

Chapter 4

THE FEMINIST

But Now I'm Gonna Move

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The women's movement has inspired a lot of talk about male supremacy and misogyny in rock, but most people seem to have missed a crucial point: that there is an alarming difference between the naive sexism that disfigured rock before, say, 1967 and the much more calculated, almost ideological sexism that has flourished since. What happened in between was that rock got integrated into the so-called counterculture and what had been a music of oppression became in many respects a music of pseudoliberation. Early rock was sexist in all the obvious ways. The industry was controlled by men; most singers and virtually all instrumentalists were men; song lyrics assumed traditional sex roles and performers embodied them. (Although the Beatles made important changes in the masculine style, the substance remained pretty much the same.) Yet insofar as the music expressed the revolt of black against white, working class against middle class, youth against parental domination and sexual puritanism, it spoke for both sexes; insofar as it pitted teenage girls' inchoate

energies against all their conscious and unconscious frustrations, it spoke implicitly for female liberation. The Big Bear was a universal code that meant "Free our bodies." Since most of the traditional themes of rock and roll had to do with sex and rebellion, they were in one way or another bogged down in the contradiction between male-supremacist prejudice and revolutionary impulse. Male performers perpetuated the mythology that made woman the symbol of middle-class respectability and kicked over the pedestal without asking who had invented it in the first place. The British groups, in particular, tended to make women scapegoats for their disenchantment with the class system: Mick Jagger, the Stanley Kowalski of rock, brought down rich playgirls with crude exhibitions of virility; the Who condemned the romantic illusions and self-protective hypocrisies of wives and girlfriends. Female singers, for their part, often expressed their own rebellion vicariously by identifying with a (usually lower-class) male outlaw, as in "Leader of the Pack." Female fans made an analogous identification with male rock stars—a relationship that all too often found us digging them while they put us down. This was not masochism but expediency. For all its limitations, rock was the best thing going, and if we had to filter out certain indignities—well, we had been doing that all our lives, and there was no feminist movement to suggest that things might be different.

When rock was taken over by upper-middle-class bohemians, it inherited a whole new set of contradictions between protest and privilege. The new musicians are elite dropouts and, as such, tend to feel superior not only to women but to just about everyone. Their sexism is smugger and cooler, less a product of misdirected frustration, more a simple assumption of power consistent with the rest of their self-image. It is less overtly hostile to women but more condescending. A crude but often revealing method of assessing male bias in lyrics is to take a song written by a man about a woman and reverse the sexes. By this test, a diatribe like "Under My Thumb" is not nearly so sexist in its implications as, for example, Cat Stevens's gentle, sympathetic "Wild World"; Jagger's fantasy of sweet revenge could easily be female—in fact, it has a female counterpart, Nancy Sinatra's "Boots"—but it's hard to imagine a woman sadly warning her ex-lover that he's too innocent for the big bad world out there. The new sexism is also less honest. The rock culture has not merely assimilated male supremacy but, with its own Orwellian logic, tried to pass it off as liberation. Reverence for such neglected "feminine" values as gentleness and

nurturance becomes an excuse to bad-mouth women who display “masculine” characteristics like self-assertion or who don’t want to preside as goddess of the organic kitchen. Freedom for women is defined solely as sexual freedom, which in practice means availability on men’s terms. The rock community is a male monopoly, with women typically functioning as more or less invisible accessories; around male musicians I’ve often felt as out of place as a female sportswriter in a locker room. The classic statement of the rock attitude toward women appeared in a *Rolling Stone* supplement on groupies. It seems that rock bands prefer San Francisco groupies to New York groupies: the latter, being coldhearted Easterners, are only out for conquests; Bay Area chicks really dig the musicians as people, not just bodies, and stay afterward to do their housework. This sort of disingenuous moralism offends me much more than the old brutal directness. At least, the Stones never posed as apostles of a revolutionary lifestyle.

Like the educated middle class that produced them, the new rock musicians are art snobs, and one facet of their snobbery is a tedious worship of technical proficiency. The cult of the Musician has reinforced the locker-room aspect of the rock scene. There, as elsewhere, musicianship, like most technical skills, is considered a male prerogative, and female instrumentalists—those few who have managed to resist pervasive cultural intimidation well enough to learn to play *and* take themselves seriously—have been patronized and excluded. Besides, the pretension, competitiveness, and abstraction from feeling that go along with an emphasis on technique are alienating to most women. (This may be why there are relatively few female jazz fans.) In an overwhelmingly male atmosphere, female performers have served mainly as catalysts for male cultural-revolutionary fantasies of tough chicks, beautiful bitches, and super-yin old ladies. Janis Joplin half-transcended this function by confronting it, screaming out the misery and confusion of being what others wanted her to be. But she was a genius.

Of course, contradictions have a way of resolving themselves, as a nineteenth-century revolutionist pointed out. The same social events that produced a sexist “cultural revolution” produced a sexist radical left, which, in turn, gave rise to the women’s liberation movement. Rock has been particularly resistant to the inroads of a resurgent feminism, but it is not impervious. A year ago, there were probably fewer female rock performers of stature than at any other time in the past decade; today there is a noticeable

influx of female singers and composers, and they are finding a receptive audience. More important, women are beginning to break away from the hip stereotypes. Carole King is scarcely a counterculture heroine, and Joni Mitchell's latest album, *Blue*, makes me wonder what ever happened to the sweet folksinger who used to talk about baking cookies to the crowd at the Bitter End. For a long time, I didn't listen to Alice Stuart's album, because its title, *Full Time Woman*, turned me off; when I did, I discovered that the title song starts out "I hear you've got a full-time woman now, / Does she love you like I never could?" and ends "You gotta set me free. / I'd do it for you, baby; now do it for me." Deliberate or not, the reversal of expectations was in itself a statement: things are seldom what they seem.

Women musicians are also starting to emerge. A number of all-female rock bands have formed, some actively feminist, but as yet this remains almost entirely a local, "underground" phenomenon; the main exception is Fanny, which has put out two disappointing albums. The most exciting female musicians to surface so far belong to a mixed group. They are Toni Brown and Terry Garthwaite, the leaders of a Berkeley quintet called Joy of Cooking. Toni writes most of the group's material, plays a conspicuous electric piano, and sings; Terry sings lead and plays guitar; they are backed up by three men, including a conga drummer. Joy has made two excellent albums—*Joy of Cooking*, which came out last January, and a new release, *Closer to the Ground*—and is a popular performing band on the West Coast. Now that it is making a major tour of the East and the Midwest, its audience should begin to expand.

Toni and Terry are not propagandists, except by implication; even in "Only Time Will Tell Me," Toni's one overtly feminist song, we are warned that "Everybody wants some power in this land of liberty, / But having lots of power never made anybody free." Still, they are, among other things, propaganda. Besides being intelligent and inventive musicians, they have flouted the convention that women in rock must be either passive or bitchy or desperate. Toni's voice is sweet, Terry's rougher and funkier; both seem to be controlling strong feelings in a way that suggests a desire to keep some of their resources for themselves rather than give body and soul to the audience. Terry, in particular, communicates a female sensibility that is strong, straightforward, independent, exuberant. So do the songs themselves. Although Toni has written some moving portraits of women dumped on by men, particularly "Too Late, but Not Forgotten" and "Red

Wine at Noon" (the only cuts from the first album on which she sings lead; ballads are more her style than Terry's), the mood of "Only Time Will Tell Me" (also included in the first album) is more typical: "Been standing on a corner, trying to get across the street, / So many years now I've been staring at my feet, / But now I'm gonna move. . . . / I'm gonna stretch out and find my wings and fly away." Toni's lyrics, some of them quasi-political intimations that the world and people are in a mess and what are we gonna do about it, reflect a cautious, tough-minded optimism. The music, an original, unclassifiable mixture of rock, country, and gospel, with a lot of upbeat vocal improvisation and irresistible rhythms, is—not joyful, exactly; zestful is closer. It is also very polished—occasionally too much so. Fortunately, the group's reserve generally comes across as dignity—not the kind that excludes a good time, either—rather than stinginess. The new album is very much an extension of the first. As its title suggests, the country influence is stronger; the lyrics are somewhat more contemplative and romantic, although there is also plenty of dry comment on the sexual revolution, as in "First Time, Last Time": "If you make it with a stranger you better really know the score, / because no matter what he tells you there's bound to be a whole lot more." Terry has contributed two of the songs, and she holds her own with Toni; the lyrics to "Humpty Dumpty," a rocker about the futility of waiting for the king's men to put you together, are especially good.

Joy of Cooking has been around for four years. That the group should begin to make it at this particular time suggests some questions, the most obvious being: would Toni and Terry have been overlooked if it weren't for all the women's-liberation publicity of the past year or two? Take that one step further: if record companies were benignly neglecting them because they were women, did the lack of pressure help them develop as beautifully as they did? More cynically: is it easier for them now that the prominence of solo singer-songwriters has made the mystique of groups and musicianship less central? Perhaps all this is irrelevant. Joy of Cooking is not just a good band but an exceptional band, and it's more than possible that the public would have had to recognize that fact, women's liberation or no. It just may be that, unlike a lot of less exceptional bands, Joy had the sense to wait to make an album until it was ready. On the other hand, chances are that if it were any less exceptional it would never have survived at all.