



the Sex revolts

Gender,

Rebellion,

and

Rock 'n' Roll

Simon Reynolds and Joy Press

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gender, rebellion, and rock'n'roll

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the sex revolts

To our parents

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introduction

When we started working on this project, we knew there was a book to be written, but we weren't sure exactly what it was. Telling people about our subject – gender and rock – elicited such intense and diverse responses we were even more convinced and confused. It was as though we'd confronted our friends with a Rorschach inkblot: everyone saw something different. Some women proffered examples of songs that they loved, but whose lyrics unsettled them; many men tended to assume that this was to be a book about that old chestnut, 'women in rock' (as if male artists were somehow exempt from the category of 'gender'). Others were defensive or even derisive at the mere mention of the word 'misogyny'.

Clearly, everyone felt that something was *at stake* in an investigation of rock'n'roll 'through the lens of gender'. Rock offers an imaginative space in which you can reaffirm your sexual identity, or stretch and sometimes escape its limits altogether. Suzanne Moore calls this imaginative activity 'gender tourism'. This might mean venturing where the grass seems greener, taking a walk on the wild side, enjoying a cheap holiday in other people's misery, or simply leaving your everyday self behind. Shy women can glimpse ferocity in the Stones or Sex Pistols; emotionally

armoured men can toy with androgyny, while male wimps can 'play soldiers', taking vicarious pleasure in warrior masculinity or megalomaniac fantasies.

The Sex Revolts began as a critique of misogyny in rock, gradually evolved into a survey of images of femininity in the rock imagination, and finally solidified in its present state: a kind of psychoanalysis of rebellion (male and female). In the first section, Rebel Misogynies, we explore ways in which the male rebel has dramatised himself *against* the 'feminine'. These include the born-to-run impulse (Rolling Stones, Iggy Pop), the soldier or warrior who takes refuge in the camaraderie of brotherhood-in-arms (the Clash, Public Enemy), and self-aggrandising fantasies of man-machine omnipotence (heavy metal, techno) and of kingship (the Doors, Nick Cave, gangsta rap).

The second section, Into the Mystic, examines idealised images of women and femininity in male rock – the endless expressions of a longing to *come home*, to return to the womb, that often take the form of cosmic/oceanic mysticism or worship of Mother Nature. This tradition – the psychedelic mother's boy – includes the Byrds, Van Morrison, Pink Floyd, Can, Brian Eno, My Bloody Valentine, et al.

In the third section, Lift Up Your Skirt and Speak, we trace some of the ways in which female artists have struggled to imagine and create a specifically female rebellion. Since this involves defining themselves against conventional notions of femininity, female rebels find themselves grappling with slippery contradictions. We concentrate on the strategies that seem most telling: masquerade/mystique (Kate Bush, Siouxsie, Annie Lennox, Grace Jones), demystification of conventional femininity (Slits, Raincoats, Riot Grrrl), the tomboyish mimicry of male rebellion (Joan Jett, L7), the 'confessional' mode (Janis Joplin, Lydia Lunch, Hole), and artists who embrace contradiction and revel in flux (Patti Smith, Throwing Muses, Mary Margaret O'Hara).

Why have we so starkly separated the men from the women, and the 'real men' from the mother's boys? Because it seemed the best way to bring out the patterns and connections that stretch across different eras. When it comes to gender difference, we share Gilles Deleuze and Felix

Guattari's suspicious but pragmatic attitude towards 'all the dualisms that are the enemy, an entirely necessary enemy, the furniture we are forever rearranging'.

From dualism to duo-ism. . . the intrinsic problems involved in two people writing as a single voice. Our male-female partnership has been both an advantage and a constraint; we've been able to correct each other's biases and blindspots, but we've also found it difficult to write directly about our individually gendered experience. At times, we've been tempted to shatter this neuter, univocal 'we' and open the text up to internal dissension. (We even toyed with using two type-faces, but ultimately shied away from this gambit as Derrida-esque whimsy.)

Because we leapfrog across time and space to sketch major threads, themes, lineages, traits, metaphors and obsessions, this book is necessarily far from comprehensive. We ignore many major figures, and spotlight some marginal artists, because they take certain tendencies to the furthest limit, and so reveal more. Earlier books about 'gender and rock' mostly concerned themselves with women's struggle against chauvinism in the music industry or with the more routine forms of sexism (as in heavy metal and gangsta rap). These blatant kinds of misogyny are, we feel, self-explanatory, so we've focused instead on what isn't so obvious: the misogynist subtext, the secret complicity in patriarchal values, that often lurks beneath the apparently subversive and libertarian. We're intrigued by the way that what sounds and feels like 'freedom' – the music of the Rolling Stones, the Stooges, Sex Pistols, for instance – can conceal the seeds of domination.

Iggy Pop once said of the women in his life: 'However close they come I'll always pull the rug from under them. That's where my music is made.' This is rock'n'roll *in excelsis*; this male ferocity, resentment, virulence, is the ESSENCE. Part of our goal in writing this book was to discover whether it's possible to imagine a rock'n'roll that *isn't* fuelled by this violent fervour to cut loose.

The Sex Revolts is not an attempt to bring these rock

rebels up before the sexual politics tribunal – it's more like an interrogation than a trial. For what it's worth, nearly all of the artists covered in the book are ones we like. Some of the 'worst offenders' – the Stones, the Stooges, Nick Cave, etc. – are among our all-time favourites. Our argument is simply that these artists' very exhilaration is inseparable from their entrenchment in 'unsound' gender politics. What makes these rebels so powerful is the psycho-sexual dynamic of breaking away.

Of course it is possible to get off on rock's energies without 'agreeing' with its anti-women impetus or even being consciously aware of it. For years, women have managed to find release in what – in the cold, dispassionate light of analysis – would seem clearly oppressive to them (e.g. Led Zeppelin, Guns N'Roses). It's a bit like being thrilled by a missile's flight while ignoring both its fuel (misogyny) and its target (you!). Or gasping at the Pyramids and blithely forgetting the immense suffering of the slaves who erected them.

If you choose to venture along the path of critical awareness, though, and start to dissect rock's psychosexual underpinnings, you quickly arrive in an interesting interzone of double allegiances – torn between the conflicting criteria of rock fandom and feminism, aesthetics and ethics. Ellen Willis captured this ambivalence in her essay 'Beginning to See the Light', in which she grappled with the apparent paradox that she, as a feminist, could be far more excited by the Sex Pistols' anti-abortion tirade 'Bodies' than by the wholesome positivity of most 'women's music'. 'Music that boldly and aggressively laid out what the singer wanted, loved, hated – as good rock-and-roll did – challenged me to do the same, and so, even when the content was antiwoman, antisexual, in a sense antihuman, the form encouraged my struggle for liberation. Similarly, timid music made me feel timid, whatever its ostensible politics.'

This paradox informed our thinking from the start, even before we opened Willis's book to find it spelled out so succinctly. And we certainly haven't resolved the aesthetics v. ethics, rapture v. responsibility dilemma, just consented to an uneasy truce. At times, we wondered whether we'd ever be able to listen innocently to the Stones or the Stooges

again. While it hasn't interfered with our pleasure, we do notice that our easy sense of abandon is ever so slightly checked, our listening shadowed by what we've unearthed. Don't say we didn't warn you.

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part 1

rebel misogynies

chapter 1

angry young men: precursors and prototypes for rock rebellion

‘One is still bound to the mother. All one’s rebellion was but dust in the eye, the frantic attempt to conceal this bondage....“Forever outside! Sitting on the doorstep of the mother’s womb.”’

Henry Miller (on Arthur Rimbaud)

Rebels come in all shapes and sizes. Some are goaded into revolt by the constraints of their specific social environment. There are the perennial rebels without cause (like Marlon Brando’s biker in *The Wild One*, who, when asked what he was rebelling against, retorted ‘what have you got?’). And there are rebels who look for causes to validate their insurrectionary temperament. What, if anything, unites these boys, these men? Precisely their masculinity.

That is, after all, what springs to mind when we think of The Rebel. Our argument is that, whatever the ostensible pretext or context, a large part of the psychological impetus of any rebellion is an urge to separate from the mother. Male rebellion is a re-enactment of the primal break that constitutes the male ego: the separation of infant from the maternal realm, the exile from paradise. The rebel re-enacts the process of individuation in endless and diverse rites of severance, continually flees domesticity. Inevitably, this flight is alloyed with regret, and often – as in the music of the Rolling Stones and Jimi Hendrix – leads on to a quest for a new home; unrest subsides and comes to re-berth in a mystical or idealised maternal idyll. As Nietzsche put it: ‘to build a new sanctuary the old sanctu-

ary must be first destroyed.'

So the rebel may simultaneously worship an abstract femininity (a home away from home) while ferociously despising and fearing real-life women. He can long for the womb and for an idealised mother-lover, while shunning or abusing the flesh-and-blood women in his vicinity. In the rebel imagination, women figure as both victims and agents of castrating conformity. Women represent everything the rebel is not (passivity, inhibition) and everything that threatens to shackle him (domesticity, social norms). This ambivalence towards the feminine domain is the defining mark of all the classic instances of rock rebellion, from the Stones through the Doors, Led Zeppelin, the Stooges, to the Sex Pistols, Guns N'Roses and Nirvana.

Jean-Paul Sartre's distinction between the rebel and the revolutionary is useful here. For him, the rebel is secretly complicit with the Order he revolts against. His goal is not to create a new and better system; he only wants to break the rules. In contrast the revolutionary is constructive, aims to replace an unfair system with a new, better system, and is therefore self-disciplined and self-sacrificing. Because of his irresponsibility, the rebel has access to the ecstasy of dissipation and living in the now; the revolutionary enjoys the satisfaction of merging his identity with the collective, long-term project of improvement whose fulfilment lies in the future. We take it as read that rock is not a revolutionary art, that its insubordination and ego tantrums are complicit with or bound within the terms of capitalism and patriarchy.

For the most part, the rebel's main grievance is that a particular patriarchal system doesn't let his virility flourish freely, but instead offers a life of mediocrity. He languishes as a cog in the machine, while dreaming of a life fit for heroes. Meanwhile, women have been left stranded between the status quo of patriarchy, and the alternative *filiarchy* of the rebels, the rock'n'roll brotherhood of Prodigal Sons. Here, too often women's only scope for self-