

## CHAPTER IV

In academic music, women faced certain troubles. This might not be the case in popular music. Technology and the Internet play a very strong roll in the way music is transmitted and downloaded. Though women have also experienced troubles and obstacles, it seems to be that, in this genre of music, the problem is that of content vs. image. We all know that sex sells, and it is no surprise that a woman would have to encounter this issue if she wants a career in popular music.

As we have seen, in the case of Tori Amos, this problem resulted in an inadequate portrayal of her musical ability and musicality. An artist or musician might think that the “music business” has something to do with music. Unfortunately this is not the case and it must be known before hand that the business side of it is what is all about at the end. With “Y Kant Tori Read” the idea was to profit from an artificial image using music as a pretext to market a product.

The idea of the “packaging” of the music has a lot to do with the visual side of the music itself, whether it has anything to do with it or not. The fact that the music industry has benefited from imagery and catchy tunes, has a lot to do with the birth of MTV (Music Television), a channel devoted to playing videos 24 hours a day 7 days a week. This pop-culture phenomena which first aired in 1981 has become an empire, dominating and dictating what is and what is not “cool”. Such a huge impact has now turned up to be the main way of distribution and advertising for any record or artist. The amount of air play of a video can insure the success of a song or band. In the case of Y Kant Tori Read, it barely made it on MTV. The question arises, would YKTR have been successful if the video had acquired more air time? Who knows?

But even if the “music video” was meant to expand our visual horizons, 30 years prior to that, rock music was making its way through our ears. Rock came to break and question all structural boundaries imposed by society. Still researchers and historians have gone through tough times describing or explaining this musical phenomena. This has been the interesting side of rock; there is no real definition since it involves so many aspects and sub genres. Probably, the most accurate statement ever made regarding rock n’ roll, can be found on the preface of the first edition of Rolling Stone Encyclopedia of Rock n’ Roll: “It is the most vital, unpredictable force in pop culture, and the exception to every rule. Like all important popular art, it can speak to and from the public’s heart of hearts even if it has been crafted by the most knowing artisans. And even at its most elaborate it hints at a rebel spirit: the idea that an outsider with something important to say can broadcast it to the world. At its best, rock can be entertainment, good business, and catharsis all at once; at its worst, it’s only rock n’ roll”.<sup>1</sup>

Today, the amount of existing genres is immense. Folk rock, psychedelic rock, hard rock, funk rock, blues rock, jazz rock, progressive rock, country rock, bubble gum rock, soul rock, heavy rock. The list goes on and on. But “one aspect of rock that has always been taken for granted by its proselytes and detractors alike is that it is a form of music that somehow means sex”<sup>2</sup>. In an article by Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie, “Of all the mass media rock is the most explicitly concerned with sexual expression... its musical elements, its sounds and rhythms, draw on other conventions of sexual representation, and rock is highly charged emotionally even when its direct concern is nonsexual”<sup>3</sup>. Back in the

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<sup>1</sup> Pareles, Jon. *The New Rolling Stone Encyclopedia of Rock n’ Roll*. Fireside, New York, 1983,1995.

<sup>2</sup> Simon Frith, Angela McRobbie. “*Rock and Sexualitiy*”. Routledge, London, 1990. p. 217.

<sup>3</sup> Simon Frith, Angela McRobbie. “*Rock and Sexualitiy*”. Routledge, London, 1990. p. 218.

50's and 60's, rock n' roll music was breaking through the main stream making, it a new outlet for younger generations to express themselves. Teenagers were all dancing away to the sounds of Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry etc. They were seen as rebels breaking and bending previously established rules at that time. Rock n' Roll was often referred by older people as "devil's music". Conservative folks were afraid of it giving its sexual innuendo and the tendency of young kids to rebel and expose their hidden desires and ideals. When Elvis appeared on TV, network producers were forced to shot him from the waist up. According to them, Elvis's dancing and movements were suggesting an explicit sexual message to kids all over the U.S. A.

Having this kind of scenario were even men were censored, women barely had the chance of being involved or having a place in music. When they finally began their way into the musical scene, it was in the form of little ensembles consisting of three or four members. These groups, like the Ronnettes or the Supremes were generally made up of one lead singer and two backup singers. They were all well dressed and their hair was always in place. There were no crazy dances, restricting their movements to a choreographed little routine where they barely moved. All focus was on their voices and the melodies they evoked. The songs they sang were often referred as "poppy love songs", where a man is idealized as being the boy next door and the longing of being with him. Women had no control of their music, image and performance. As Simon Frith mentions, " The subordination of women in popular music is little different from their subordination in other occupations; as unskilled rock workers women are a source of cheap labor, a pool of talent

from which the successes are chosen more for their appropriate appearance than for their musical talents”<sup>4</sup>.

These groups had their share of success and were clearly embraced by the music industry, but by the end of the 60’s and early 70’s things started to change. With the rise of artists such as Janis Joplin and Joni Mitchell, Debbie Harry and Grace Jones, it was obvious that women were heading to a new direction in the music world. These singer-songwriters started bending the rules that had been previously established by society and also by men.<sup>5</sup>

This sudden “uproar” came hand in hand with the establishment of the radical feminist movement in the 70’s. Judith A. Peraino says in her article “Rip Her To Shreds”, “Radical feminism teaches that the patriarchy has formed a male culture that privileges men and oppresses women”<sup>6</sup>. The ideology of this movement and the base of its beliefs came from the perception of comparing women “in terms of men and not within the context of other women”. There was no place for males and females to be equal<sup>7</sup>.

Radical feminists focused much of their work and efforts on “identifying either male-gender oppression or female-gender strengths”<sup>8</sup>. Their objective was to create an “alternative women’s culture”. As a result, feminists were bound to make an alliance with the lesbian movement of the 70’s. This union was not always a comfortable one, giving the fact that they shared the same ideals but did not share the same sexual preferences.

Out of all these unions and rebellions, women were able to find an outlet in music to express their thoughts and feelings through songs. As a result, the music produced by these individuals was called “women’s music”. Both the music industry and feminists use this

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<sup>4</sup> Simon Frith, Angela McRobbie. *“Rock and Sexuality”*. Routledge, London, 1990. p. 378

<sup>5</sup> Simon Frith. *“Music for Pleasure”*. Routledge, New York, 1988. p. 114.

<sup>6</sup> Judith A. Peraino. *“Rip Her to Shreds”*. Repercussions, Berkeley Press, 1992. p. 21.

<sup>7</sup> Op. Cit. p. 22.

<sup>8</sup> Op. Cit. p. 24.

term to refer to the “genre of music ideally written, performed and produced by and expressly for women”. In popular use, “women’s music” referred to “music whose lyrics convey an explicitly lesbian or feminist message, or to recorded music commercially released by a women-owned and operated label such as Olivia Records”<sup>9</sup>.

“Women’s music” was intensely influenced by another genre of music, also considered to be a political movement in the 70’s; Urban Folk Rock. This style of music consisted of “politically explicit lyrics to instill class consciousness”. Folk artists used unamplified instruments and their songs were usually very simple to insure musical accessibility to the audience. Women’s music artists also used unamplified instruments, but used them as a sign of opposition to the “amplified and electrified sound of male-dominated, sexist rock and roll” produced by bands like “The Rolling Stones”, which was referred to as “cock-rock”<sup>10</sup>.

According to Simon Frith, the new success for these “long-haired, pure-voiced, self-accompanied on acoustic guitar” women were “reinforced in rock by qualities traditionally linked with female singers ‘sensitivity, passivity and sweetness’”. For women, becoming “hard aggressive performers”, they had to become “one of the boys”. This came along with pain, frustration and in Janis Joplin’s case, death”<sup>11</sup>.

Amos’s music could be considered folk. For example, in “Me and a Gun”, the constant repetition of the melodic line, the simple harmonic structure (I – IV – V – I), and the lyrics being sung over and over, could be compared with some of American Folk’s early music. These similarities appear in songs like “Dich Justice” by Henry Lee, or “Old

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<sup>9</sup> Judith A. Peraino. *“Rip Her to Shreds”*. Repercussions, Berkeley Press, 1992. p. 25.

<sup>10</sup> Op. Cit. p. 27.

<sup>11</sup> Simon Frith, Angela McRobbie. *“Rock and Sexuality”*. Routledge, London, 1990. p. 370.

Shoes and Leggings” by Uncle Ech Dunford<sup>12</sup>, as well as in many other popular tunes of the time. Now, both of the songs (“Me and a Gun” and “Icicle”) show a simple accompaniment as that of a ballad, which in this case is done mostly by a banjo, violin or acoustic guitar. But what seems to link Amos’s music the most with folk is the addressing of issues, though not political, the songs do talk about realities lived by real people; in this case sexual abuse and religion. At the same time Tori Amos proves to be a rock musician. The openness and sexual honesty of her lyrics, and the challenging statements made through her music of her songs go hand in hand with a movement that was basically born out of a necessity to express ideals, thoughts, or feelings without restriction or censorship.

Whether her music, or any other rock artist work, fits any given genre, the fact is that this is a woman that has challenged the minds of people, the ways of structured institutions (religion) as well as her audience. She has been able to maintain a successful career surviving fads or fashion, adding to the fact that she has opened doors for so many women who follow her, makes her a an icon in the world of rock n’ roll. Tori Amos has showed through her music and work the vulnerable side of being a woman in the form of rich melodies and an enchanting voice, as well as her strength and courage in fighting inner demons; qualities often attributed to men.

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<sup>12</sup> *Anthology of American Music*. Disc 1-2.