Review


This book contributes to the growing literature that celebrates and interrogates the impact women have had in the development of rock. Whiteley focuses on specific female artists ‘who can be considered catalysts within their respective genres . . . and how and why they have moved the goalposts of what is arguably a male-dominated industry’ (p. 1). Thus, she sustains a theme of feminist resistance throughout the book, as she shows how each artist challenges dominant social views as well as musical styles and genres. Whiteley does not adopt a single feminist theoretical framework, however, as she prefers to reveal the changing debates in feminism over the decades from the 1960s to the 1990s. Rather, the author contemplates the female artists within their respective rock movements, discussing the social context and feminist issues that pertain to the given artist, adopting a plurality of feminist stances.

Whiteley offers historical and style-analytical commentary on the music of path-breaking female artists, beginning with Janis Joplin in the 1960s and concluding with the Spice Girls in the 1990s. Certain chapters provide the socio-historical context of rock music movements and the relevant issues of gender and sexuality within those movements. Other chapters offer case studies of selected artists and their music. The historical approach is evident in this organisation and, although the book is not intended as a history of women in rock, it serves nicely to develop critical ideas along a timeline, positioning the individual artists in relation to rock’s development.1

The opening trilogy of Chapters 1 through 3 explores three perspectives on 1960s rock. Chapter 1 reviews the social and musical context of the 1960s counterculture, which is demonstrated to be a male preserve, dominated by such artists as the Beatles, the Rolling Stones and Jimi Hendrix. During this period in rock, Whiteley identifies two schools of socio-musical thought: the ‘love’ school (illustrated by the Beatles), which resolved social dilemmas by affirming a sense of community and romantic notions of love; and the ‘sex’ school (illustrated by the Rolling Stones), which adopted a more confrontational approach to social problems, by extolling sexual aggression and freedom. Chapter 2 then explores how these schools defined ‘woman’ in generalised representations, as idealised feminine being, as sexual dominatrix, as earth mother, or as submissive sexual object. She cites examples of such representations in songs by the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Led Zeppelin and others, illustrating how the lyrics portray these female archetypes from a male perspective. This examination of patriarchal inscriptions of women is offset by the study in Chapter 3 of the emerging feminist consciousness in the late 1960s. Here, Whiteley provides a very brief overview of the diverse feminist viewpoints in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Given the purpose of this book to
illuminating the ‘Sexuality, Identity and Subjectivity’ of female popular artists, this chapter on second-wave feminism could have provided a more detailed account of the literature and political issues of that significant period.

Janis Joplin (Chapter 4). Within the male-dominated musical world of this period, it was difficult for a female artist to position herself – to define, claim and represent her own gender. Thus, Whiteley sets the stage for her first case study, in which she explores Janis Joplin’s struggle to assert her identity through musical expression. In her analysis, Whiteley adopts the interesting analytical perspective of how Joplin as vocalist relates to her supporting band. Whiteley distinguishes the blues as a style that permits an intimacy of delivery, and a sensitive relationship between the guitar and voice, from rock as a style that is power-driven, dominated by the guitar, creating a competition between guitar and voice (p. 57). She then examines how Joplin confronted the problems inherent in merging these two styles. Whiteley demonstrates Joplin’s power as a rock singer in ‘Piece of My Heart’ (p. 58), as well as her ability to explore the blues idiom in ‘Little Girl Blue’ (p. 61). Whiteley’s analyses combine subjective interpretation with music-technical description, creating a colourful and lively commentary. She concludes the chapter with a reflection on the choice faced by the female artist either to comply or to challenge the dominant codes in rock. Lamenting that Joplin’s choice to confront ‘marked her as degenerate rather than equal’ (p. 66), Whiteley nevertheless celebrates her assertiveness by featuring her so prominently in the book.

Chapter 5 prepares us for the singer-songwriters of the 1970s, locating their origins in folk revival and folk/rock fusions. The folk style allowed for freedom of expression, and that characteristic, combined with fusions of folk and rock/blues/jazz, led to unlimited possibilities for a personal and expressive style: ‘It was this growing emphasis on individualism and self-expression that was to influence women singer-songwriters most’ (p. 75). Whiteley identifies the new introspection as one of the important vehicles for feminist expression; whereas folk protest took on broader social tensions, the singer-songwriters could explore the effects of society on an individual. At the same time, Whiteley attributes the maturation of popular music, the growing importance of the ‘album’, and the new alliance between pop, jazz and folk as additional factors in the creation of a space for the female singer-songwriter.

Joni Mitchell (Chapter 6). Mentioning Joan Baez, Carole King and others as artists who established singer-songwriter careers in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Whiteley chooses to celebrate an artist who has had an extensive and influential presence in popular music. Joni Mitchell is a true veteran of the industry, with a thirty-year career and continuing acclaim (earning a 2001 Grammy award). Whiteley focuses only on the early albums Cloud and Blue, establishing Mitchell’s basic musical and lyrical style. The author brings out the immediately personal and self-explorational content of the lyrics, making occasional reference to a harmonic colour or vocal gesture that complements the lyrical moment.

Chapter 7 explores the emergence of punk in the 1970s as a period which witnessed the ‘feminisation of rock’, and focuses on Patti Smith and Siouxsie Sioux as two significant figures in that process. In order to situate the disruptive music and poetry of punk, Whiteley begins with literary theorist Terry Eagleton’s emphasis on text as mediating socio-political relations, citing his post-structuralist view of language as ‘an active, transitive force which “shapes” and positions the subject . . . while always remaining “in process”’ (p. 95). To put this concept to good feminist
use, she then establishes a link to Julia Kristeva’s notion of how woman exists within the patriarchal schema of language: the symbolic order is a male domain, representing power, control and a teleological concept of space and time, whereas the semiotic order is a female domain, representing disorder, chaos, and a cyclical concept of space and time (pp. 96–7). Whiteley especially uses the models of symbolic/semiotic and teleological/cyclical to explain the tensions between the rational and irrational in the punk rock style. She argues that as punk ‘opened up a space for ‘do it yourself’ spontaneity and . . . individualism’ (p. 97), it likewise opened up a space for female artists. The ensuing discussion of punk artists Patti Smith and Siouxsie Sioux stresses the disruptive quality of their poetry and stylistic delivery.

Annie Lennox, Madonna, k.d. lang and Tracy Chapman. For her coverage of the 1980s, Whiteley offers four case-study chapters (Chapters 8 through 11). The first three artists are grouped together for their challenges to the representation and performance of ‘femininity’. In feminist literature, this subject is discussed by a number of theorists from a variety of viewpoints. Whiteley, however, limits the discussion to Luce Irigaray’s concept of an écriture feminine and its correspondence to feminine pleasure and sexuality. Whiteley’s exploration of Irigaray’s ideas on female sexuality and desire are presented without a critical contextualisation of the theorist’s work in relation to that of other feminist theorists. As Whiteley transfers Irigaray’s ideas to her own interpretation of female artists from the 1980s, she focuses on the destabilisation of dominant images, and the plurality of female sexuality and desire. She considers Lennox’s play on androgyny and sexual power in the video ‘Sweet Dreams’, Madonna’s exploration of autoeroticism and exaggerated femininity in ‘Express Yourself’, and lang’s disturbance of the heterosexual norms of traditional country music on the album Absolute Torch and Twang.

The fourth artist chosen to represent the 1980s, Tracy Chapman, is placed within the context of the folk protest scene, along with artists such as Michelle Shocked, Suzanne Vega and Sinead O’Connor. To place Chapman’s music in a socio-historical context, Whiteley briefly mentions the 1960s Civil Rights movement, and the developing problems of inner-city America through the 1970s and 1980s. Chapman’s musical and lyrical techniques on the album Talkin’ ‘Bout a Revolution are acclaimed as ‘the poetics of musical documentary’ (p. 176).

Authenticity versus Artifice. For her final two chapters, Whiteley identifies two distinguishing discursive practices in the music of female artists in the 1990s: (i) the authenticity and personal truthfulness found in the folk, singer-songwriter tradition, and (ii) the artifice and commercialism that can potentially exist in the pop tradition. To illustrate the first category, Whiteley analyses the painfully personal account of rape in ‘Me and a Gun’ by Tori Amos. Her careful melodic and lyric analysis here reveals the depth of her own personal response to an original and personal musical expression. She then turns to the music of Courtney Love, PJ Harvey and Björk, commenting on how each artist negotiated for herself a particular space within her chosen genre. I find in this discussion an unfortunate brevity, as the musical contributions of these significant artists cannot be reduced to a few remarks on image, lyrical content and striking vocal delivery. The brevity is particularly problematic in the discussion of PJ Harvey, as Whiteley cites a passage from Reynolds and Press (1995), which tosses out a categorisation of Harvey that demands criticism: ‘Polly Harvey has perfected a kind of self-exposure, in lyrics and self presentation, that uniquely combines seduction and threat, intimacy and estrangement’ (Reynolds and Press 1995, p. 338, cited in Whiteley, p. 210). Surely,
in a book dedicated to gender studies in popular music, this statement cannot stand without feminist critique! Nevertheless, the reader’s interest will be sparked by the descriptive commentary that is found in this chapter. This would also be a good place to remark on a lacuna in the musicological and analytical references in Whiteley’s work; for instance, there is no mention of Judith Peraino’s work on the PJ Harvey album that Whiteley discusses (Peraino 1998). In this regard, I find the lack of a Bibliography to be generally problematic.

The second discursive practice (artifice) is illustrated through the discussion of Brit Pop and the girl group, The Spice Girls. This choice for a concluding chapter might surprise the feminist reader, yet Whiteley provides some interesting perspectives on a group whose connection to feminism is, as Whiteley puts it, more vernacular than political or intellectual. She explores questions concerning the ‘production’ of this group and the mechanisms by which they have gradually assumed greater artistic autonomy.

Whiteley’s work will be appreciated for raising a vast number of questions concerning the developing roles of women in rock and pop over a thirty-year span, the challenges of these women within a male-dominated industry, the nature of these artists’ commentaries on gender and sexuality, as well as questions concerning the theoretical and analytical methods that we use to discuss their music and lyrics. Although it does not and could not answer all such questions, it will certainly serve as an important foundational text for anyone involved with the study and interpretation of popular music by women.

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Endnotes
1. In addition to the socio-historical chapters, there is an important passage in the introduction (pp. 12–15) which offers historical commentary and discusses significant female artists such as Armatrading, Moe Tucker, Bonnie Raitt and Suzi Quatro, who are not studied elsewhere in the book.

References