

Does Rock Degrade Women?

By MARION MEADE

LAST spring I sat through three hours of the film "Woodstock" alternating between feelings of enchantment and repulsion. Sure, there was all that magnificent music, along with the generous helpings of peace and love and grass. And yet I found something persistently disturbing about the idyllic spectacle on the screen.

For one thing, with the exception of a pregnant Joan Baez who couldn't seem to stop talking about her husband, all the musicians were men. Sweaty, bearded men were busy building the stage, directing traffic, shooting the film, and running the festival. Brotherhood was repeatedly proclaimed, both on stage and off. Woodstock Nation was beginning to look ominously like a fantasyland which only welcomed men. How about the women? Barefooted and sometimes barebreasted, they sprawled erotically in the grass, looked after their babies, or dished up hot meals. If this was supposed to be the Aquarian Utopia, it reminded me more of a Shriners picnic at which the wife and kiddies are invited to participate once a year.

Looking back, I think the movie confirmed an uneasiness I'd felt for some time but had refused to admit: Rock music, in fact the entire rock "culture," is tremendously degrading to women. I reached this conclusion reluctantly and with a good deal of sadness because rock has been important to me. And while I still dig the vitality of the sound, I find myself increasingly turned off in nearly every other respect.

Stokely Carmichael recalls that as a child he loved Westerns and always cheered wildly for the cowboys to triumph over the Indians until

one day he realized he was an Indian. All along he'd been rooting for the wrong side. More and more, women rock fans are discovering themselves in the same curiously surprised position. For those who have taken the trouble to listen carefully, rock's message couldn't be clearer. It's a man's world, baby, and women have only one place in it. Between the sheets or, if they're talented like Arlo Guthrie's Alice, in the kitchen.

The paradox is that rock would appear to be an unlikely supporter of such old-fashioned sex-role stereotypes. In fact, its rebellion against middle-class values, its championing of the unisex fashions and long hair styles for men seem to suggest a blurring of the distinctions between male and female. But for all the hip camouflage sexism flourishes.

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The clearest indication of how rock music views womankind is in its lyrics. Women certainly can't complain that the image presented there is one-dimensional. On the contrary, the put-downs are remarkably multifaceted, ranging from open contempt to sugar-coated condescension. Above all, however, women are always-available sexual objects whose chief function is to happily accommodate any man who comes along. This wasn't always the case. Elvis's pelvis notwithstanding, the popular songs of the Fifties and early Sixties explored such innocuous adolescent pastimes as dancing around the clock, the beach, going steady, and blue suede shoes. In those days before the so-called sexual revolution, the typical woman portrayed in rock was

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the nice girl next door with whom the Beatles only wanted to hold hands. Then suddenly came the nice girl's metamorphosis into "groovy chick," the difference being that a groovy chick is expected to perform sexually. In rock songs, she never fails.

The worst picture of women appears in the music of the Rolling Stones, where sexual exploitation reaches unique heights. A woman is a "Stupid Girl" who should be kept "Under My Thumb," a "Honky Tonk Woman" who gives a man "Satisfaction." In "Yesterday's Papers," where women are equated with newspapers, the dehumanization is carried to an extreme. Who wants yesterday's papers, the song arrogantly demands, who wants yesterday's girl? The answer: Nobody. Once used, a woman is as valuable as an old newspaper, presumably good only for wrapping garbage.

But the Stones' album "Let It Bleed" is surely unrivaled when it comes to contempt for women, as well as lewdness in general. One cut in particular, "Live With Me," is explicit about woman's proper place:

Come now, honey, doncha' want to live with me? Doncha' think there's a place for you in between the sheets?

And only an extraordinarily masochistic woman could listen to the album's title song with any sense of pleasure whatsoever. There a woman is represented as a drive-in bordello, a one-stop sexual shopping center offering all the standard services plus a few extras casually thrown in as a kind of shopper's Special of the Day.

The Stones' next album has been tentatively titled "Bitch." It figures.

Misogyny is only slightly more disguised in the music of Bob Dylan who, in his early work at least, tended to regard nearly every female as a bitch. For example, in "Like a Rolling Stone" Dylan apparently feels so threatened by Miss Lonely (whose only sin as far as I can tell is that she has a rather shallow lifestyle) that he feels compelled to destroy her. First he takes away her identity, then he puts her out on the street without shelter or food, and in the end — obliteration, as he makes her invisible. "How does it feel?" he asks.

There's no more complete catalogue of sexist slurs than Dylan's "Just Like a Woman," in which he defines woman's natural traits as greed, hypocrisy, whining, and hysteria. But isn't that cute, he con-

cludes, because it's "just like a woman." For a finale, he throws in the patronizing observation that adult women have a way of breaking "just like a little girl."

These days a seemingly mellowed Dylan has been writing about women with less hatred, but the results still aren't especially flattering. Now he calls his female ladies and invites them to lay across his big brass bed. In short, he has more or less caught up with Jim Morrison's request to "Light my fire" and with John Lennon's suggestion, "Why don't we do it in the road?"

Again and again throughout rock lyrics women emerge either as insatiable, sex-crazed animals or all-American emasculators. Although one might think these images indicate a certain degree of aggressiveness in women, oddly enough they still wind up in a servile position where they exist only to enhance the lives of men.

As for romance, rock hasn't rejected it entirely. Rock love songs exhibit a regular gallery of passive, spiritless women, sad-eyed ladies propped on velvet thrones as the private property of a Sunshine Superman. From the Beatles we get motherly madonnas whispering words of wisdom ("Let it be, let it be") or pathetic spinsters like Eleanor Rigby who hang around churches after weddings to collect the rice. Leonard Cohen's romantic ideal is the mystical Suzanne who wears rags from the Salvation Army and acts, the composer asserts, "half crazy." Seldom does one run across a mature, intelligent woman or, for that matter, a woman who is capable enough to hold a job (one exception is the Beatles' meter maid, Rita). Only the Stones' Ruby Tuesday insists on an independent life of her own.

Since rock is written almost entirely by men, it's hardly surprising to find this frenzied celebration of masculine supremacy. But it's also understandable in terms of the roots from which rock evolved. In both blues and country music, attitudes toward women reflected a rabid machismo: men always dominated and women were fickle bitches who ran off with other men. Often they were seen in relation-

ship to the wandering superstud who recounts his conquests in every town along the road, a fantasy which remains fashionable in rock today.

Apart from the myths of female inferiority proclaimed by rock lyricists, the exploitation and dehumanization of women also extends into the off-stage rock scene. How else can one account for a phenomenon like the groupies? That these aggressive teen-age camp followers could possibly be regarded as healthy examples of sexual liberation is certainly a cruel joke. In fact, groupies service the needs of the male musicians and further symbolize rock's impersonal view of women as cheap commodities which can be conveniently disposed of after use. The Stones said it: nobody in the world wants yesterday's papers.

Finally, rock is a field from which women have been virtually excluded as musicians. Not only is it rare to find an integrated band, but the few all-female groups have been notably unsuccessful. The very idea of a women's rock band is looked on as weird, in the same category as Phil Spitalny's all-girl orchestra, a freak show good for a few giggles.

The problem is that women have been intimidated from even attempting a career in rock. Women, the myths says, aren't smart enough to understand the

complexities of electronics or tough enough to compose music of sufficient intensity or physically strong enough to play drums. The guitar is acceptable but the electric guitar is unfeminine.

As for female rock singers, you can count them on a few fingers. We did have Janis Joplin, a blueswoman in the finest tradition of Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday. When Janis wailed about love as a ball and chain and women being losers, now there were ideas with which women could identify. At least we knew what she meant. The soul sounds of Tina Turner and Laura Nyro also radiate the feeling that they know what it's like to be a woman. Otherwise, just about the only rock queen left is Grace Slick. Although some may regard her private life as liberated in that she decided to have an illegitimate child and generally appears to care little for society's conventions, even her work with the Jefferson Airplane is hardly oriented toward women.

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Which leaves us with Joan Baez, Judy Collins and Joni Mitchell, who specialize in the bland folk-rock deemed appropriate for a delicate sex.

At this point, what does rock offer women? Mighty little.

Recently, however, rock bands have reported strange happenings at concerts. Instead of the usual adoring screams from the women, every so often they've been hearing boos and unladylike shouts of "male chauvinist pigs." Because the bands tend

to regard these disturbances as a puzzling but passing phenomenon, they've made little effort so far to understand the changes taking place in their audience. What they fail to recognize is that the condescending swaggering which worked for Elvis in the fifties and the sadistic, anti-woman sneers of Mick Jagger in the sixties are no longer going to make it in the seventies.

There's no question that rock is already in trouble. The current spiritual and economic malaise has been variously attributed to the Hendrix-Joplin deaths, the general tightness of money, as well as lackluster albums and tired performances from the popular stars. Whatever the reasons, rock listeners today are plainly bored. Does anyone really care if John, Paul, Ringo, and George ever get together again? Not me.

On the other hand, isn't it about time for women to band together and invade the chauvinistic rock scene? Only then will the vicious stereotypes be eliminated and, one hopes, some fresh energy generated as well. For too long we've sat wistfully on the sidelines, acting out our expected roles as worshipful groupies.

Women have always constituted an important segment of the rock audience. Unless the industry is willing to alienate us completely, they'd better remember what Bob Dylan said about not needing a weatherman to know which way the wind blows. For the times they are a-changin', eh, fellas?