

Facharbeit
aus dem Leistungskurs
Englisch

Thema: The Changing Roles of Women in American Music

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Kursleiter: Herr Scheler
Abgabetermin: 01. Februar 2001, 12.40 Uhr

Bewertung:
Erzielte Punkte: schriftlicher Teil:.....; mündlicher Teil:.....;
Erzielte Punkte (gesamt):; in Worten:
(doppelte Wertung)

Abgabe im Sekretariat am, Uhr

.....
(Unterschrift Sekretariat,
Schulstempel)

.....
(Unterschrift Kursleiter)

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Introduction

It was Geoffrey Latham who said “Music is the vernacular of the human soul.”¹ With that in mind, it seems rather ridiculous that for a long time female musicians weren’t as accepted in music as their male counterparts. However, it was like that for many years, and just nowadays this trend nearly seems to be brought to an end - luckily.

In my following paper, I want to portray some of the different roles women have played in American music, and I want to show how their image and importance changed over the years. My choice of the various artists is merely put together of different artists that I myself consider to be either the most important ones of their decade, or the most representative ones. Of course there is a much wider bandwidth of female musicians than what I am portraying, but they all have some relevance to the following generations, whether it is Janis Joplin, who’s wildness and early death inspired many women to continue where she left, whether it is Joan Jett, demonstrating that you have to be true to yourself, or whether it is Britney Spears who just more than anyone shows the commercial aspect of music, which became more and more important during the evolution of the music business.

¹ <http://www.ontonet.be/~smitsr/quotes/music.html> (page 4 of 5)

50's: Ruth Brown – Inventor of R&B

During a time when women were either categorized as blues or as jazz singers, Ruth Brown left her own mark on music, as she was something else – a part of both, combined with a special rhythm, later on referred to as rhythm & blues (R&B).²

Brown's musical career started very early in life in the church choir her father was directing, then continued in music classes at school, which she tended to skip, though. However, that of course never stopped her from singing.³

Aged 17, she got married to trumpet player Jimmy Brown and ran away from home. After singing in an orchestra for a very short time before getting fired (“[The leader of the band] changed his mind. They said I couldn't sing”⁴), Brown started performing at a night club, where she soon was discovered. On her way to sign the contract of the record label, she got in a car accident and had to stay in hospital for nine month. The record label waited for her, though, and it eventually paid off. Brown's success lasted for 13 years thanks to hits like “Teardrops In My Eyes” (her first number one in the charts⁵), “Mamma He Treats Your Daughter Mean”, “Lucky Lips” or “It's A Good Day For The Blues”.⁶ In 1963, Brown's contract with Atlantic wasn't renewed, probably because they already found two new women to sing for their label, Aretha Franklin and Roberta Flack. From that moment, Brown started to work as a bus driver and as a cleaning woman to pay high school and college for her sons. Thanks to a friend, she starred in a musical again in 1975, which was the key to her comeback. Gigs in clubs followed, so did appearances on television, a main role in the very successful movie “Hairspray” and finally, in 1989, a Grammy for her album “Blues On Broadway”. Since then, she got several more awards and finally got due respect for her work.⁷

Brown's career was probably typical for women in music during the 50's. She was one of the few lucky ones that were discovered, and when she's been

²cf. <http://www.blues.org/history/womenhistory/ruthbrown.html> (page 1 of 4)

³ cf. Gillian G. Gaar, “She's A Rebel – The History of Women in Rock'n'Roll”, Seal Press, Seattle 1992, p. 7

⁴ Gillian G. Gaar, p. 8

⁵ cf. Gillian G. Gaar, p.8

⁶ cf. <http://www.blues.org/history/womenhistory/ruthbrown.html>, (p. 2 of 4)

⁷ cf. <http://www.blues.org/history/womenhistory/ruthbrown.html>, (p. 3 of 4)

singing for the label long enough, she was left behind (not even getting proper royalties from her record label⁸). Her view on herself at first also was rather traditional, as she tried to sound like other people at first, namely like Billie Holiday. When they coincidentally met one night, Holiday predicted Brown unlimited possibilities. She added, however: "What you gotta do is really decide who you are. Because every time you go out on stage and [sing my songs], they'll call my name and never know yours."⁹ Holiday's advice obviously proved to be very good, making Brown invent her own style. However, regarding her song "Teardrops In My Eyes", Brown once said: "So if this is what they wanted to hear, good, I could do it. And if they had turned around and said 'Well, I want you to do gospel', I could do that too."¹⁰ In that far she probably was rather pushed into that role, she let her record label decide what music they wanted to hear and it was not herself having the urge to sing like that at first.

⁸ cf. <http://www.blues.org/history/womenhistory/ruthbrown.html>, (p. 3 of 4)

⁹ cf. <http://www.blues.org/history/womenhistory/ruthbrown.html>, (p. 2 of 4)

¹⁰ Gillian G. Gaar, p. 8

60's: Janis Joplin – “one of the guys“

A rock musician – now a legend - struggling with society's sexism in the 1960's was Janis Joplin. Born in 1943 in Port Arthur, Texas, a conservative refinery town, she was always seen as an outsider by her peers, or – as she described it – as “a weirdo among fools”¹¹. What made her different from the rest was her interest in music, art, poetry and reading, and the fact that she wasn't a racist as the rest of them. When she was still in her teens, Joplin used to be with an all-male gang, trying hard to be one of them. And in fact, she was so good at behaving like the rest of the boys that even they were embarrassed when she started swearing. Ironically, later on in her life this view on her took a big part in killing her as she couldn't deal with the sexism anymore.¹²

Joplin graduated from high school in 1960 and became a student at Lamar College and later at the University of Texas in Austin, where she also started singing in local clubs. Acceptance, however, still wouldn't set in; her classmates despised her so much that they even threw things at her, and she finally quit university shortly after she'd been voted “Ugliest Man On Campus” by her fellow students.¹³

At the age of 20, Joplin traveled to San Francisco where she continued performing in clubs. Eventually she received an offer to sing for Big Brother and the Holding Company in 1966, which she gladly accepted. In the following years they became very successful and at the end of 1967, Joplin split from the band and started a solo career. When she didn't sell as many records as expected, she stopped performing for a while and then started playing with the Full Tilt Boogie Band.¹⁴

By 1970, the stress and her exhausting lifestyle had made her an alcoholic and a heroin addict. On October 4, 1970, Joplin died in her hotel room in L.A. of a heroin overdose at the age of 27, and maybe it was her early death that made her a legend. When her album “Pearl” (which was given the title after her nickname) was released after her death, it peaked to number 1 in the charts, as

¹¹ Gillian G. Gaar, p. 104

¹² cf. Gillian G. Gaar, p. 104

¹³ cf. Gillian G. Gaar, p. 104

¹⁴ cf. <http://www.janisjoplin.net/kozmic/biography.html>

well as the single “Me and Bobby McGee” (which Kris Kristofferson had written for her).¹⁵

Joplin’s life is a good example for the views of women at that time. She didn’t behave like a girl was supposed to, and she had to pay a high price for it. It probably was this being outcast that made her turn to alcohol and drugs, and the fact that she became famous didn’t make her feel less lonely – she once said: “Onstage, I make love to 25,000 people - then I go home alone.”¹⁶

She invented a new role, the role of the rebel, the tough woman that claimed the same rights as the male musicians. Unlike contemporaries like the Supremes or Aretha Franklin, Janis didn’t put on expensive evening gowns or makeup for her shows and she was giving all of herself on stage, or, as the musician Chrissie Hynde described it: “[Joplin’s] performance was so in your face and electrifying that it really put you right there in the moment. There you were living your nice little life in the suburbs and suddenly there was this train wreck, and it was Janis.”¹⁷

But that was probably one of the reasons why she was so successful, the fact that nobody before rebelled against society that way. But behaving like that in those times often enough evoked negative emotions of the audience as well:

“I’m up there singing [...] and I look out at the crowd and the front rows are goin’ - these girls have these little pinched smiles and the expressions on their faces are of absolute horror. They’ve never seen anything like it, and they don’t want to again, man. The chick’s up there, shakin’ it all and sayin’ , ‘How do you like that, boys?’ and the boys are goin’ , ‘Aaaaaaghhh!’ The girls are going, ‘Oh my God, she may be able to sing, but she doesn’t have to act like that!’”¹⁸

And in the end, she was suffering enormously from that. “People kept saying one of the things about her was that she was just ‘one of the guys’” a former boyfriend of Joplin’s said. “Sexism killed her.”¹⁹

¹⁵ <http://www.janisjoplin.net/kozmik/biography.html> (p. 2 of 2)

¹⁶ <http://www.janisjoplin.net/kozmik/quotes.html> (p. 1 of 3)

¹⁷ <http://www.janisjoplin.net/kozmik/quotesII.html>

¹⁸ <http://www.janisjoplin.net/kozmik/quotes.html> (p. 2 of 3)

¹⁹ Gillian G. Gaar, p. 107

70's: The Runaways – Girls With Guitars

In the mid 70s, another band saw the light of day: The Runaways. It all started with a 14 year old girl, Kari Krome, discussing lyrics with manager Kim Fowley at a party. Fowley was very impressed with such a young girl writing lyrics like that and as Kari wanted them sung by girls her age he was looking out for potential new rock stars. The first member was 17 year old self-taught guitar player Joan Larkin, who then renamed herself Joan Jett after her parents got divorced. Soon followed drummer Sandy West, when Fowley met her in the parking lot of a bar. When Fowley decided that even though Kari was a great lyricist, she wasn't very good at singing, he brought in Sue Thomas (who later on renamed herself Michael 'Micki' Steele).²⁰

They recorded a demo album together, which wasn't released, though. Later on that year, Lita Ford on guitars and Cherie Currie as a vocalist joined The Runaways, and Steele left as she didn't like the tough image of the band. In December '75, Jackie Fox entered the band as the bass guitarist, completing the lineup.²¹

They lasted until '79, with moderate success in the US and particular success in Japan (hence, they produced their album "Live in Japan", of course with live material from their Japan tour).²²

It was several factors that kept The Runaways from mainstream success in the US: for one thing people used to make fun of them being an all-girl band. "Men just aren't used to hearing women screaming at the top of their lungs, screaming 'no' right in their faces."²³ Joan Jett once said. For another thing, their way of presenting themselves was probably too rebellious for the prude US. With Cherie Currie appearing on stage in merely stockings, suspenders and lingerie it is to some degree understandable why they were tagged as "Jailbait Rockers".²⁴ The reaction of the press, however, mainly missed out on seeing beyond their image and listening to the music instead. "The first question

²⁰ cf. <http://members.tripod.com/~KenSternation/runawaysstory.html> (p. 2 of 8)

²¹ cf. <http://members.tripod.com/~KenSternation/runawaysstory.html> (p. 3 of 8)

²² cf. Gillian G. Gaar, p. 221

²³ <http://www.linkaholic.com/joanquotes.htm> (p. 2 of 2)

²⁴ <http://members.tripod.com/~KenSternation/runawaysstory.html> (p. 4 of 8)

[in interviews] would be, 'I heard you girls are all sluts, right?' It was torture."²⁵ Joan Jett recalled. However, their appearance in the music scene surely made a difference. They were probably the first all-female rock band, and opposed to most other female musicians up to then, they were playing their own instruments and mostly writing their own songs. With that, they set a landmark for women in rock.



²⁵ Gillian G. Gaar, p. 221

80's: Joan Jett & the Blackhearts – Bad Reputation

After the breakup of The Runaways, Joan Jett decided to pursue a solo career. She first recorded three songs with the former band Sex Pistols in England, then produced an album of the Germs in L.A. When she got to know Kenny Laguna and his wife Meryl in 1979, she found not only great managers in them, but also loyal friends.²⁶

Kenny and Joan wrote several songs together and eventually produced an album. However, they were turned down by no less than 23 record labels. “I suppose my reputation was bad”²⁷, Jett later on said in an interview. But despite the discouragement, they didn't give up and instead printed 5000 CDs with money that Kenny had saved as a college fund for his daughter. They entitled it “Bad Reputation” and sold it out of the trunk of their car after the shows, and more or less to their surprise they nearly couldn't keep up with the demand.²⁸ That's how they got attention from Boardwalk Records and got signed to them. There they released their second album “I Love Rock'n'Roll” which peaked to #1 in the Billboard charts where it stayed for 7 weeks. The coming years were filled with several other hit songs, including “I Hate Myself For Loving You” and a cover of the Tommy James & the Shondells song “Crimson and Clover”. Jett also was the first foreign artist to play in East Berlin.²⁹

She has matured from the naive, inexperienced kid she was in The Runaways, to a strong and powerful but still down-to-earth rock star. She inspired a lot of younger musicians and proved that as long as you believe in yourself and don't give up hope, you can make your dreams happen.

Also, she claimed her right to be who she is, regardless of what others thought about her. Or in her own words, as she sings it in her song *Bad Reputation*:

“I don't give a damn about my bad reputation [...] / A girl can do what she wants to do and that's what I'm gonna do”³⁰

²⁶ <http://www.joanjett.com/biography/index.html> (p. 1 of 3)

²⁷ <http://www.monsterbit.com/stammer/dec97/story1.html> (p. 3 of 7)

²⁸ cf. <http://www.linkaholic.com/cnnfn.htm> (p. 1 of 5)

²⁹ cf. <http://www.joanjett.com/biography/index.html> (p. 2 of 3)

³⁰ “Bad Reputation”, Joan Jett & the Blackhearts, 1981 (audio CD)

Jett's lyrics clearly express her attitude that everyone is equal and free to decide about their lives. She also wrote songs about society as in "Go Home" which she wrote together with Kathleen Hannah of Bikini Kill, inspired by the brutal rape and murder of fellow musician Mia Zapata of The Gits.³¹

She is a very good example to show that it definitely was not the music industry itself that made her become one of the most important women in rock'n'roll, but that it was herself, forcing her way to the top against a male crowd that told her she had no chance of succeeding.

Furthermore, Jett is also one of those musicians that were inspired by an earlier generation of women in rock – in her case it was Janis Joplin: "During the 'whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa's' in 'Combination Of Two,' I couldn't help but go to the mirror and pretend I was a wild woman like Janis, in a rock band."³²



³¹ <http://www.monsterbit.com/stammer/dec97/story1.html> (p. 5 of 7)

³² <http://www.janisjoplin.net/kozmic/quotesII.html>

80's: Madonna – Material Girl

Another female artist that emerged from the 80's – but whose success has very visibly continued over the 90's into the new millennium - is Madonna Louise Veronica Ciccone, or simply known as Madonna. She was born on August 16, 1958, in Michigan. Her mother died of breast cancer when Madonna was only five years old. After a few years, her father Tony married Joan Gustafson, their former housekeeper, a very strict woman – just like Madonna's father. Madonna started to take dance lessons very early in life, and after high school she attended the University of Michigan, where she got a dance scholarship. After a while she decided to go to New York to be a dancer, and she did so despite her dad being against it, and as she had very little money, her living conditions were very poor.³³

After a while she started training at Alvin Ailey's American Dance Center and later at another dance company, but then she realized that dancing probably wouldn't be her start into a great career, so she got a job in Paris where she sang backup vocals for the French singer Patrick Hernandez. When she came back to New York, she started to play drums in her former boyfriend's band and eventually also sang songs for them. Her next step was forming her very own band.³⁴

Thanks to a friend, Mark Kamins, she finally got a record deal at Sire Records, releasing several singles that all were very well accepted in dance clubs. When her album "Madonna" was released, her real success started. The album sold more than nine million copies, and her following album "Like A Virgin" (released in 1985) reached number one and sold more than eleven million copies. Furthermore she starred in the movie "Desperately Searching Susan", which also was a big success.³⁵

Madonna's strength was lying in the way she presented herself – as a sexual woman. With a belt buckle that read "Boy Toy" and her lingerie worn on the outside, Madonna knew how to attract her audience – literally. "From when I was very young I just knew that being a girl and being charming in a feminine sort of way could get me a lot of things, and I milked it for everything I could"³⁶

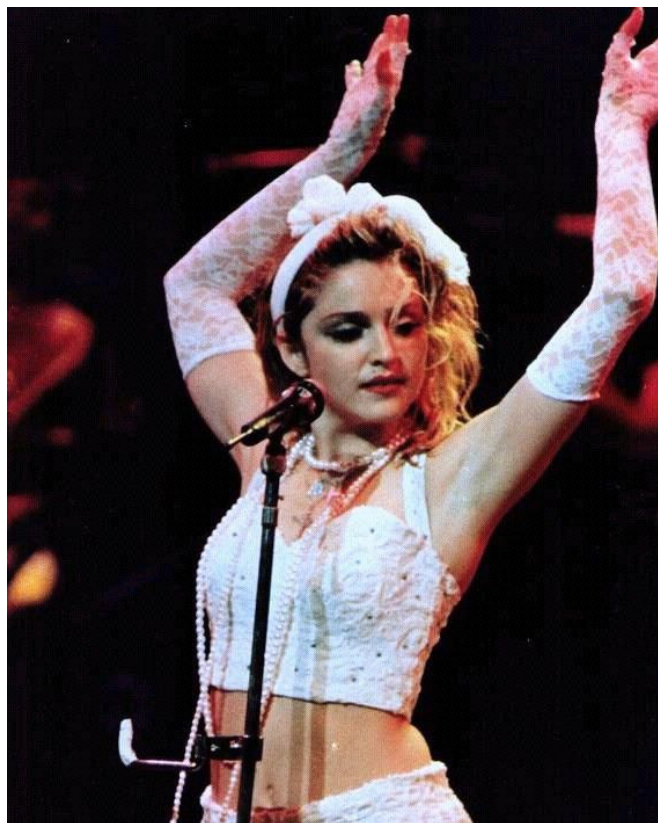
³³ cf. <http://www.001pic.com/Madonna/bio.html> (p. 1f of 6)

³⁴ cf. Gillian G. Gaar, p.333

³⁵ cf. Gillian G. Gaar, p.334

³⁶ <http://www.001pic.com/Madonna/bio.html> (p. 2f of 6)

she explained. Madonna was always aware of what she sold, she was always in control. In her song *Material Girl* she sings: “We are living in a material world / And I am a material girl”³⁷, and even though her business strategy mostly seemed to apply to that (when she became known and her career was blossoming, she started her own clothing label, “Wazoo”, which e.g. sold rubber bracelets and “Boy Toy” belt buckles), she explained: “I always said I wanted to be famous... I never said I wanted to be rich.”³⁸ Whatever her intentions were, she definitely is a smart business woman and one of the richest women in the world, due to that.



³⁷ <http://www.crosswinds.net/~mightybrown/lyrics/80s/yyyy.html>

³⁸ <http://www.001pic.com/Madonna/bio.html> (p. 1 of 6)

90's: Britney Spears – Commercial Girl

Britney Spears, who was born on December 2, 1981, started her professional career at the tender age of eight, when she traveled from her hometown Kentwood, Louisiana, to Atlanta, Georgia, to audition for the Disney Channel's Mickey Mouse Club. Even though she was too young for the show, she got an agent in New York thanks to a producer of the Mickey Mouse Club, which resulted in her starting to study at the off-Broadway Dance Center and at the Professional Performing Arts School during the summers. Thanks to that, she got a part in an off-Broadway production in 1991. Two years later she became a member of the Mickey Mouse Club – finally old enough – and after a year of high school back home after the show ended in 1993 she was discovered by an executive at Jive who heard her demo tape. In 1998 she started performing in malls throughout America, and in 1999 her debut album was released and reached number one in the Billboard charts.³⁹

While Britney's aforementioned predecessors were mostly 'rebel girls', she herself was rather the 'commercial girl'. Of course, all of them share a love for the music, and as Britney stated in an MTV interview it was she herself who wanted to pursue a career in the entertainment business and she wasn't pushed into it by her agents or her parents.⁴⁰

But even though her career reminds of Madonna's, considering the way it seems Britney is also selling more of her body and image than of the music, for some reason she doesn't seem to have as much control over it. The media seems more interested in her intimate life than in her music, and Britney is giving in to the demand.⁴¹

³⁹ cf. http://www.extremeireland.com/pages/eFeatures/xt_article_03.htm (p. 1f of 3)

⁴⁰ cf. http://www.extremeireland.com/pages/eFeatures/xt_article_03.htm (p. 2 of 3)

⁴¹ cf. <http://www.theage.com.au/entertainment/20000517/A65115-2000May16.html> (p. 2 of 3)

90's: Lilith Fair – Celebration of women in music

An event that clearly shows the achievements of women in music is undoubtedly Lilith Fair. Named after Adam's first wife before Eve (according to Hebrew folklore), Lilith Fair is a celebration of women in music. The tour that had nearly 40 shows in 1997 and 57 shows in 1998, from the east coast to the west coast of the US, was filled with only female artists like the Indigo Girls, Tracy Chapman, Sheryl Crow, Jewel, Fiona Apple and – of course – the founder herself, Sarah McLachlan.⁴²

But even though no male artists were invited, Lilith Fair wasn't about revenge for the difficulties the male-dominated society caused for women in music, but rather about celebrating their achievements. That's why men would have taken the sense out of Lilith.

With profits of more than \$16 million in 1997 and more than \$25 million in the year after⁴³, Sarah proved the people very wrong that told her that nobody would want to see more than one woman playing at a concert. A lot of the money was used for women's charities, which shows again that Lilith Fair is much more than just a commercial event. Lilith Fair showed to the – probably very surprised - music industry that there is indeed a very high demand for female musicians, so Bonnie Raitt probably was right when she said "Sarah and the women did an incredible thing [at Lilith Fair 1997], and I don't think the music business will ever be the same."⁴⁴

⁴² cf. Dickerson, James, "Women On Top", Billboard Books, New York 1998, p. 132f

⁴³ cf. <http://www.cnn.com/SHOWBIZ/Music/9806/29/lilith.fair/index.html> (p. 1f of 3)

⁴⁴ <http://www.cnn.com/SHOWBIZ/Music/9806/29/lilith.fair/index.html> (p. 2 of 3)

Conclusion

It became visible that over the last decades, women have managed to gain a position in music that is at least equal to that of men. It might have been difficult for the first who walked that path, but they surely did a great job with it, making it easier for generations to come to also find their way into music, without having to face the prejudices that were a common notion years before.

While in 1986 there were only 32 percent of female artists in the top 20 album charts⁴⁵, that number slowly increased, with occasional drops, to an amazing 61 percent by 1996 and still 60 percent in 1997.⁴⁶

Now, of course, also the music industry came to the point of realizing that music by women is in great demand, and even though they might start many commercial projects that resemble Britney Spears both lyrically and in looks, there will always be others that won't let the big businesses take the lead. Women like Janis and Joan, going their own way, writing history, making a change and – what it is all about, making good music.

⁴⁵ Dickerson, p. 243

⁴⁶ Dickerson, p. 248

Sources

Picture of Janis Joplin taken from <http://www.janisjoplin.net/pictures/12/vc-03.jpg>

Picture of Joan Jett taken from <http://www.joanjett.com>

Picture of Madonna taken from <http://www.madonnanet.com/madonna/vbzd.jpg>

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