative* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986) 1-3

associated with his music. Fold's version, however, is presented ironically through re-contextualization, and this overt artificiality endears him to his intended audience of young and abundantly white suburban individuals and aligns him with their social expectations. In Albrecht's account, this creates a consciously artificial performance, which can be seen by audiences as authentic, if it is seen as a genuine acknowledgement of a lack of authenticity.⁴⁷

For Jett, the nature of a song shouldn't affect its reception, and each song should be evaluated independently on its own merits, without accounting for its origins. In her own words, "Just because it's a cover song doesn't mean it's bad... It annoys me, you should do what you want."⁴⁸ This point is articulated by Deena Weinstein in her chapter "Appreciating Cover Songs: Stereophony" when she explains that appreciating a cover song requires the listener to abandon socially constructed ideas of romanticizing authenticity and focus instead on the cultural significance of the music.⁴⁹ Weinstein goes on to explain that since the dawn of mechanical reproduction, a song is taken to mean the recorded performance, not a written piece of music. For a song to be identified as a cover, the original performance must therefore be familiar to the listener, or they are simply hearing a recorded song. Given the limited exposure Americans had to the original Arrows' recording, for many "I Love Rock 'n Roll" represented an original recording.

⁴⁷ Albrecht, Michael Mario. "Acting Naturally Unnaturally: The Performative Nature of Authenticity in Contemporary Popular Music." *Text and Performance Quarterly* 28:4. (2008) 382-383

⁴⁸ Needs, Kris. "Joan Jett, Return of the Jett Girl." In *ZigZag*. February, 1980.
<<http://www.rocksbackpages.com/article.html?ArticleID=10909>>

⁴⁹ Weinstein, Deena. "Appreciating Cover Songs: Stereophony" in *Play it Again, Cover Songs in Popular Music* Ed George Plasketes. (USA: Ashgate, 2010): 243

Simon Frith explains authenticity in music as not being solely influenced by the music, but also by external known information relating to the music and the musician. Where his discourse focuses on recorded music as opposed to live performance, a medium he has deemed to be more common and relatable to fans of Rock music, Frith explains that in addition to the music itself, factors around the music's production are key to a listener's attribution of authenticity. Their knowledge of the performer as a musician and their experience with previously released material influences their interpretation of a particular recording.⁵⁰ This once again places the attribution of authenticity outside the realm of the actual material and audible music, and into a number of external factors to be interpreted on an individual basis. For Jett, "I Love Rock 'n Roll" was her first exposure to fans as a solo artist, and for fans of the Runaways, it was not a great departure musically from the material that band had produced; it was still simple, heavy, loud, and rough rock music. These fans were exposed to Jett as an individual in the way she personally wanted to be presented, without any commercial interference. It simultaneously distances her from the original Arrows' recording, through the instrumentation, timbre, and style of the music.

The idea of the culture industry is necessary to understanding the debate of authenticity in popular music. It argues for and supports the idea of performer-based authenticity being an industrial and manufactured process, where artists are inevitably subjected to industrial standards. This is not altogether different from the gender standards implemented by cultural repetition and rebelling against gender

⁵⁰ Frith, Simon. *Performing Rites: On The Value of Popular Music*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996)

norms to establish a unique sexual persona. Philip Auslander identifies this seemingly oxymoronic creation of authenticity as being produced and marketed by industry powers, and argues that different markers of authenticity are used in different genres to appeal to the distinctive audiences. This includes performances of choreographed synchronicity in genres like Soul or Motown, as well the antithesis of this organized unison in alternative genres like Rock which feature the appropriation of accents or vocal stylings to accompany either acoustic 'pure' performances or highly amplified and virtuosic representations of Rock music.

According to Auslander, authenticity exists in Rock music as an opposition to what is deemed inauthentic musical performance by the target demographic, whether it be pop music or even classic rock that preceded it. Most commonly, the attribution of authenticity is applied to Rock musicians who have created a reputation based on live performance rather than recorded performance. Jett has continuously performed live and toured not only as a headlining act with the Blackhearts, but also as an opening band for artists like Aerosmith and as part of festival line-ups like the Warped Tour, which features mostly young alternative and punk performers. The live performer's struggle and development into a well-known artist establishes a distinct persona for the musician in question, one of a hard-working individual or group that possesses talent in performing, in contrast to the developing recording industry where synthesized and altered performances are common.⁵¹ It is about paying dues and persevering for the sake of their art, while guarding their genuine expression.

⁵¹ Auslander, Philip. "Seeing Is Believing: Live Performance and the Discourse of Authenticity in Rock

"I Love Rock 'n Roll" for young women

In relation to these theories of authenticity, Jett's performance of "I Love Rock 'n Roll" can be construed as authentic despite the song's origin and nature because she is performing it as an authentic representation of herself. Jett's performance and recording of the song has transformed it from a standard rock song to a rock song standard, an iconic anthem for women looking to showcase the rough side of their personalities. Young female pop stars have adapted the song as demonstrative of their coming of age, as performers such as Britney Spears, who publicly and incorrectly identified it as a Pat Benatar song; Melanie Chisholm of the Spice Girls' fame; and Miley Cyrus, who performs a medley of Jett's hits while on tour, have performed the song as they transitioned from innocent young pop singers into sexier and more mature performance personae. When considering Jett's own career, the single acted in a similar way as she distanced herself from the highly sexualized and indisputably young girl band "jailbait" image she had garnered from her work with the Runaways. "I Love Rock 'n Roll" introduced her to a rock audience, and she was able to perform in her aggressive masculine way and be taken seriously rather than be downplayed as a member of the Runaways.

Where any number of Jett's early singles could have been performed by young female singers in place of "I Love Rock 'n Roll" to embody this transformation in a young female singer's career, it seems that this single has been selected unanimously. The three songs performed by Cyrus on tour are perhaps the most

Culture." *Literature and Psychology* 44:4 (1998) 9-20

iconic and appropriate candidates for the process of embodying such a transition, as she also performs “Bad Reputation” and “Cherry Bomb,” both of which lyrically explain aspects of struggling to be understood and rebelling against established behavioural systems. However, by choosing to sing “I Love Rock ‘n Roll,” young women such as Cyrus and her peers are choosing to remove the discussion from their personal lives and public personae, and are placing it firmly within the music, celebrating their appreciation for a genre perceivably based on authenticity and critical merit, rather than the aesthetically based pop music. They are not only declaring their personal growth from young pop stars to (they hope) serious musicians, but they are also declaring their allegiance to music itself, presumably in hopes of further distancing themselves from their superficial music beginnings.

On April 13, 2011, Jett performed on a televised episode of Oprah titled “Rock Goddesses” in which she was introduced as “super rocker Joan Jett”⁵² as part of a lineup consisting of rockers Stevie Nicks and Pat Benatar as well as hip hop group Salt-N-Peppa. In this segment she performed a medley of three of her biggest hits with her Blackhearts while sharing the stage with young Miley Cyrus, who was featured prominently on lead vocals. Jett stated that Cyrus’ covers of her songs are among her favourites, and Cyrus claimed to be one of Jett’s biggest fans, and described their duet as a dream come true. Cyrus, who has faced her fair share of challenges in her transition from young Disney network star to woman trying to be taken seriously as a musician, explained that for young women who want to play

⁵² *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. Music Goddesses. First broadcast April 13, 2011 on ABC

guitar and play rock music Jett is a great role model for both for her skill and for her strong independent attitude.

Cyrus' admiration not only focuses on the importance and lack of female musicians in the rock canon, but also brings attention to the number of young women looking to participate in the genre who lack a variety of positive female role models. Jett's identity as a performer without strong identifying allegiances to either gender's norms is iconically represented in "I Love Rock 'n Roll" as she performs with many macho and predatory inclinations but without abandoning her femininity while singing a song about pure love of rock and roll music.

Joan Jett and Punk

Jett's subversion of established typical gender roles and her commitment to creating music that she enjoys, along with her personal style are suited to the punk genre and culture. Defined universally as a subculture, punk originated as a representation of the "other" in society, as an opposition to an oppressive political, social, and economic climate. A subculture encompasses a group of like-minded individuals who collectively represent a view that counters and opposes that of the rest of society. Due to many subcultures' inherent lack of an easily identifiable definition, individuals within a particular subculture are most often identified by distinctive and characteristic appearances, mannerisms, or actions that personify the shared beliefs of the subculture; they may be more easily defined by what and

who they are not than by who they are.⁵³ For these reasons, punk is a very accepting and transient culture, based on ideology and self-affiliation with the genre rather than a set list of necessary defining features. For Jett, this liberal interpretation of a genre allowed her to pay homage to her musical inspirations, though they were by majority men. She was theoretically freed from any restriction set on her by popular culture due to her gender or physical appearance, though punk still remained dominantly a “boys’ club” for performers. It inspired her to break boundaries and established standards.

According to Dick Hebdige, the fundamental essence of punk is found in the collective culture, which is formed on the ideals of all-encompassing inclusion of those who are generally the victims of exclusion. It is a culture that accepts misfits and those who are rejected, alienated, or dissatisfied with popular culture and mainstream society. Exclusion becomes the badge of inclusion, including victims of any socially founded beliefs or norms, ranging from politics, employment, the economy, societal structure, to clothing and music, and even including discrimination based on race, sexuality, social class, or gender.⁵⁴ This definition creates an ideal cultural situation for youth and an outlet for teenage bravado and enthusiasm. Though this ideal applies openly and readily to audiences and fans, it only applies theoretically to performers. Maria Raha, author of “Cinderella’s Big Score”, a guide to women who perform in masculine dominated music subcultures, states that “Even in punk, a culture hell-bent on making people uncomfortable by its behavior and appearance, the very presence of women onstage frequently caused

⁵³ Hebdige, Dick. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. (USA: Routledge, 1987)

⁵⁴ Ibid

discomfort in the scene itself.”⁵⁵ Both Raha’s statement and common perception of punk musicians prove that although anybody who feels marginalized is welcomed in the punk community as a supporter, the music itself has a distinct hierarchy that is still dominated by men.

Though male performers are afforded the opportunity to perform and be recognized as punks, women who participated in this scene were forced to construct personae that further aligned and identified them within the culture. There were no female performers who were simply accepted as punks as each woman was forced to address and align their gender. As a result there are two definitive categories of punk female performer that can be easily identified: the expressly feminine and the masculine androgynous. These identities represented a further level of struggle by women in punk. Not only were these women feeling marginalized and oppressed by mainstream society, but they were forced to struggle with standards of male dominance in punk as well. This reaffirms the paradox in punk’s philosophy of open inclusion, where it becomes apparent that this inclusion is based on male conceptions of what merits inclusion.

If punk is ideally a culture based on acceptance of those who are not fulfilled by mainstream society, yet women are not fully accepted without negotiations, one might wonder why these women choose to work to fit into punk society instead of pursuing acceptance in mainstream society where they may not require such strict negotiations of gender identity. Lauraine Leblanc interviewed a large number of female punks to understand why women were attracted to the genre in spite of

⁵⁵ Raha, Maria, *Cinderella’s Big Score: Women of the Punk and Indie Underground*. (USA: Seal Press, 2004): xiv

these troubling issues of feminine identity. While many claimed that they were attracted to a group that supported aggressive expression of frustrations that were generally not afforded to women, and they longed to experience this very masculine and liberating expression, others had a more sentimental reason for seeking punk acceptance. Leblanc recounts the frequency with which women compared the punk community to a family, in which they experienced relationships that felt like sibling bonds with near strangers and were treated as equal participants, at least in the audience arena.⁵⁶ This environment, they felt, allows both feminine and masculine expression as they have been traditionally recognized.

Though punk music is founded on ideals of countering mainstream culture's established norms and standards in a variety of social and political realms, the very mainstream culture of heterosexuality is quite strongly upheld and propagated within punk communities. Women and homosexuals are theoretically accepted as performers, but are often classed as related subgenres rather than as part of the major punk aesthetic. According to Lauraine Leblanc, relationships within punk culture generally tended to follow traditional monogamist heterosexual lines, often with the male partner expressing the stronger and more dominant role and the female partner conforming to the subjugated role, expected to be attractive and available.

The women of punk are therefore expected to not only maintain the aggressive front expected of a punk, but to also express themselves as sexual and flirtatious. This is intrinsically contradictory, and creates a sense of tension for

⁵⁶ Leblanc, Lauraine. *Pretty in Punk: Girls' Gender Resistance in a Boys' Subculture*. (USA: Independent, 2002): 69-93

women in punk who must negotiate their own personalities to participate in a community that promoted acceptance. Those women who chose to remove themselves from this traditionally feminine role presented themselves androgynously, and were then able to garner the respect of their male counterparts though they sacrificed their identities as women to do so. These women became, in a way, isolated: judged by punks and by mainstream culture as well.⁵⁷ In these cases, women accepted that men were the dominant characters in punk, and they generated personal identities to negotiate this masculine dominance so they could ultimately achieve their status as punks.

For the women who successfully negotiated the tensions of gender in punk, there were a variety of outlets for expression that supported the ideal of a collective culture. The do-it-yourself model allowed creativity without bounds, and the accessibility of the music allowed women to create music, though their popularity and success required a degree of negotiation, and they were afforded the opportunity to either express themselves in a hyper-masculine manner, or to propagate their beliefs and messages of feminism and female empowerment. As much as they were controlled and discriminated against, it was still an arena that allowed women to create their own unique identity without judgment or rejection. Jett was able to emulate her punk idols like the Sex Pistols in style and attitude without abandoning her femininity or hiding her female physicality. She does not hide her breasts or cut her long hair, nor does she abandon applying make-up or change her name to be perceived as a masculine person.

⁵⁷ Leblanc, Lauraine. "The Boys' Turf." *Sexuality and Gender*. (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 2002): 167 - 173

Though Jett is seldom referenced as a punk musician and is notably absent from any established punk canons, her musical style, personal attitude and ideals, influences, and even the chronological time of her musical career garner her the right to be regarded or at the very least discussed as a punk musician in scholarly and musicological discussions. The way in which Jett has negotiated gender norms to establish herself as a musician before any other affiliation (to gender or genre) and the unlikely progression of her career from commercially constructed “jailbait” to an independent and strong female performer who defies what is typical of female rockers provides an interesting and unique discussion in rock music. “I Love Rock ‘n Roll” is an iconic song for young women that connects the rock and punk canons effectively, despite Jett’s gender and career origins. However, because of Jett’s unorthodox persona and varied musical contributions, she appears to be toying with the established gender and music conventions without fully and aggressively rebelling against them, making her career a difficult one to position in a broader musicological discussion.

CHAPTER 3 "BAD REPUTATION"

"Bad Reputation" Background

"Bad Reputation" is a song from Joan Jett's original independent debut album released in 1980, and the title track of its reissue in 1981 on Boardwalk Records. This album features songs written and recorded prior to Jett's success with "I Love Rock 'n Roll" but many remained largely unheard until Jett's success with her next album. Although "Bad Reputation" was not as popular or successful as "I Love Rock 'n Roll," the song stands as an anthem for women in rock and women who choose to rebel from stereotypical societal roles, and defines Jett's attitude for the remainder of her career.

"Bad Reputation" represents Jett's first widely heard original recording as a solo artist and firmly establishes her rebellious persona. The song lyrically and audibly rejects established stereotypes for music created by women while acting as a confirmation of the attitude Jett displayed with "I Love Rock 'n Roll," one that defies mainstream expectations and espouses Jett's interpretation of masculinity and femininity in her own construction of gender. The song goes one step further than "I Love Rock 'n Roll" where Jett initially declared her love for rock music to be of utmost importance, to a situation where she addresses her personal character. Jett's success demanded that she explain her rebellious and aggressive ways, and she chose to express those opinions in her music.

The song was co-written by Jett, with Ritchie Cordell, Kenny Laguna, and Marty Joe Kupersmith. It is lyrically basic and straight forward, enabling Jett to clearly articulate her opinion and her disregard for the opinions of others. She

declares that she will not change for any outside force or individual and is content with pursuing her life and career in any way she sees fit. Lyrically, the bad reputation she's proudly declaring and identifying with is easily connected to her aggressive and confrontational personality and her refusal to conform to gender stereotypes. The song stands as a celebration of her bad reputation, and is embraced as an anthem for those afflicted with such negative reputations.

Musical Analysis

In *Mother Jones* magazine, Dave Marsh named "Bad Reputation" one of "...the great power-chord singles of our times, as nasty as it wants to be."⁵⁸ The harmonic progression of "Bad Reputation" closely mirrors the three-chord structure of "I Love Rock 'n Roll," still stressing Jett's allegiance to the basic punk rock and rock 'n roll three-chord structure and further distancing herself from the virtuosic rock and polished disco performed by many of her contemporaries, from progressive rock bands like Rush to chart-toppers like the Bee Gees. This song does however differ from "I Love Rock 'n Roll" where it features a key change, something commonly used in popular music. The song opens in the key of E, and repeatedly hammers out the tonic to emphasize the tonal center before completing the I-IV-V progression and cycling through the chords E, A, and B, in that specific order. After the second verse, the song changes to the key of G and immediately moves into a new verse on the new tonic. Once again, Jett's song cycles through the same progression as it moves

⁵⁸ Marsh, Dave. "Rock 'n' Revolution." *Mother Jones* 21:2 (April 1996). P15

to a C and then a D chord. It ends much like it began, with the repeated hammering of the tonic chord, only this time in a new key.

Jett's three-chord structure is not only a tribute to the punk aesthetic that inspired her and gave voice to her career, but it is also representative of her earlier musical influences. As with many others in the punk scene, Jett picked up her first electric guitar before the punk movement, and rock 'n roll and the blues claimed her interest. Inspired by the likes of Chuck Berry and Led Zeppelin, Jett sought to learn how to play the electric guitar and make the kind of music she loved.⁵⁹ This classic rock, before the popularity of virtuosic genres like heavy metal and progressive rock, was harmonically simple, and very frequently followed the I-IV-V progression. This enabled any guitarist with a basic knowledge of music theory to easily play along while remaining technically accurate so the soloist could be featured more prominently with more complex melodic lines.

This song does not use any standard pop song format, as it does not feature a prominent chorus. Whereas, in many songs, verses will be interspersed with a familiar and catchy chorus to maintain an audience's attention and encourage them to learn and identify a song more quickly, "Bad Reputation" is structured around 4 verses that begin and end in a similar fashion. All four verses begin with the declaration "I don't give a damn about my bad reputation" and end with the line "Oh no, not me" repeated multiple times before beginning the cycle again, creating the impression of a chorus through the catchy hooks but with some variety in the

⁵⁹ Gehr, Richard. "Joan Jett: Her Life was Saved by Rock & Roll." *Music & Sound Output* July 1988
<http://www.rocksbackpages.com/article.html?ArticleID=400>

material each time it is repeated. The four verses allow for four different declarations of perceived bad reputations, so the audience has the potential to identify with a number of situations rather than one singular account in story form. Similarly, an individual who regularly defies societal expectations could identify with each one of the verses.

Though modulation and key changes have become a standard feature in popular music, such changes are generally used to emphasize a certain emotion or to introduce a bridge or new thematic material. In heavy metal or progressive rock, a modulation is used to show off a particular instrumentalist's proficiency and virtuosity through elaborate solos, generally on electric guitar. Classical compositions generally used modulation to introduce a new theme or compositional section as part of a standard form.⁶⁰ Modulation is generally used as a dramatic tool, and is often used in power ballads and emotion-driven pop songs by artists like Barry Manilow or Celine Dion. Modulation is used to increase the emotional impact and heighten a listener's response to the lyrical content of the song. In the case of "Bad Reputation," the key change does not accompany any of these standard compositional tools. Once the key changes, Jett immediately jumps back in with another verse structured the same way as the first two. The key change really acts only as a divider, placed in the middle of the song to divide the four verses.

The placement of the key change is also structurally unusual when compared to other contemporary pop or rock songs, as it comes much earlier than is aurally expected. Andrew Goodwin describes popular music as being constricted to a highly

⁶⁰ Randel, Don Michael. "Harmony." *The Harvard Dictionary of Music*. 4th Ed. (USA: Harvard University Press, 2003) 379-382

predictable form, established to suit its intention of being easily accessible and most importantly, brief. “Bad Reputation” easily demonstrates established popular music conventions like repetition and applies common rhythmic techniques to propel the song forward, but the early placement of the modulation, at the middle of the song rather than closer to the end, lends only to re-establish the song rather than allow it to evolve and develop.⁶¹ According to Goodwin, the short song structure should develop until a peak near the end, which loosely resolves to encourage repeated listening. This theory explains the popularity of modulations after the central part of the song, as opposed to Jett’s placement of the modulation as a divider. Instead of building excitement and intensity, “Bad Reputation” experiences a peak halfway through with little drama, variation, or excitement after the key change. The only distinct difference created by the key change is an increased intensity in Jett’s snarls and growls as her vocals adapt an even more aggressive and confrontational quality.

Jett’s lead vocals are played up with supporting vocals from the male members of her band. While she sings the end of each verse with declarations of indifference to established acceptable reputations, she sings “Oh no, not me” with amplified vocal growls and snarls against the repeated “no, no, no” and “me, me, me” sung by the male vocals. She adapts a more aggressive and masculine style of singing against the objections of the male presence in the song, a feature not used in “I Love Rock ‘n Roll” and many of Jett’s other songs where the backing vocals are provided by Jett herself, creating a dialogue perhaps indicative of her opposition to patriarchal standards. The repeated “no, no, no” from the male singers is not

⁶¹ Goodwin, Andrew. *Dancing in the Distraction Factory: Music Television and Popular Culture* (Britain: Routledge, 1993): 78-82

aggressive, and sounds almost disengaged, acting as a chant that constantly discourages Jett's declaration, as Jett's vocals become more agitated with the negative reaction.

From another perspective, the all-male Blackhearts have supported Jett throughout her early career despite the many rejections. The dialogue they share with Jett in "Bad Reputation" could also be heard as encouraging Jett to further rebel against the societal norms that stand in her way, egging her on to establish her reputation despite negative reaction. In either understanding, the presence of male vocals in this song creates an interesting vocal interplay, and introduces audiences to Jett's all-male band.

"Bad Reputation" and Gender

In the music video for "Bad Reputation" viewers see the story of Joan Jett and the Blackhearts brought to life through scenes of the band performing interspersed with a silent film-inspired montage of the struggles and triumphs of the band. In a rare autobiographical moment, the viewer sees the very private Jett being rejected by a number of venues and record companies with written phrases coming across the screen that show the many ways Jett has been disrespected and largely disapproved by mainstream music before her success with "I Love Rock 'n Roll." The combination of Jett's lyrical declaration with the visual element of watching her performance and reading the rejection lines type-written across the screen creates further context and understanding of Jett's struggles, adding depth to the lyrical content of the song. We see lines like "We don't want your kind in here," hinting

perhaps at Jett's punk roots or even her threatening construction of gender, and "Come back when you're dressed like a lady," implying discrimination based on her gender and appearance, before the direct insult "You can't sing" crosses the screen. Jett then decides to start her own label, achieves great success with "I Love Rock 'n Roll," and concludes with scenes showing her triumph and eventual acceptance by the record industry that rejected her, despite her unchanging image as a rebel against dominant gender norms.⁶²

Jett's rebellion is not just against societal perceptions of appropriate gender performance, it stands in stark contrast with established images of women in music, where gender conventions are perceivably broken less frequently than in mainstream society. The role of women in music has generally mirrored the role of women in patriarchal society. According to Simon Reynolds and Joy Press in *The Sex Revolts*:

...Women's position in the scheme of '60s rebel rock was shaky at best. In bohemian culture, the 'feminine' signified domesticity, conformism, or an ideal of sanctuary and succour. For the most part, women's choices were limited to mistress or muse.⁶³

The domestic perception of women creates a dominant interpretation of women as being "feminine" with a connotation of subjugation and weakness. Therefore, female performers are most commonly seen as weaker or lesser than their male counterparts for no reason other than their gender, rather than simply existing as

⁶² "Bad Reputation." *Real Wild Child: Joan Jett Video Anthology*. Directed by Jack Edward Sawyers. (USA: Blackheart, 2003). DVD

⁶³ Reynolds, Simon and Joy Press. *The Sex Revolts: Gender, Rebellion, and Rock'n'roll*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995): 236

women who make music. They are women first, and musicians second.⁶⁴ In 1978, Kate Bush, a female singer-songwriter, said “I just think I identify more with male musicians than female musicians because I tend to think of female musicians as... ah... females.”⁶⁵ Women are then placed in a position of negotiating their gender in a dominantly male-centric environment, echoing the struggles of women’s liberation in mainstream culture with their music.⁶⁶

Reynolds and Press identify Jett, as well as Suzi Quatro and Riot Grrrl band L7, as prime examples of female artists who approach music with the conviction that women are capable of anything a man can accomplish. They identify these women as tough and independent, though in ways that imitate and impersonate masculine rebellion in music, leaving them again in a position where their work is still seen as secondary in comparison to male efforts that preceded them. They state:

The tomboy approach seems unsatisfactory, however; it simply emulates male rebellion, including its significant component of misogyny, implicit in the stance of someone like Joan Jett, who wants to be one of the boys, accepted into the gang.⁶⁷

Jett’s persona is of course not limited to the tomboy stereotype, as she does not present herself as “one of the boys,” but seeks to be understood primarily as a musician. Her persona has masculine characteristics, but she still retains many aspects of femininity. They later identify Jett as being successful in her portrayal of a

⁶⁴ Ibid

⁶⁵ Ibid, 236

⁶⁶ Leblanc, Lauraine. *Pretty in Punk: Girls’ Gender Resistance in a Boys’ Subculture*. (USA: Rutgers University Press, 2008): 1-10

⁶⁷ Reynolds, Simon and Joy Press. 233

tough rebel, but because women must seemingly imitate men to be taken seriously as rock rebels, they are unable to bring anything new or unique to the rock canon. These women are neither regarded as women or men, but instead occupy the role of honorary men, where they are expected to act without traditional notions of femininity and also without dominantly masculine traits so to not upset established gender roles. These women are therefore constantly in a secondary position, as any divergence from masculine standards would damage their masculine personae.

This public perception of Jett “imitating” men and yearning to be “one of the boys” focuses on women as being secondary to men. Her critics seem to view it as improbable and unworthy of discussion that a woman would perform in a way that she is comfortable despite the gender theory ramifications, as it sounds like she must be imitating a man. Adoption of masculine qualities does not always imply a desire to be male, it merely indicates an individual’s appreciation of certain qualities that happen to be associated with the male gender. Kathleen Kennedy argues:

...Jett constructed female masculinity not as an imitation of rock machismo but rather, as a gender and sexual identity that moved outside of the binaries that defined twentieth-century white middle-class sex/gender systems.⁶⁸

Despite these arguments, Jett has to negotiate her reputation as being an imitator of masculine identity rather than a woman with a specific combination of feminine and masculine characteristics.

⁶⁸ Kennedy, Kathleen. “Results of a Misspent Youth: Joan Jett’s Performance of Female Masculinity.” *Women’s History Review*. 11:1 (2002) 91

Jett's Bad Reputation

Joan Jett, though largely influenced by the punk movement, presented herself in a very different way than many women in punk music did. From the onset of her solo career, after her work with the Runaways, she was not flamboyant in her dress like Debbie Harry, nor was she masculine like Patti Smith, and her on-stage persona was not that of a female performer, just that of a musician. The Runaways are largely associated with the developing punk culture of the 1970s in retrospect because of the music industry standards to which they stood in opposition and the aggressive nature of their lyrics and live performances. Steve Waksman identifies them as among the first bands in the LA music scene to be called punk rock.⁶⁹ Their popularity at the time, however, was primarily based on their status as an all-girl band, which therefore attracted female fans and sexualized attention from men. One of the reasons Jett was so undesirable to record companies before "I Love Rock 'n Roll" was her reputation as one of The Runaways, a group not taken seriously by many in part for their "jailbait" reputation at a time when women like Pat Benatar and Debbie Harry were finding popularity in rock music perhaps in part due to their sexually mature and confident attitudes. They had deliberately accessible sexual personae, in contrast with Jett's consciously de-sexualized persona and reputation for being young, rather than mature and experienced.

For Joan Jett, rock and roll has always been more than just a style of music, it represented her beliefs and ambitions, acting as a religion as she grew up and matured. She has always taken her craft very seriously and maintains the belief that

⁶⁹ Waksman, Steve. *This Ain't the Summer of Love: Conflict and Crossover in Heavy Metal and Punk*. (California: University of California Press, 2009): 107

music should have a context and purpose, fueled by love for the medium itself. Despite her firm rock mentality, Jett explains that her time with The Runaways introduced her to a number of hardships in the music industry, the most difficult to overcome being the lack of credibility and serious consideration afforded to her by critics.⁷⁰

Music Journalism

The late 1960s saw the birth of rock criticism with heavy circulation of music-based periodicals like *Rolling Stone* and *Creem*, and with this rising presence of music criticism came a hierarchical system of evaluating music. In many journalistic circles, rock and roll came at the top of the list of credible and authentic music, as disco and other popular music genres garnered a reputation of being fake and unworthy of critical attention. Musicians were placed firmly in a genre category so they could be identified, and then evaluated based on their artistic merits.

In the 1980s, at the time of Jett's rising popularity, rock's critics were appreciative of musicians like the Rolling Stones, who established themselves in the late 1970s and helped develop the modern rock and roll sound. In other words, the hierarchy of rock royalty featured a plethora of white men at the top of the tower. They were largely male groups that not only maintained classic rock mentalities but simultaneously pushed boundaries both in music and in performance personae. Above all else, these idealized rock musicians supposedly represented pure unadulterated love for music, and their chosen genre represented the highest level

⁷⁰ <http://joanjettbadrep.com/>

of art possibly attainable in a popular genre of music according to critics and dedicated fans.⁷¹ Music periodicals like *Rolling Stone* helped support the white male canon in rock by further marginalizing women in the music industry, featuring them not in interviews or articles but placing them almost exclusively in advertisements directed at men, exploiting the women as sexual objects and further propagating the role of women in rock as being that of the fan and groupie.⁷²

Simon Frith explains the privilege accorded to rock music as an attempt to romanticize independent and authentic rock music. Those artists who are highly regarded within the rock community represent those ideals, fighting the impending commercialization of the genre. Those stars are most commonly perceived as individuals who have fought musical oppression and climbed the hierarchical ladder from the bottom by putting time, energy, and love into their craft to create an authentic product. Popular music artists, on the contrary, are regarded as instant stars, who were given everything they needed to achieve success through commercial involvement and who follow a precise formulaic model for success that eliminates the need for blood, sweat, and tears.⁷³

The attribution of a higher level of artistry to rock musicians for their personal struggles and authenticity is taken directly from the discourse surrounding folk music discussed in chapter one of this project. The notion of rock's unique and primary position in the hierarchy of musical originality and authenticity is therefore

⁷¹ Lewis, Lisa A. "The Making of a Preferred Address." *Gender Politics and MTV*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990)

⁷² Coates, Norma. "(R)Evolution Now?" In *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender*. Ed Sheila Whitley. (New York: Routledge: 1997) 54

⁷³ Frith, Simon. *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure, and the Politics of Rock 'n' Roll*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981) p1

not entirely accurate, as the methods for measuring rock's authenticity are shared with not only folk genres, but are largely mirrored in the punk community, a firmly established antithesis of rock. Also notably absent from this rock discourse is the established pattern of measuring authenticity and the culturally constructed nature of rock stardom, enabling large-scale commercial investment without noticeable commercial presence. Despite the flaws innate in rock's constructed hierarchy, there was little room for diversity in canonical representations and discussions of the music, dominated by white male artists from The Rolling Stones to Bruce Springsteen.

Joan Jett and Pat Benatar

Some women did break into the rock canon, though not without struggle and stigma. One of Jett's most successful contemporaries in the rock arena is Pat Benatar, whom many would identify as a rock musician although she, like Jett, is noticeably absent from many canonical and scholarly discussions of rock music. Benatar began her music career in New York after years of professional singing instruction in her youth. After years of singing in restaurants and at small functions, Benatar found herself not only with a band but also a record deal with Chrysalis Records, who released her first album *In The Heat of the Night* in 1979.⁷⁴

Benatar's public image closely mirrored Jett's own, as both were physically slight women with shaggy, dark-hair who fronted all-male rock bands with aggressive personas. Where Jett struggled to secure a record deal, Benatar's fight

⁷⁴ Benatar, Pat and Patsi Bale Cox. *Between a Heart and a Rock Place: A Memoir*. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2010)

was not to obtain the industry's support, but to maintain her own voice amidst commercial influence. Much to her own disdain, Benatar was widely marketed as a hyper-sexualized version of herself, and found that promotional images for the band's releases and tours frequently only featured her, and were altered to give the allusion of her wearing less clothing and having larger breasts.⁷⁵

Much of the divergence in public perception between Jett and Benatar comes from reputation. Jett's "Bad Reputation" established her as a rebel and non-conformist who would aggressively defend her choices when confronted, while Benatar's struggles to be understood were not widely disseminated in a song. She appeared to embrace her femininity and the standards imposed upon her, while Jett verbally lashed out against such restraints.

Benatar did receive critical acclaim and recognition for her role as a woman in rock and roll, winning four Grammy awards between 1980 and 1983 for Best Female Rock Performance. She sold over 22 million copies of her albums, and in 2008 she was inducted into the Long Island Music Hall of Fame. She is known for her powerful voice, and much like Jett, for her tough persona. Benatar's records were more successful than Jett's and the Grammy awards spoke for the critical reception to her musical material. They were both arguably similar female performers and were releasing music at the same time, but Jett's reputation as one of The Runaways preceded her and affected audience reception. Unlike Jett, Benatar was presented to mainstream audiences as a woman rather than a "girl" and appeared to use her sexuality in her performances and persona.

⁷⁵ Ibid

Where the rock hierarchy is based largely on authenticity, as earned through struggle and commercial independence, Benatar's demonstration of female sexuality not only creates a wider gap between herself and the larger demographic of male rockers, but it also acts as a detriment to her credibility as a true rocker in any canonical discussions. For an authentic rock musician, the music must be of first and foremost importance as rock music ideally represents a higher degree of social, culture, and political awareness than other popular music genres that exist for instant gratification.

In the 1960s, female singer-songwriters like Joni Mitchell and Carole King had brought more critical attention to female musicians in popular music. Many women in the folk revival of the 1960s played acoustic guitar, and all these women who distanced themselves from the established role of woman as a singer rather than a musician garnered critical approval for their musicianship. The 1970s and 1980s then afforded women the opportunity to really play with the men on the mainstream music stage. The Go-Gos were an all-female band and they played their own instruments, and Heart's Wilson sisters, Ann and Nancy, were not only vocalists but also guitarists for the band. By the time mainstream audiences were introduced to Pat Benatar, they had been exposed to women who marketed themselves as musicians rather than as singers, but Benatar presented herself solely as a singer, garnering her less musical credibility for canonical consideration. Though Benatar has always objected to how she was portrayed by the industry and media, the public's opinion of her had already been formed. Her talent was not denied, and her accolades and awards speak volumes for her abilities, but her struggle to be

understood as a musician and taken seriously as a rocker was overshadowed by her image as a singer who prioritizes her sexual image over her musical product.

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler identifies gender construction as being the product of repeated acts. These acts and images are created, modified and repeated by mainstream society and vary from culture to culture. They shape conventions for gender and create expectations, while establishing a standard for gender presentation and reinforcing heterosexual boundaries.⁷⁶ Benatar's highly sexualized and stereotypically feminine presentation limited her ability to exceed accepted roles for women in music by systematically encouraging audiences to see her as a female before they hear her as a musician. She also spent a great deal of time singing in her upper register, encouraging a feminine sound in contrast with Jett's lower guttural growls more reminiscent of male performers.

The biggest difference between Pat Benatar's performance style and Joan Jett's is not in their performance of sexuality. Until the late 1990s, Jett's persona, performance, and music remained largely de-sexualized as she preferred to wear men's fashions while not adopting a masculine appearance, and her lyrics held few references to her gender at all, theoretically giving her more credibility as a musician rather than a female performer than Benatar's image allowed her. Supporting Jett's potential credibility with musicians and rock critics is the fact that she is widely recognized as a songwriter and as a guitarist rather than a singer. In 1977 she produced the only album released by punk band The Germs, (GI), which received great critical reviews and is highly regarded by punk fans as a triumph in

⁷⁶ Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. (USA: Routledge, 1990)

the genre. This added level of musical depth and skill would theoretically lend Jett more credibility with some audiences as a musician than Benatar and garner her more critical attention, but Benatar's commercial and critical success greatly outweighed Jett's in the 1980s. Benatar has been quoted as describing her persona as less "rock" than Jett's, saying "Joan Jett made me look like Marie Osmond. She was such a hard-ass."⁷⁷ Why then, would Jett's skill, dedication, and documented struggle to enter the industry not place her on the same platform in scholarly rock discussions as a male with her pedigree?

Women and the Electric Guitar

In Mavis Bayton's 1997 article "Women and the Electric Guitar" she discusses the existing theory of the electric guitar being a masculine instrument, and suggests that a woman who becomes proficient with the instrument is not only a threat to the culture of masculinity in rock music, but also upsets established gender conventions in music and society. Societal pressures encourage women to pursue romance and eventually take on the role of wife and mother, rather than focusing their energy on learning and becoming proficient with an instrument like the electric guitar. There have always been instruments that are socially acceptable for women to learn, like the piano, flute, or violin, all instruments that are recognized as delicate and feminine, though all instruments require the same level of determination and dedication to perfect.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Kennedy, Kathleen. "Results of a Misspent Youth: Joan Jett's Performance of Female Masculinity." *Women's History Review*. 11:1 (2002) 91

⁷⁸ Bayton, Mavis. "Women and the Electric Guitar." In *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender*.

For Jett, the stigma associated with a woman who dedicated her time to a 'masculine' instrument never made sense. She publicly questioned:

What does the statement "Girls can't play rock and roll" even mean? Are you saying that girls can't master an instrument? Because I remember as a kid being in band class with girls who played the cello, who played the violin, who could play Beethoven and Bach pieces. So, no, that's not it. What you're saying is, socially, girls aren't *supposed* to play rock and roll. Because socially, rock and roll means sexuality.⁷⁹

Jett's comments reinforce the unjust nature of a male-dominated canon, and the danger of eliminating female musicians from critical musical discussions as it simply perpetuates the idea that rock music is not an arena in which women can excel.

In a 1977 interview, blues singer-songwriter and guitarist Bonnie Raitt explained that though it was also difficult for men to be noticed in the music industry, women had a whole series of stigmas and reputations to avoid to be noticed among the many men trying to make a living with music.

It could get easier if there were more women instrumentalists just sort of sprinkled around in more bands – and I don't mean the all-girl band situation, which is often exploited for its own sake. I was lucky. I played the guitar, which seemed like a gimmick, and one of the reasons I got where I am is because I was cheap. When you hired me as an opening act, you didn't have to hire a whole band, you just hired me. I carried my own guitar, I did a little blues and some ballads, and I didn't threaten the male act on the bill.⁸⁰

Raitt's observation shows how limited even highly skilled female performers felt in male-dominated music genres. She accurately describes how easily female

Ed Sheila Whitely. (New York: Routledge: 1997): 40

⁷⁹ Blenstock, Richard. "Joan Jett: Jett Set." *Guitar World* (May 2010)
http://www.guitarworld.com/article/joan_jett_jett_set

⁸⁰ 'Flashback', from interview with Patricia Brody, May 1977, *Guitar Player* (April 2009): 160

musicians are downplayed and ostracized for being “gimmicks” merely by threatening the status quo and recreating musical situations often employed by men, whether it be forming a single gendered band or by picking up a masculine instrument. It severely limits a female performer’s ability to be critically acclaimed and recognized, when even demonstrating skill and proficiency is seen more as a threat than as an asset.

The sexuality of the electric guitar is not only well documented through Bayton’s account among many others, but it is visually present in popular culture and reinforced through the performances of many male performers. Male performers from Chuck Berry to Prince have exploited the phallic appearance of the electric guitar visually, and the nature of the instrument’s appearance is only emphasized by the position in which many masculine performers hold it, with the body of the guitar directly over the crotch so that the long neck resembles a grossly enlarged penis, which is constantly stroked with the fingering hand. The reason behind holding the guitar in such a position does not lie in increased comfort or dexterity; it is in most cases strictly aesthetic. Beginner guitarists are often encouraged to play with the guitar held at a higher stance, as a higher position will increase mobility and comfort in the wrist ensuring an easier playing experience. However, holding the guitar in such a manner is often perceived by audiences as being sissy, according to Bayton’s interviews and accounts⁸¹ and as “dorky” in

⁸¹ Bayton, 44

comparison to a “cool” lower stance according to some beginner guitar reference books.⁸²

Jett has always been well aware of the phallic imagery created by a low guitar stance, and hasn’t shied from embracing it despite her gender. In 2010 Jett described her take on guitar stance while explaining how she taught young actress Kristen Stewart to emulate her in the 2010 film *The Runaways*. She consciously explained that when she plays guitar, the pick-ups of the instrument stay firmly placed above her crotch to maintain a deeper level of connection with the instrument, citing the spiritual sexual connection she has with her instrument. In a particularly interesting comment, she describes yelling at Stewart, instructing her: “Kristen! Pussy to the wood! Fuck your guitar!”⁸³ In this context, she is not using the guitar as an extension of male genitalia, but perhaps describing a woman’s interaction with the masculine instrument, placing her in a position of sexual power and control. Steve Waksman explains that critically acclaimed guitarist Jeff Beck views his guitar placement in a similar way, explaining that for Beck the pick-ups were the part of the guitar that ensured the instrument’s “wholeness” as it is the part that supports the instrument’s amplification. Notably, Beck also keeps the pick-ups of his guitar placed firmly above his genitalia, though he does not publicly reference the phallic nature of the instrument as a reason.⁸⁴

⁸² Chappell, Jon. “Holding Your Own” in *Rock Guitar for Dummies* (Hoboken: Wiley Publishing, 2001)

⁸³ Blenstock, Richard. “Joan Jett: Jett Set.” *Guitar World* (May 2010)
http://www.guitarworld.com/article/joan_jett_jett_set

⁸⁴ Waksman, Steve. *Instruments of Desire: The Electric Guitar and the Shaping of Musical Experience*. (USA: Harvard University Press, 2001): 245

The phallic imagery of the guitar has not exclusively alienated women from playing the instrument, but it stands as a physical representation of the masculinity that is inherent in rock culture. At its inception and throughout its early development, rock music was not a style anybody could seek to learn through traditional lessons. It was instead learned mainly through networking and community learning with other rock musicians. Jett has described her frustrations when, as a teenager, she sought electric guitar lessons and was ridiculed by teachers who would try and teach her older standards like “On Top of Old Smoky” in place of the harder rock music she asked for. Jett’s introduction to making rock music came from her initial self-teaching and developed as she played with The Runaways and was granted access to some of the rock community’s knowledge. The technological component of the electric guitar also alienated women, as the many electronic components and facets of learning to effectively use the instrument were not necessarily familiar to women in the 1950s and 60s as the technology developed, and men were largely protective of this information. The ‘boys club’ of rock and roll music excluded women to protect the masculinity of the genre and the instrument, while simultaneously building a very gender-specific canon.

According to Marcia J. Citron, canonization results in the legitimizing of dominant ideologies and value systems in any given genre, creating a self-perpetuating definition. “In general, the values encoded in a canon affirm a particular cultural group”⁸⁵ and in the case of rock music, the dominant group is male, to the exclusion of females. As a result, women like Joan Jett had very few, if

⁸⁵ Citron, Marcia J. *Gender and the Musical Canon*. (USA: First Illinois, 2000): 21

any, female role models to emulate or aspire to model themselves after, which resulted in a cycle of comparison that further promoted men as the pivotal forces in rock. This cycle is still powerful today. Women in rock and alternative genres of music have constantly found themselves compared to male counterparts in the industry where they have so few recognized female predecessors. Norma Coates attaches a piece of promotional material from Patti Smith's *Gone Again* to articulate this point, showing that Smith's own promotional representatives felt the need to compare her to prominent male artists like Bono (Born Paul David Hewson), Michael Stipe, and Kurt Cobain to establish her position in rock history.⁸⁶ This unintentionally acts to propagate and enforce the conception that the most important artists in alternative music are exclusively men, and that women can only be compared to them. Even Pat Benatar identified the gap between women and rock music, explaining that she was looking for a particular sound with her music not explored by women. In her memoir *Between a Rock and a Heart Place* she describes looking for the sound of... "Zeppelin, the Stones, the Clash, Foreigner – all had that intense, guitar-driven sound. [She] was well aware that this was new territory for a woman."⁸⁷ The sounds of Janis Joplin and Grace Slick wouldn't do as she exclusively wanted the rock sound only performed previously by men.

This cycle is infinitely detrimental to the development of young women as musicians, as those with rock music aspirations have very few women to idolize and are therefore imitating music produced by and identified with men. The damaging

⁸⁶ Coates, Norma. "(R)Evolution Now?" In *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender*. Ed Sheila Whitely. (New York: Routledge: 1997) 50

⁸⁷ Benatar, Pat and Patsi Bale Cox. *Between a Heart and a Rock Place: A Memoir*. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2010) 49

critical perception of female musicians as being secondary to male performers continues so long as the iconic figures in rock music are exclusively men, and women are identified as either imitating male contributions or rebelling against them, without individual critical merit, further establishing men as the dominant force in rock music.

The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame

Nowhere is the dominant presence of men rock felt more strongly than in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Foundation was established in 1983 and aimed to recognize those individuals and groups who had a profound effect on rock and roll music. The committee responsible for selecting inductees consists of rock and music historians who nominate individuals and groups to be presented to an international group of over 500 voters that have been designated experts in the field. On average, five to seven artists, individuals, or groups are inducted per year, resulting in 296 inductees since the first ceremony took place in 1986.⁸⁸ Of those inductees, a disappointing 56 are women, leaving men with 81% of the coveted spots in the museum.

In the year 2011, only one of the eight inductees was female. However, 2011 is the year that the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame decided to focus on women in many of their events. They staged two special exhibits about women in rock entitled “Girls on Film: 40 Years of Women in Rock” and “Women Who Rock: Vision, Passion,

⁸⁸ “Induction process.” *Rock & Roll Hall of Fame* at [http://rockhall.com/inductees/induction process/](http://rockhall.com/inductees/induction-process/)

Power.” The Hall of Fame also moderated a panel at the SXSW Music Festival in Austin, Texas, on March 18, 2011 called “A Woman’s Work: Changing the Music Industry.” Of the six individuals on the panel, only one was male, the Rock Hall’s Chief Curator Jim Henke, and he took the position of moderator. Of the five women on the panel, only one, Wanda Jackson, was a Hall of Fame inductee.

The first exhibit opened on February 14 and will run until September 5th. It features images of what Hall of Fame historians have deemed “...some of the most influential women in rock and roll over the last four decades.”⁸⁹ Joan Jett is notably absent from the list of the Hall of Fame’s inductees, yet is listed as a highlight of this exhibit, among a list of other featured women who all have places in the Hall of Fame.

The latter of the two woman-focused exhibits raises one very serious question: if there are so many women who helped propagate rock music, why are so few women recognized with a spot in the Hall of Fame? The exhibit is divided into eight musical eras, tracing the influence and importance of women in rock from the 1920s to present day and focuses on over 70 artists, including Jett and the Runaways, a number much greater than the number of female performers featured as inductees. Prominent in the exhibit is the array of provocative, revealing, and iconic outfits worn by women from Mary Wilson to Madonna and Lady Gaga. A promotional video for the exhibit focuses almost exclusively on the outfits found in the exhibit, spending a large amount of camera time on plunging necklines and high hemlines. The questionable choice of content for the exhibit is not the biggest

⁸⁹ “Girls on Film: 40 Years of Women in Rock” *Rock & Roll Hall of Fame* at <http://rockhall.com/exhibits/girls-on-film>

concern brought about with the exhibit. The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame is attempting to shed light on women in the music industry, but is doing so in a way that still excludes them from the larger history of music. They are identified primarily as women, not as musicians.

In 2003, *Rolling Stone* magazine published a list of their choices for the 100 greatest guitarists of all time. Out of the 100 musicians listed, ranging from Bo Diddley to Jack White of the White Stripes, only two women were included. Joni Mitchell was placed at 72, and Joan Jett can be found in spot 87.⁹⁰ In response to the male-dominated list, and written to coincide with the electric guitarist documentary *It Might Get Loud* which focuses exclusively on male players, *Elle* Magazine published their own list, counting the greatest female electric guitar players. Jett was placed in the number one position among women like fellow Runaway Lita Ford, Heart's Nancy Wilson and Sleater-Kinney's Carrie Brownstein.⁹¹ Though the *Elle* list was not published by a reputable music journalist or in a recognized music journal, it does showcase a wide variety of women who play electric guitar in diverse genres, and asks why they have been so blatantly neglected. In Jett's case, her reputation as an electric guitarist may not have done much for her critical reception, but the guitar community has promoted their respect for her abilities.

In 2008, Jett's guitar proficiency was recognized by the Gibson guitar company as they released the Joan Jett Signature Melody Maker, modeled after her

⁹⁰ Fricke, David "100 Greatest Guitarists of All Time" *Rolling Stone Magazine*.
<http://www.rollingstone.com/music/lists/100-greatest-guitarists-of-all-time-19691231>

⁹¹ Vadnal, Julie. "12 Greatest Female Electric Guitarists" in *Elle*. (August 21, 2009)
<http://www.elle.com/Pop-Culture/Movies-TV-Music-Books/12-Greatest-Female-Electric-Guitarists>

own Gibson guitar that she has played since she bought it from guitarist Eric Carmen upon the disbanding of his band, The Raspberries. The Joan Jett Signature Melody Maker had a white finish, identical to hers, and differs from the standard Melody Maker guitar only with the modifications featured on Jett's own instrument. In 2010, Gibson developed another Jett-inspired guitar with the Blackheart Melody Maker, which features the same technical specifications but with a black body detailed with red and pearl heart inlays after Jett announced that she needed a black guitar to play in concert.⁹²

Despite Jett's recognition from Gibson and on Rolling Stone's list among so few women, and her recognition as an important contributor to rock music through the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame's exhibits, she is still elusively absent from critical and scholarly discussions of rock music. Susan McClary identifies even the recent rising popularity in female performers as being discriminatory, where mainstream media often refers to women in rock as exceptions, not examples worthy of emulation.⁹³ Only in the canon specifically designated for women in rock is Jett recognized in any major capacity. One might wonder how an individual can be such an important and influential woman in rock, yet be remarkably absent from the discussion of individuals in rock music.

Though it is one of her more commercially successful singles, "Bad Reputation" provides unique insight into many reasons Jett has been excluded from academic and canonical discussions of rock music. She consciously defies

⁹² "Joan Jett Blackheart." *Gibson*. <http://www2.gibson.com/Products/Electric-Guitars/Melody-Maker/Gibson-USA/Joan-Jett-Blackheart.aspx>

⁹³ McClary, Susan. "Women and Music on the Verge of the New Millenium." *Signs* 25:4 (Summer, 2000): 1283-1286

established norms in behaviour, gender performance, and most importantly expectations in musical performance, and willingly disregards the criticism that is directed at her. Where much of her exclusion from the rock canon can be explained by the immense difficulty to classify her solely in one genre, it is only supported rather than eradicated by her reluctance to adhere to the norms of mainstream society.

CHAPTER 4 “ACTIVITY GRRRL”

“Activity Grrrl” Background

The song “Activity Grrrl” was part of Joan Jett and the Blackhearts’ 1994 album *Pure and Simple*, and was inspired by the work and ideologies of the Riot Grrrl culture of the early 1990s. The album came out as mainstream media was growing more familiar with and receptive to the Riot Grrrl movement, and many critics saw the album as both Jett’s response to the movement, and as her own personal recognition of her role as a precursor to the movement itself. Four of the twelve songs on *Pure and Simple* were co-written with Kathleen Hanna of Bikini Kill, a pivotal band in the scene, creating a stronger connection to the established networking of the Riot Grrrls. “Activity Grrrl” was also performed and recorded by a side project of Jett’s, Evil Stig, as a tribute to murdered Riot Grrrl Mia Zapata, a story to be discussed as this chapter progresses.

Joan Jett wrote “Activity Grrrl” after she attended a Bikini Kill concert, and the lyrics reflect the ways in which the performance and audience affected her own approach to expression, politics, and performance. The song describes the ways in which the Riot Grrrls work to promote their philosophies (“...she puts her thoughts into magazine form and passes them all around her dorm”), and praises the young women for their perseverance and determination in the face of adversity (...she’s looking at the challenge that tomorrow’s bringing”). Jett describes the Grrrls as “...impossible to ignore,”⁹⁴ and determined to right the wrongs in society without

⁹⁴ Jett, Joan and the Blackhearts. “Activity Girl.” *Pure and Simple*. Warner Brothers Records, 1994. CD

hurting or negatively impacting those around them. The Riot Grrrl is painted as a heroine fighting against an uptight world and defying the established norms through informing the masses rather than turning to aggression or pressure. Jett's Activity Grrrl is young, college-age, and is active in the community to support her causes but still has fun and expresses herself through singing, always looking ahead with a positive attitude. It acts as an anthem for these women, who happen to admire Jett, and her appreciation for their stance and their efforts is obvious.

Musical Analysis

Musically, "Activity Grrrl" marks a departure from Jett's established style. Where the majority of her songs until this point had followed the punk and classic rock progression of I-IV-V with little modulation and basic steady rhythms accompanying Jett's rough speaking and shouting style of singing, this song is a definite departure, perhaps in order to represent her changing musical and political views. The introduction and three verses of the song feature two chords played alternately, oscillating between E minor and its related major, G, before modulating to E major for a couple bars to lead into the chorus. The chorus is based in the key of E, and uses an all major key progression of V – VII – IV – V – I, adding more chordal variation than is seen in most of her work. After the second verse and chorus, the bridge emulates the introduction and verses but in a different key one major second higher with alternating F# minor chords and related major A chords. After the bridge, the song returns to the original introduction and goes through another verse and a series of repeated choruses in the original key.

Though the chordal structure of “Activity Girl” is more similar to a pop song than Jett’s standard punk and rock fare, the lack of full modulation in the song sets it apart from many pop songs, maintaining the song’s accessibility without extensive playing skill required, as there is little new or transposed material. The song’s bridge is the only real departure from the standard form of the song, and still shows little virtuosity on the guitar, opting instead for an aggressive drum solo as a break from the existing material. Where many pop songs feature a modulation to a new key part way through a song and continue in a new key, Jett’s song opts to return to the original key after only 8 bars of new key material.

In another musical change, Jett’s characteristic growls and snarls are barely present in this song, as she performs it with a more pure and lyrical tone than most of her songs. Where Jett previously fought to be taken seriously as an aggressive female performer in the rock genre, this new singing tone seems to represent an acceptance of her female voice, allowing her lyrics to deliver the message rather than her persona. Her exposure to the Riot Grrrls had given her a new perspective on performing aggressive music as a woman, and showed her that it was not only possible but also held great potential for influencing others.

The result is a song that is audibly more uplifting than many of Jett’s other songs because of the expanded harmonic material and her use of a more delicate singing style in place of constant growls and snarls. It also enabled Jett to explore a more story-based style of songwriting than is seen in her previously released material, as she tells the story of the activity girl rather than expressing brief ideas and emotions like in “I Love Rock ‘n Roll” or “Bad Reputation.” The goal seems to

still be to create music for people to enjoy and participate in, without any impression of superiority or virtuosity.

The cover of *Pure and Simple* was just that: simple and vulnerable. The cover art did not feature Jett looking tough and angry. It reflected the album's title, with a basic black and white photograph of Jett posing naked from the abdomen up. Her shoulders are slouched and seemingly nervously pulled forward, with a side profile looking tentatively at the camera. Her lips are parted and her hair is carefully styled to look like one might imagine she looked upon waking up, very soft and feminine, before adopting her masculine and aggressive appearance. Perhaps most noticeable is the lack of make-up. Jett's signature dark eyeliner is traded in for a natural look of pure simplicity, and leaving her looking unusually vulnerable. Her shoulders are bony, and her pose is almost awkward and uncomfortable, breaking down her image as a tough and emotionally distant. The performer who didn't want to share too much of her personal life was allowing her fans to witness a different side of Joan Jett.

The album artwork acts as a visual representation of the changes to her personal views, and her rebirth as a politically and actively aware woman with the ability to empower others, rather than just to make music because she loved the craft. She began writing songs with a more conscious knowledge that the lyrics she wrote and sang would be sung by girls, women, and men everywhere, so her lyrics needed to not only resonate with her fan base in a personal and relevant way, but to

represent opinions in a broader context. She recognized the power that now came with the music.⁹⁵

The Start of Riot Grrrl

After establishing her reputation as an aggressive female performer who could compete with her male counterparts in the 1980s, Jett's ambitions changed course with the inception and development of the Riot Grrrl movement of the early 1990s. She became not only an avid supporter of the movement's ideals but also a major contributor, not only as a musician, but also as a pioneer and advocate. This particular period of Jett's career differs quite significantly from her earlier endeavours, as her focus was no longer strictly on creating music for enjoyment, but she began to incorporate her own political and social beliefs into her music.

Many Riot Grrrls looked to Joan Jett as a role model, and she has retroactively been considered by a number of media sources and journalists as one of the original Riot Grrrls for her performance style and the role she played in the music industry in the 1970s and 1980s. The appreciation was reciprocated, as Jett became involved in the movement and credits it with inspiring her own political views and increasing her political activity and activism. In 1992 she began working with Bikini Kill after attending one of their concerts. She produced three songs for them, and in the process became very good friends with Kathleen Hanna, solidifying her position as a prominent figure in Riot Grrrl culture.

⁹⁵ Jett, Joan and the Blackhearts. *Pure and Simple*. Warner Brothers Records, 1994. CD

The Riot Grrrl mentality was in a sense a revival of the punk movement of the 1970s that directly inspired Jett. It allowed women to act in ways atypical of their gender and step outside the established gender norms propagated by society and by the music industry. Women could embrace elements of masculinity, from dress to attitude. It was liberating for women who felt confined by mainstream society and who found that the punk movement was largely a masculine one, with its focus on young males who were dissatisfied with their roles in society. The enemy in punk, the target against which punks protested, was largely undefined and included non-specific societal conventions and constraints of many forms. The goal was to rebel, though the question of “against what” was left blank for the individual to fill, with examples like the Sex Pistols who raised objections to many established conventions without offering any constructive ideas to remedy them. As punk was more focused on masculine rebellion, women began creating their own genre and surrounding culture not only to oppose restrictive customs and norms but also to work towards new understandings and freedoms, and called it Riot Grrrl.

Riot Grrrl was born in Washington State in the late 1980s and early 1990s, just as grunge became the most celebrated new underground music movement, originating in Seattle. Many women found that they were marginalized in the grunge scene and weren't even given the same marginal or theoretical level of respect for their feminist ideologies as they were within the punk movement. These women began their own subculture, still based in the ideals of punk but with some very notable differences. DIY (Do It Yourself) philosophies were at the forefront and

provided outlets for third-wave feminist expression not embraced by mainstream popular culture or other contemporary music movements.⁹⁶

The ideals of the Riot Grrrl movement were largely propagated through independently crafted and distributed periodicals called zines: a practice that also helped motivate and propagate the punk movement. They included interviews, editorials, and features to encourage the DIY movement by including ideas and tips for becoming more autonomous. The pages contained slogans espousing their beliefs, and aimed to empower the female readers and to provide an alternative to the male-dominated media. The movement originated with young women in college, and that was the target demographic for their zines, activities, and music. These women were young, determined, and educated.

The Riot Grrrls did not aim to ignore or completely destroy established patriarchal and hierarchical systems in music, but sought out a new way to create and distribute their music outside of those structures. In 1993 Bikini Kill and Huggy Bear, two very prominent Riot Grrrl bands, brought attention to the gendered nature of the manner in which even an audience of mixed genders views a live performance by asking all the men in the audience to move from their traditional place at the front (near the stage) to the back so that the women could engage with the music front and center. Men who ignored the request were singled out and performances were interrupted until the audience reflected the bands' ideal. Performers embraced and reclaimed the negative names that had been accorded to them, writing words like "whore" across their bodies and rewriting derogatory

⁹⁶ Turner, Chérie. "Introduction." *Everything you Need to Know About the Riot Grrrl Movement: The Feminism of a New Generation*. (NY: Rosen Publishing Group, 2001): 1-10

advertisements to bring attention to their negative nature and effect on young women.⁹⁷

For individuals like Jett, who was widely marginalized by mainstream music for her gender and lack of adherence to established normal gender conventions, the Riot Grrrl movement created an arena where acceptance was not only encouraged but a requirement. Women did not have to fight or ignore how they were widely perceived. They could address it and re-appropriate it in whatever way they were comfortable with. The aim was to constructively create a new standard in response to what was wrong with mainstream music.

Allison Wolfe and Molly Neuman created the name Riot Grrrl as they searched for a title for the weekly zine they were beginning to write. Though Riot Grrrls had many ambitions, intentions, and philosophies, critical and scholarly accounts focus on dismantling common conceptions of femininity and feminism and reconstructing the image and derogatory connotations of being a girl as primarily important and common. Bikini Kill's Kathleen Hanna, an active feminist who was at the forefront of the movement, explained that the different spelling of "girl" acted to reclaim the word and fuel it with the aggression and confidence that society teaches girls to downplay.⁹⁸ This is reflected in the styling and clothing of many Riot Grrrls, who would wear clothing that juxtaposed stereotypically feminine styles with masculine ones, combining feminine clothing with cropped haircuts or combat boots or displaying ironic slogans on their clothing.

⁹⁷ Leonard, Marion. "The Riot Grrrl Network: Grrrl Power in Indie Rock." *Gender in the Music Industry*. (USA: Ashgate, 2007): 119

⁹⁸ Gilbert, Laurel and Crystal Kile. *Surfergrrrls: Look Ethel! An Internet Guide for Us*. (Seattle, 1996):

Independent zines and music allowed for uncensored expression, where women were free to speak their minds and share their experiences and struggles with society.⁹⁹ Gayle Walde and Joanne Gottlieb's chapter on Riot Grrrl addresses the root of these struggles, identifying gender standards in childhood as the root of many social objections that develop in adulthood. Young girls are encouraged to adapt more demure and self-conscious personalities in contrast with young boys who are widely encouraged to command power in patriarchal society. Jett's career in particular has been judged by these patriarchal standards, as her brash personality in "I Love Rock 'n Roll" and "Bad Reputation" strongly rebels against these social expectations. Riot Grrrls take a position of power by adopting masculine behaviour, mainly through the tactic of self-naming and bringing attention to their sexuality and physical bodies, with female band names like Hole and Snatch to complement male band names like the Sex Pistols and Meat Puppets.¹⁰⁰

Most Riot Grrrl music audibly resembled punk music, using loud instrumentation with a rough, unpolished sound that made use of distortion and aggressive vocals, not unlike Jett's own music of the 1970s and 1980s. Bands like Bikini Kill led the way, with singer-songwriter Kathleen Hanna lending her voice to the cause not only through music, but also as a founder of the prominent zine *Revolution Girl Style Now*. Bikini Kill did attract the attention of the mainstream

⁹⁹ Coulombe, Renée T. "You're Just a Girl! Punk Rock Feminism and the New Hero in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*." *Music, Sound and Silence in Buffy the Vampire Slayer* ed. Paul Attinello, Janet K. Halfyard and Vanessa Knights. (Burlington: Ashgate, 2010) p149-164

¹⁰⁰ Gottlieb, Joanne and Gayle Wald. "Smells Like Teen Spirit: Riot Grrrls, Revolution, and Women in Independent Rock." *The Popular Music Studies Reader*. Ed. Andy Bennett, Barry Shank & Jason Toynbee. (USA: Routledge, 2006)

media, who recognized the band's musical contributions but belittled their cause. The *Daily Star* identified them as "... outrageous, fast-living, dirty-talking, hard-drinking, all-girl bands..."¹⁰¹ while portraying the women as little more than brats and rebels. Marion Leonard identifies the media's reaction to Riot Grrrl as dismissive of the feminist objectives of the movement, as many media outlets linked the women to other youth cultures focused on delinquency, in part due to their young ages.¹⁰² This led many Riot Grrrls to avoid any interaction with the mainstream, a feat that eventually and unintentionally led to the demise of the independent and autonomous punk scene of the 1970s. Joan Jett commented on the media's aggressive stereotyping of the genre, as she:

...explained to a reporter, 'and people shouldn't immediately throw up a wall and say 'oh my God, they want to cut my dick off, so I can't listen!' ... You don't have to agree but you could say, 'I hear what she's saying and I understand how she could feel that way.'¹⁰³

Jett's optimism was not widely adopted by the Riot Grrrls, who adopted a media blackout to avoid the backlash Jett describes.

With a rapidly growing woman-centered alternative culture, questions about the sexuality of the Riot Grrrls were inevitable and frequently referenced by mainstream media and culture despite their attempts to avoid recognition outside their community. The Riot Grrrls were strongly connected to the Queercore movement, and shared many members. Though the movement's belief in freedom of self-expression was extremely supportive of members who were not heterosexual,

¹⁰¹ Leonard, Marion. 125

¹⁰² Ibid

¹⁰³ Kennedy, Kathleen. "Results of a Misspent Youth: Joan Jett's Performance of Female Masculinity." *Women's History Review*. 11:1 (2002): 103

the common conception that Riot Grrrls were all “man-hating lesbians” was quite far from the truth. The aim was to support and empower women, not to degrade or offend men. The Riot Grrrls were certainly not against men, as there were many men who participated in the making and propagating of its music, like Bikini Kill’s guitarist Billy Karen and a number of the members of UK band Huggy Bear. Though sexuality was frequently a topic of discussion and a focus in many Grrrls’ personal accounts, there was no expectation of any specific sexual orientation. The only requirement was acceptance of others. The goal was to empower and support women of any orientation, a position Jett firmly supports and promotes.

Joan Jett and the Riot Grrrls

There have been many discussions of Jett’s sexuality in mainstream media, but they are rarely discussions Jett herself participates in. She has described herself as a sexual person and a sexual performer, and has voiced the insecurities she felt when her sexuality was questioned as a young woman in *The Runaways*. As she matured, she ignored these questions and embraced the idea of being perceived in a highly sexual and ambiguous light, explaining in her own words that “If someone calls me a slut or dyke now, I don’t care. I like being dirty and sexual, I like making them squirm.”¹⁰⁴ Her perspective led to the emphasis being placed on her gender rather than her suspect and much-questioned sexuality, and she has publicly voiced her desire to be recognized as a musician rather than a female musician or by any definition based on her sexuality. Her focus was, and has always been the music,

¹⁰⁴ Jett, Joan. Interviewed by Conniff, ‘Cool Jett,’ pp. 17-18.

though her involvement with the Riot Grrrls led her to view her music as a tool for empowerment. Her early dismissal of perceptions of her sexuality lent to her role model status for the Riot Grrrls who sought to evade classification.

Jett credited the Riot Grrrls with giving a voice to marginalized women, and creating a healthy outlet for expression. She has publicly supported the movement when mainstream media sought to categorize it and unfairly accused it of being a group of man-hating women of alternative sexual orientations. After her introduction to the Riot Grrrl network, she began participating in and advocating for many women-focused organizations, from the National Organization for Women to a number of pro-choice efforts where she openly participated in rallies and events. Working with women who were victims of abuse and neglect and gaining a new knowledge of how difficult it was for many women to express themselves gave Jett new determination and a goal to empower women through her music as well as her political action. It was this new appreciation that led Jett to feel a strong connection to one particular victim of sexual abuse: Seattle's own Riot Grrrl Mia Zapata.

Mia Zapata and The Gits

At the forefront of the Seattle Riot Grrrl network was a band called The Gits, fronted by singer Mia Zapata. They released a debut album in 1992 titled *Frenching the Bully* and in 1993 their sophomore album was near completion when on July 6, Zapata was found dead in Seattle, the victim of a vicious physical assault and rape that ended with her assailant strangling her. The underground music scene rallied to put pressure on police to catch her killer, and grunge acts like Nirvana and

Soundgarden and fellow Riot Grrrl bands performed concerts and charitable fundraisers in her memory.¹⁰⁵

It was this horrific event that prompted a number of local Riot Grrrls and womens' rights activists to found Home Alive, a nonprofit advocacy group and program that provided self-defense resources to women in Seattle. Zapata's murder also influenced a number of songs, notably one written by Jett and Hanna titled "Go Home," which appeared on a benefit album in support of Home Alive. The same recording would also appear on Joan Jett and the Blackhearts' album *Pure and Simple*. The music video for the song ended with a plea for those with any information on Zapata's untimely demise to contact authorities, as the killer was still unknown and the murder unsolved at the time of the recording.

Lyrically, the song tells the story of a woman being stalked, and follows the effects of being followed and feeling vulnerable under the watch of a threatening man. Beginning with the words "Walking down the street at night, I am so aware of you. Give me a reason to fight, when there's no one to protect you,"¹⁰⁶ it stands as a declaration for a woman to protect herself, and turn her anger and aggression towards the attacker. It tells her to ignore the inner monologue that directs her to hide and run home, and encourages her to know how to protect herself, a message embraced by Home Alive. The lyrics encourage the woman to get angry and fight

¹⁰⁵ Simmonds, Jeremy. "Mia Zapata." *The Encyclopedia of Dead Rock Stars: Heroin, Handguns, and Ham Sandwiches*. (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2008) p301-302

¹⁰⁶ Jett, Joan and the Blackhearts. "Go Home." *Pure and Simple*. Warner Brothers Records, 1994. CD

back rather than put herself in further danger, as she shouts “Get that voice outta my head, I will choke it dead, dead, I will stab it dead, dead, I will kill it dead, dead.”¹⁰⁷

The music video illustrates the same story, with the woman (played by Jett) being torn by fear and indecision as she debates whether she should run or fight. The video shows Jett deciding to take on her attacker, and she ultimately subdues him and runs from the scene as the video closes. It encourages women to take control over dangerous situations rather than risk allowing themselves to become victims, a philosophy embraced by Riot Grrrls in many facets of life.¹⁰⁸

After “Go Home” was released, the three remaining members of The Gits (Matt Dresdner on bass, Steve Moriarty on drums and Joe Spleen on guitar) contacted Jett and asked for her help in their effort to raise funds to hire a private investigator to pursue Zapata’s case after initial police efforts didn’t produce any results. Their goal was to have Jett perform Zapata’s vocals on a number of their songs, and have the Gits accompany her on a number of her own songs in a benefit concert. Though Jett had not personally known Zapata, she was touched and deeply affected by her tragic end, and she signed on to the project. A few songs quickly became an entire set, and the band performed as Evil Stig (Gits Live spelled backwards). After a successful string on live performances, they released a live recording in August of 1995 to gain further financial support for their causes.¹⁰⁹

The recording not only featured a number of Zapata’s original songs and a number of Jett’s, but also the song “Last to Know” which was written by Jett and the

¹⁰⁷ Ibid

¹⁰⁸ Kennedy, Kathleen. 105

¹⁰⁹ “Evil Stig Press Kit, 1995” Available at <<http://joanjettbadrep.com/presskits/pkes.shtml>>

remaining Gits. For The Gits' original song "Whirlwind," Jett's vocals are accompanied by a recording of Zapata singing, allowing Jett to sing with the woman she never met, but for whom she was working so hard to find closure for. For Dresdner, Moriarty, and Spleen, it was a new opportunity to perform the songs they created and loved, and had thought they would never perform again. For Jett, it was an opportunity to pay homage to a woman whose life ended too soon, and to fully submerge herself back into the underground music scene without the watchful eye of the critics who panned her for her pop roots by performing under the band's name and not her own. She could play for an audience that appreciated not only her career, but also the cause she was supporting through the performance. The quartet have all described their experience as natural and comfortable, to a degree that none had expected after Zapata's murder.

Jett's vocals represented the grittier and more unrefined side of Zapata's original vocals. Zapata's voice was versatile, and easily moved from a punk-inspired growl and speaking style of singing to a refined singing style with melodic development and skillfully applied vibrato perhaps more reminiscent of a popular music style. Jett's performance drew on the tough and aggressive quality of Zapata's singing, and the direct and honest lyrics were easily adapted to suit Jett's vocal style.¹¹⁰

This project also enabled Jett to experiment with her performance persona, as she performed the Evil Stig music as the lead vocalist but without her trusted Gibson guitar slung over her shoulder. Where Jett has previously connected her

¹¹⁰ Gits, The. *Frenching the Bully* (reissue). Broken Rekids, 2003. CD

musical power to her guitar playing, focusing on her connection with the guitar and establishing her own guitar playing position as was discussed in the previous chapter, she was now taking on the role of lead singer without her guitar as a shield.¹¹¹ Rather than adopt a removed stance when performing out of her comfort zone, she took the opportunity to further blur the lines of performer and audience as she would lean further into the crowd and crouched down to meet them face to face without the guitar hindering her mobility. She truly embodied the spirit of the punk movement that had initially inspired her musical career, never removing herself from the fans or placing herself above them in performance.

In 2004, a suspect in Zapata's murder was found, as DNA evidence connected construction worker Jesus C. Mezquia to the crime scene. In March of that year, he was convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to 36 years in prison. Home Alive continued to help women in Seattle for seventeen years, before closing in June of 2010 due to financial difficulties.

Fetish

The changes Jett experienced through her work with the Riot Grrrls carried through into her career following her collaborations with their network. In 1997, Jett made the first major change to her image since she came into the music industry as a teenager. Always known for her black shaggy hair, dramatically dark eye makeup and clothing that verged on masculine, and represented her tough persona, Jett made a complete, though temporary, transformation to her long established

¹¹¹ Evil Stig "Second Skin." Live performance available at
<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GewOoqpZDpc>>

image. The look that once identified Jett as tough had become mainstream by the 1990s as more hardcore styles and images became prominent in popular culture. Jett embraced this time as an opportune one to play with her image to better reflect her new ideology. She cut her long shaggy hair to a short, cropped style and bleached it blonde, and replaced her tough and masculine clothing with tight revealing leather and latex ensembles embellished with S&M accessories to accent her many tattoos and piercings.¹¹² Though she has since reclaimed her black shaggy mane and returned to her original established image, she made it visually evident that her perspectives had changed since “I Love Rock ‘n Roll.”

The change in Jett’s hairstyle is the most notable of the changes in her style, and perhaps the most referential to the Riot Grrrl style. Where the Riot Grrrl style features the juxtaposition of the overtly feminine and the masculine in dress, Jett’s hair does the same thing. She traded in conventionally “feminine” long hair for a tightly cropped style, yet changed her hair colour to blonde, a colour more sexualized and identified as feminine by popular culture. This parody of the bombshell blonde image played well into Riot Grrrl culture and raised further questions on Jett’s sexuality. Where blonde female performers like Debbie Harry are often thrust into the role of feminized sex symbol, Jett’s blonde hair accessorized a sexual persona that was not traditionally or distinctly feminine, but instead emphasized her aggressive and tough attitude in a sexualized way.

The change in her appearance coincided with the recording and subsequent release of her 1999 album *Fetish*, her most highly sexual album to date. Many of the

¹¹² Jett, Joan and Todd Oldham

songs on the album deal with S&M themes and feature sexually graphic lyrics, allowing Jett to cover new territory after twenty years of recording and performing with little attention paid to matters of sexuality.¹¹³ In lieu of masking her female sexuality for fear of it negatively affecting the public's perception of her as a performer and musician, the experiences and insights she gained through work with the Riot Grrrls inspired her to use her sexuality as a tool of empowerment. She had come full-circle, from the Runaways' exploited sexualization to a mature, empowered sexual image she controlled.

The sado-masochistic community is frequently connected to the homosexual community due to its interest in transformative gender roles and its identity as an "other" to mainstream ideas of sexuality. In Leo Bersani's discourse on masochistic culture, he describes sexuality as being a predominantly masculine construct driven by desire that is understood solely from a heterosexual male perspective. In S&M, women are often placed in the dominant position, which Bersani interprets as a prominently lesbian role where a woman is either imitating the degradation women face in standard sexual relationships or enacting her desire to be the male in a relationship. This would place any man being dominated in the traditionally feminine role, embracing his desire to be dominated by another man.¹¹⁴ Beneath the implications of sexuality as basis for masochistic desires is the idea that S&M is based on performance, and enables any individual to feel empowered through their desires, whether their interest lies in dominating or being dominated. S&M allows

¹¹³ Jett, Joan and the Blackhearts. *Fetish*. Blackheart Records, 1999. CD

¹¹⁴ Bersani, Leo. *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986)

for equal choice and control between the individuals concerned without restriction based on natural or biological characteristics. It is a way to mimic standard heterosexual roles but in whatever construct one might desire, raising the question of whether heterosexuality is innately desired as homosexuals aim to elaborate on standard hetero roles.¹¹⁵

Despite any critical analyses of the implications of S&M culture on femininity and female roles, women have embraced sado-masochistic practices as an outlet for expressing themselves sexually without the constraints of typical sexual practices. In *Fetish's* title track, Jett graphically describes the use of bondage, pain, dominance, and submission through the account of an individual performing as a 'top.' Underneath the description of an aggressive encounter lies respect; as the 'top' character Jett works to connect to her partner and create a mutually beneficial environment.¹¹⁶

To create further ambiguity about Jett's own sexuality and sexual preferences, many of her songs are not only gender neutral, but are also told from a third person perspective. For instance, Jett tells the story of a woman referred to as Baby Blue in the song of the same name, telling the tale of her search for sexual satisfaction wherever she can find it. In this account, Jett is the storyteller, never identifying with the individual in any first-person account. This not only distances Jett's personal sexual life from her musical product, but also creates a song with which any individual can identify, while still encouraging any fan to sing along

¹¹⁵ Hart, Lynda. "That was Then: This is Now: Ex-changing the Phallus." *Postmodern Culture* 4:1 (1993)

¹¹⁶ Jett, Joan and the Blackhearts. "Fetish." *Fetish*. Blackheart Records, 1999. CD

without feeling out of place or excluded from the target audience because they don't personally identify with the song's message. This is quite a departure from her earlier songs that were not related to her sexuality, where she often associated personally with the lyrical content, singing "I love rock 'n roll" and "I don't give a damn about my bad reputation."

Jett's *Fetish* album does provide a unique insight into her own perceptions of sexuality, though it is largely ambiguous and verging on androgynous. The album cover features a photo of her bare back with a collar and chain, and the disc's insert prominently features a definition of the word 'fetish' one must assume to be Jett's own preferred definition. It defines a fetish not only in sexual terms but also as a desire with spiritual connotations and personal relevance. According to Kathleen Kennedy, the evidence created throughout the album supports the theory that Jett sees S&M as a way to use sex and sexuality as a weapon, in which violence is not used to restrain or hurt individuals, but rather to systematically destroy traditional boundaries and constructs.¹¹⁷

Though the insights and ideals the Riot Grrrls passed onto Jett were largely political rather than sexual in nature, the transformation in Jett's public performance of sexuality with *Fetish* closely follows the transformation in her political awareness as seen in "Activity Grrrl." She began to express herself explicitly and without hesitation through her music, using her own opinions and insights to empower a new generation of women just as rock and roll and punk music had inspired her through the endless possibilities they allowed.

¹¹⁷ Kennedy, Kathleen 107

The Riot Grrrl movement acted to create a serious voice for female musicians who would historically be relegated to the pop music canon, strictly based on their gender. Where the previously discussed rock and punk canons were dominantly male, women have generally been relegated to the pop canon, an arena where there was no immediate need to take performers seriously as musicians. Although Jett's beginnings in the Runaways would have her placed in the pop genre, her solo career has placed her far from consideration in the pop canon. She has always been aggressive and confrontational, and her contribution to the Riot Grrrl community enabled her music to become a vessel for her political beliefs, adding a level of depth uncommon in pop music. As a result, even the 'default' canon for women in popular music won't count Joan Jett as a prominent figure.

This particular period of Jett's career acts as a departure from her earlier music, as she shows tremendous growth in her music, style, and overall message. The Riot Grrrls influenced Jett to accept her persona as outside traditional music genres or canons and embrace her personal self rather than her image to be accepted as a musician. She took the ideals and messages of the Riot Grrrls and created a new and dominantly positive musical identity for herself outside the canonical structures, drawing herself farther from the expected image of a rock or punk icon with renewed confidence. She explored her artistic and theatrical potential without the restriction created by typical rock and punk personas.

CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION

Through analysis of many aspects of Joan Jett's career, persona, and musical contributions, it can be argued that Jett's career and music merit a place in musicological discussion despite her refusal to strictly adhere to canonical characteristics. The longevity of her career proves that she has managed to remain relevant to audiences for over 30 years, despite the commercial and arguably in-authentic way in which she was introduced to the music community. Her persona allows for many applications of gender theory, culminating a rather unique case study for female masculinity, while her music argues for a rethinking of the idea that punk and rock music genres belong solely to men.

The only musical discussion in which Joan Jett garners any recognition is one that is dedicated to women in rock music. As I have explored in the previous chapters, the scope in which she is examined, when she garners recognition, is quite limited and even then her accomplishments as a woman in music are downplayed as secondary to a musician without gender definition. She is masculine and aggressive but does not downplay her femininity, embracing her long hair and heavy make-up while on stage, and does not bring any emphasis to her own personal sexuality lest it detract attention from her music. Until her collaborations with the Riot Grrrls, she in fact drew little to no attention to her gender at all, instead choosing to focus on the music she created for the enjoyment of her fans. She did not attempt to challenge the established gender conventions in popular music in any way. She instead opted to ignore them, and chose to not engage with them. She has consciously opted to avoid the title of a 'woman in rock,' impressing upon people the

idea that is strictly a rock musician, and that her gender has nothing to do with the music she creates. By not bringing attention to her gender, she has in fact distanced herself from the standard discussions of women in rock music in which many female performers use their gender as a primary topic of discussion in an attempt to bring about gender equality in music.

Though discussion of women in rock has experienced a great rise in prominence in academia and music journalism, it still places women in a category that is by default taken less seriously than the general canon, or at the very least removed from general musical discussion. It implies that although Joan Jett may have been voted by Elle magazine to be the best female electric guitarist, she is still only measurably talented among other women; she is still not 'good' enough to be considered simply a great rock guitarist. In academic settings, the gender-based canon is in itself difficult to organize and teach, as it encompasses so many genres and sub-genres over a greater period of time, rendering a chronological genre-based discussion difficult to negotiate. In many cases, they are either neglected or attempts are made to fit them into standard discussions of canons but always with an emphasis on their gender as it generally separates them from the remainder of the artists.

Joan Jett's allegiance to her craft and performance persona as they matured throughout her career create an opportunity for discussions of authenticity and gender that few, if any, other artists could provide. By the mid-1990s Jett had evolved from an artist worthy of mention in either the punk or rock canon to one who expanded her musical repertory beyond the constraints of either genre through

her increased personal, social, and political awareness. This development has placed her in a unique position of blurring genre lines and rising above those stereotypical definitions, a position widely felt by her many fans who admire her music and authenticity despite her lack of adherence to any genre. Joan Jett is too female and mainstream for punk, too female, too un-virtuosic and from an unsuitable beginning for rock, too rock and punk for pop, and somehow simultaneously not female enough (or least not female-focused enough) for those canons dedicated to women in music. Does this mean she should be excluded from academic discussions?

It must be noted that Jett is not a unique case of marginalization in musical discussions. Many artists have not garnered as much critical and scholarly attention as their careers may merit based on their unwillingness to conform to standard defined genres. Due to the structured and assimilated nature of the canon, a myriad of artists, like Jett, remain unexamined in scholarly research despite their contributions that merit recognition because they don't assimilate to established genres and are perhaps too unconventional to seamlessly fit into musical discussion. This does not mean that scholars and critics are unwilling to acknowledge the artist's contribution, only that standard parameters for popular music studies don't leave much room for unconventional contributors. What do you do with a case study that doesn't easily fit into the established parameters for discussion and has few or no contemporaries to align them with? There are a myriad of artists in this situation, who, if included in canonical-style discussions, would completely alter the defining characteristics of their chosen genre for better or for worse.

PJ Harvey is a critically acclaimed singer-songwriter, but her unconventional style of songwriter leaves her both unparalleled, and largely unexamined. Bill Friskics-Warren describes her as mythopoetic, and describes her ability in this genre as unrivaled by her peers. In this style, an author or writer creates mythologies, donning any number of personae to explore perspectives and tell stories from a number of sources and origins.¹¹⁸ Her process is extremely unique in popular music, which would allow for an equally unique analysis of her career and music, but because she does not fit into any established canon she is often excluded from discussion for lack of facilitated placement in discussion. She is too artistic for pop music, her sound is too mainstream to be considered art-rock or high art, and she is for lack of a better term too female for rock music. Her inclusion in a rock canon would bridge the existing gap between rock and art-rock music, blurring well-established lines of understanding in genre formation.

Bad Brains is another example of a largely ignored musical act that many, I feel, would argue merit a place in popular music scholarship. Formed in 1979, Bad Brains is seldom recognized for their role in the development of the hardcore punk genre. Their music was extremely political and extremely technical. Though it was still audibly punk, based on accessibility of playing and social dissatisfaction, the speed of their music required a level of technical proficiency beyond that of many punk musicians, and with the political capital of Washington as their base, much of the dissatisfaction felt by youth was politically oriented. In addition to the political

¹¹⁸ Friskics-Warren, Bill. "Sexual Healing, Or Somethin' Like Sanctified: Marvin Gaye, Al Green, Madonna, and PJ Harvey" in *I'll Take You There: Pop Music and the Urge for Transcendence*. (New York: Continuum Books, 2006) 67

climate of DC, Bad Brains had another political focus for their repression, as they were the first known all African-American punk band.¹¹⁹ Their influence has been noted through many East coast hardcore and punk acts, and their messages focused on unity and positivity while searching for a revolution in music and society. They dressed in Rastafarian colours and espoused Rastafarian beliefs, while often including reggae music in their live performances.¹²⁰ Though punks theoretically accept any individuals who are dissatisfied with the status quo, there have been so few groups composed of minorities that including them in any punk canon would only raise questions about why there weren't more. If their contribution was widely recognized, the standard image of a punk musician would have to be altered, or at least not so strictly defined by a white male.

Courtney Love has also been largely omitted from musical discussion despite her prolific music career as a singer and guitarist for the band Hole. Maria Raha describes Hole as "...the highest-profile female-fronted band of the '90s to openly and directly sing about feminism"¹²¹ and explains "Courtney Love's missteps, so devoured and overblown by gossip columns and news programs alike, only obscure the fact that a Hole album can pump adrenaline into every corner of a room, and that feminism can fit into fairly mainstream rock and roll."¹²² Love is however not recognized in many musical discussions because her public persona has been so

¹¹⁹ Maskell, Shayna. "Performing Punk: Bad Brains and the Construction of Identity." *Journal of Popular Music Studies*. 21:4 (2009) 411-426

¹²⁰ Andersen, Mark and Mark Jenkins. "I Against I" in *Dance of Days: Two Decades of Punk in the Nation's Capital* (New York: Akashic Books, 2003) 109

¹²¹ Raha, Maria. "Pretty on the Inside: Hole" in *Cinderella's Big Score: Women of the Punk and Indie Underground* (USA: Seal Press, 2005) 179

¹²² Raha, Maria. 181

badly tarnished through her husband, Nirvana's Kurt Cobain's suicide and her self-destructive public antics that her music has become secondary to the tabloid-fueled discussion of her as an individual. Her marriage to Cobain, the grunge movement's archetypal poster boy, placed her in a position not unlike John Lennon's Yoko Ono, where a woman's credibility as a musician is ignored in place of focusing on her relationship where she is a villain destroying a musical legend through her manipulation. Love was vilified even in the grunge community that previously supported her music. If she were recognized more seriously as a contributor to the grunge genre, a rough and raw sub-genre of rock, the Riot Grrrl movement and its place in rock history would be immeasurably different.

Women like Kate Bush and Annie Lennox don't fit into any established genres, where their music has elements of mainstream popular sounds but does not fit into the pop canon because of their higher application of artistry and emotion that defies the fabricated and easily digestible genre of pop. Many musicians in this position, like David Bowie or Radiohead, find themselves placed in a unique canon where their music is seen as art-rock: a modern popular music equivalent of high art music. This canon is however, dominated by men like the rock or punk canon, as male contributions are still largely considered more seriously than female musical contributions.

Canonical representations of music are extremely problematic, but have been widely adopted as a standard means for presenting musical history for lack of a simpler method for organizing and distributing information. As a result, fewer unique and multi-dimensional artists are explored in academic settings in favour of

those whose contributions are more easily placed and compared with their chronologically or stylistically contemporary artists.

This systematic classification of musicians does create a uniform understanding of popular music for future generations, while technological advances allow for a vast archive of music that does not necessarily fit into the canons that have been designated as most important to be heard. While marginalized musicians are becoming more prominent in specialized music discussion, the problem lies in the fact that they are often treated as exceptional cases, not a growing norm in popular music. The fact remains that over time, those who are not actively recognized face the risk of becoming lost in a sea of musicians. Though we are still aware of Joan Jett, Bad Brains, and PJ Harvey among so many other artists marginalized by genre classifications, once our current generation is being studied from a distant future perspective, the influential period of 1970 until now will need to be reduced to a brief portion of a lecture or textbook for brevity. Do we really want to be represented only by those artists deemed most relevant to canonic ideals?

This raises an important paradox in our understanding and interpretation of music. It has become ingrained in our interpretation of music that the authentic is always to be prized above that which is artificial, fabricated, contrived, or unoriginal. Authenticity is directly linked to individuality and creativity, ideas that are not represented in canons in favour of music that propagates certain aural or stylistic characteristics to better define a genre. We are however, as a culture encouraged to support those artists and musicians who change the norm and do something

creatively different and unique, outside commonly understood boundaries of genre. Keeping that in mind, how can a canon support an industry moving further into blurring lines, and how can we re-evaluate our understanding of past popular music without a canon?

Abandoning already established canons would be an extreme undertaking, as re-evaluating the music of recent history based on individual contributions and on a case-by-case basis retroactively would be difficult. The canon does also have some useful applications, mainly in defining genres through audible examples so that they can be fully understood and more easily applied to discussion of any given artist. Beyond this application, a canon is simply too limiting when there is such a diverse array of music being made that cannot be easily defined. The question that remains is of course how popular music can be effectively arranged and selected to suit an academic setting, as obviously every individual artist cannot be incorporated into discussion.

Although Joan Jett is only one of many women and musicians who have been ostracized from critical musical discussions, her career definitely provides insight into what types of musicians will be forgotten by future generations through exclusive use of the canon music history. The fact that Jett does provide so many opportunities for critical analysis opens the door for many other musicians to be examined through a multi-canonical and dimensional lens in a similar fashion, despite their absence from most academic discussions.

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