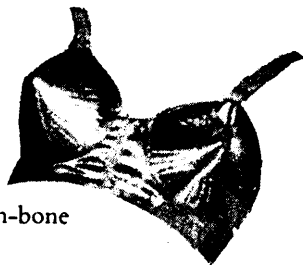


7

Lipstick Traces

MADONNA, MANIPULATION AND MTV



HIPS: 'Projection of pelvis and upper part of thigh-bone on each side of body'

LIPS: 'One of the fleshy parts forming edges of opening of mouth (upper/lower/under lip) . . . redden one's lips . . . bite one's lip . . . curl . . . escape one's . . . hang . . . lick or smack . . . pass . . . stiff upper'

TITS: '(Vulg.) Nipple (esp. of woman), woman's breasts . . . Two milk-secreting organs on upper front of woman's body . . . source of nourishment'

POWER!: 'Ability to do or act . . . particular faculty of body or mind . . . vigour, energy'

— *Oxford English Dictionary*

'One manager we had was sleazy. We were watching a video of Debbie Harry and there was a shot of her lying down with a close-up of her face. He said, 'You should look like that when you're singing live.' Thing is, it didn't look pornographic, Debbie lying there singing, but his interpretation of it was'

— ALEX, lead singer with '80s girl rock band The Shop Assistants, author interview, Aberdeen, 1987

In 1975 Queen's 'Bohemian Rhapsody' sat at the top of the British charts for nine weeks, a rock operatic *mélange* that was remarkable as much for the accompanying video promo (the first of its kind) as the song itself. This paved the way for pop as three-minute TV commercial. Until the early '80s, the visual promotion of pop was not highly developed or co-ordinated, so in some ways many women could 'slip through the net' of image stereotyping.

Throughout history the female body has been objectified as a source of sexual arousal or suggestion. Women have always felt the pressure to look decorative or pleasing, but within pop and rock, when the star is the focus of a mass gaze, this expectation is increased tenfold. In the face of the pop orthodoxy that a woman is there first and foremost to look attractive, female artists have consistently had to negotiate the Image issue. 'There's always what we call the Cleavage Question,' said singer Suzanne Vega. 'How much to show, when to show it, if at all.'¹

While Cleavage was the main sexual barometer of the '80s, when pop was in its infancy with the '20s vaudeville blueswomen and '40s jazz swingers, focus was on the Leg. With '50s dream babes the emphasis may have been on the *Derrière*, as opposed to the fetishizing of Hair in the '60s. Whatever the focus, the acceptability of women in pop has rested on their ability to read and wear the codes, to promote whatever bodily part is fashionable at the time.

'One important function of clothing has been to promote erotic activity: to attract men and women to one another, thus ensuring the survival of the species,' writes fashion semiotician Alison Lurie.² This activity was first commercially exploited on a large scale with the rise of the Hollywood 'picture personality' and a star system constructed through studio publicity, films and fan magazines. Mass-media exposure gave actresses such as Grace Kelly and Marilyn Monroe a highly public, even mythic status. Monroe set the trend for bouncy, fluffy, blond seduction with her 'breathy voice, her "horizontal walk", her revealing dress, her half-closed eyes and half-open mouth.'³ A glamour girl immortalized through Pop Art in Warhol's repetition of blurred images, Monroe became the talisman for commercial sexual desirability.

This Hollywood ideal was reflected in the growing '50s music industry with stars such as Peggy Lee, Alma Cogan and Eartha Kitt projecting an image of high glamour. By the '60s, however, the success of teen-girl groups ushered in a new look predicated on youth and freshness. Curves were out, wiggling sylph-like hips were in. Although women had always felt compelled to diet (jazz star Dinah Washington, for instance, was desperately addicted to

diet pills), with the arrival of TV and even greater means of visual promotion, more and more female artists subjected themselves to tortuous slimming methods. Florence Ballard was sacked from The Supremes partly because of her weight problem. Along with Mama Cass Elliot, she became one of the first casualties of the burgeoning pop industry.

Don't Call Me Mama Any More

A dedicated artist with a warm, full voice perfectly suited to the golden pop that made The Mamas and The Papas world-famous, Cass Elliot fought a constant battle to be taken seriously. 'I felt that I was carrying the other three,' she said in 1972. 'I'd get out on stage and say to myself, "Why should I be doing all this work for the four of us when I could be earning more as a solo act?"'⁴

Elliot saw herself as the lynchpin of the band, a folk/rock-based vocal four-piece comprising Elliot, John Phillips, Michelle Phillips and Dennis Doherty. Their first hit, 'California Dreamin'', a late-'60s classic, was followed by a succession of others including 'Monday Monday' and 'Dedicated To The One I Love', but Elliot was itching to have a solo career. Her voice was the strongest, yet attention focused on her heavy image at the expense of her musical talent, and she was fed up with being stereotyped bubbly 'Mama' in contrast to Michelle Phillips, 'the pretty one'.

Preparing for a Las Vegas solo debut in 1968, Elliot went on a strict diet and lost 110 pounds, but halfway through the first show she went down with a throat haemorrhage. 'I couldn't sing,' she said. 'All I could do was cry.' Despite a faltering start, she went on to release five solo albums, touring top 'rooms' throughout the States. Her diet struggles caused damaging fluctuations in weight, and in 1974, at the age of thirty, she died of a heart attack. *Don't Call Me Mama Anymore* was the title of her last album.

Elliot found it impossible to live up to the '60s angular ideal, but by the early '70s the pop scene had begun to diversify, allowing room for differences. At one end of the spectrum was ABBA's

bright, shiny kitsch, while at the other, a downbeat Joan Armatrading wouldn't let go of her woolly jumper. Taking advantage of the relaxation of sartorial rules that came in the wake of 'serious' '60s rock acts such as Dylan or The Grateful Dead, where scuffed denim was *de rigueur*, Armatrading addressed the image game by refusing to play it. '[Once] I'd done an absolute miracle . . . I had actually got Joan to take off the Blue Sweater. She lived in a big, baggy, blue sweater. The first night at Ronnie Scott's she was going to wear the Blue Sweater, but I managed to persuade her into wearing a white blouse,' recalls her first producer Pete Gage.⁵ This was a rare occurrence. Armatrading said,

'I've always worn clothes that I feel comfortable in. They kept saying things like, "Have you thought of wearing a dress or putting your hair up? At least stop wearing that little woolly hat on stage." I went right on doing what I wanted to do. You've got to be a bit stubborn because most of the record business is run by men, and men always have set ideas about how things should be. There's a lot of pressure on women to conform. If you want to survive you've got to be either strong or stubborn or deaf.'⁶

Pleased that she was able to sell millions without taking her clothes off, Armatrading later said sagely, 'You need all that showy, glitzy, glamorous stuff, and you need me. If you had one or the other it'd be boring. Also, being glam is just not me. I wouldn't even attempt it.'⁷ There is an early shot of Armatrading and her songwriting partner Pam Nestor, self-effacing but subcultural, lolling in the latter's Notting Hill flat. Nestor has stripy socks up to her knees while Armatrading wears a pair of scruffy flared jeans and army boots, her Afro-style hair neatly clipped. Showing both an assertion of individuality and careful attention to detail, this image suited the rock songwriting genre Armatrading had chosen, an area where she had space to make a simple, yet powerful statement.

ABBA's prominence in mainstream pop, however, rested on a stylistic nightmare: two female singers Agnetha (Anna) Faltskog and Anni-Frid (Frida) Lyngstad who encapsulated the crude certainties of '70s teen-girl culture with their luminous blue eyeshadow,

shiny pants and platform shoes. The ABBA women linger in the mind because along with male partners Bjorn Ulvaeus and Benny Andersson they riveted image to music, making the two interchangeable in the public imagination. The hit 'Mama Mia', for instance, was two pairs of video lips in close-up, intoning; 'SOS' was platinum-haired Faltskog frowning and screwing up her face to sing; 'Fernando' was lip-gloss in the firelight; while 'Dancing Queen' had the women twirling their bodies in disco glare.

It was the band's judicious use of TV and print exposure that consolidated their image with record buyers. Even though they came from a relatively small country, rarely played live and had no major concert appearances in the US, by 1978 they had become Sweden's fastest-growing corporation, with a yearly gross of over \$16 million. Anna and Frida cultivated the slick 'girl next door' pop image that ushered in the new video age, while Kate Bush took that polish one step further by turning herself into an erotic fantasy.

An early shot from Kate Bush's 1978 publicity campaign has her looking full-lipped, big-eyed and open-nostrilled to the camera, wearing a clinging vest, her nipples showing through. When asked about her image at the time, Bush insisted that she didn't feel exploited and answered matter-of-factly,

'I suppose the poster is reasonably sexy just 'cause you can see my tits. But I think the vibe from the face is there . . . Often you get pictures of females showing their legs with a very plastic face. I think that poster projects a mood . . . I'm going to have trouble because people tend to put the sexuality first. I hope they don't. I want to be recognized as an artist.'⁸

Some years later, at the time of her third or fourth album, the penny dropped. 'I was very naïve and I was very young,' she said of early photo sessions which led to her being one of the most popular 'wank' images to grace student bedrooms. 'It was all very new to me and, in the first year, I learned so many lessons about how people wanted to manipulate me.'

The tacky display of Bush's girlish femininity was replicated throughout the '70s in a more anonymous form on record sleeves and

publicity posters, from Roxy Music album covers to the 1976 advert for former Vinegar Joe singer/guitarist Robert Palmer's solo album *Pressure Drop*. There, in cod-David Hockney style, the besuited male singer was foregrounded in a luxury apartment, while in the background a woman, stark naked except for a pair of extremely high heels, stood with her back to the camera. As the '70s trundled on, the link between sex and selling records was becoming more and more explicit. The knock-on effect of this relentless focus on the female form had its most tragic impact on a young singer who internalized the terror of the world's gaze by starving herself.

Top of the World

In 1974 The Carpenters were at the peak of their fame. The previous year had ended with 'Top Of The World' at the No. 1 slot, their tenth Top Ten US hit. Their album *The Singles 1969-73* became one of the all-time biggest sellers worldwide. And within five years of their first hit 'Close To You' (which went straight to No. 1), the duo had fifteen hit singles, six top-selling albums, and won three Grammy Awards. Their record sales were in excess of seventy-nine million copies. A symbol of what could be achieved in the record-company profit jamboree of the early '70s, when the industry was in the black and throwing money at gigantic supergroups, The Carpenters were more than a corporate lynchpin. According to President Nixon, 'The Carpenters represent all that is true and best in America.' Their sound, aggressively homespun, eerily precise and vocally beautiful, was piped through airports and hotel lounges worldwide.

The Carpenters were the Sound of the '70s. Their mass-market lush harmonic swathe penetrated global consciousness – from tots, teens and rednecks to colourful grannies in Savannah, Georgia, wearing their shirts too loud, to cynical pre-punks dressing in black and living by night. 'No jive,' *NME*'s acerbic and cult '70s writer Nick Kent wrote in 1973, '– ever since I picked up on The Carpenters, I've become less concerned with pressing issues like

Watergate, Ulster and breast cancer. Already I'm sleeping better. Don't miss out on The Carpenters. Sterilized for your own protection.'

The word 'sterilized' is used with uncanny precision. In 1974, amid consumerist plenty, Karen Carpenter began starving herself. 'This year it's Karen who's zonked out on stardom,' wrote journalist Andrew Tyler. At a Frankfurt concert he was disturbed by the fact that, 'The band are immaculate, Karen is immaculate and no one misses a stroke . . . her singing is resonant and deadly accurate . . . But it's not actually happening.'¹⁰ Karen was notable by her absence.

When Karen first developed anorexia nervosa (self-starvation), her desire was simply to slim. As a child she had been quite heavy, tactfully described by her mother as 'hefty round the butt' and when The Carpenters first became famous she was dismayed by reviews that called her 'chubby'. 'How can anyone be too thin? Women are supposed to be thin. When the spotlight's on you they can see every pound. They don't just review our music, they review our hair, they review our clothes,' Karen says to her mother, standing in front of a mirror in the film *The Karen Carpenter Story*. Karen's obsession then gradually became a response to a world where, even with The Carpenters on top of the toppermost, she airbrushed herself out of existence.

Her insecurity went deep. Born in 1950 in New Haven, Connecticut, Karen was uprooted at twelve when the family moved to Downey, southern California, where young Richard felt he was better able to pursue a musical career. His father sacrificed security and pension rights after twenty-five years working as a printer to relocate the family in an area where the kids' talent would be noticed. A self-possessed young soul, Richard had a clear idea from the start how he wanted The Carpenters to develop musically. He persuaded Karen to come off the drums she loved playing to become a lead vocalist. 'She had a singing voice that was deep and powerful and very good,' he said. '[At first] it needed tutoring, but I realized that she could do something with it.'¹¹

Karen may have acquiesced, but deep within was a rebel tomboy,



The Carpenters in London, 1973: Richard and Karen, 'zonked out' on '70s superstardom. (Dave Ellis/Redferns)

the girl who preferred baseball to cookery or needlework; who watched her brother's band practise for hours before sneaking down to the drums one night and playing herself; who drummed in the school marching band and persuaded her parents to buy her a brand-new green and gold six-piece set. At sixteen Karen was

playing with Richard and friend Wes Jacobs in The Carpenter Trio, desperately trying to look old enough to appear in local bars. Despite winning an RCA contract with the prestigious talent-spotting *Battle of the Bands* live contest, they recorded material which went unreleased, and it wasn't until their concentrated efforts as a duo that The Carpenters found success. It was the intensity of their relationship and their smooth, unified sound that attracted A&M boss Herb Alpert when he signed them in 1969. With her warm, generous voice Karen gave a fresh slant to established material, personalizing classics and eradicating triteness, making even 'Close To You', one of Bacharach & David's most innocuous songs, meaningful. Not surprisingly, soon after its release in 1970, the song shot to the top of the charts.

Working only with their own voices and continual studio overdubs, Richard and Karen achieved a trademark seamless quality. 'I guess you can't beat a better blend than with yourself,' he once remarked. The excitement of racking up hit after hit at first obscured Karen's anxieties, but by 1974, when singles such as 'We've Only Just Begun', 'Goodbye To Love' and 'Yesterday Once More' had entered international consciousness, Karen found herself in the pop stratosphere without an anchor. 'Zonked out' and continually on the road with six hair-driers and an array of smiles, she didn't know who she was.

'I suspected that something was drastically wrong, but she never looked ill. She just looked, well, thin,' Richard said, with classic understatement.¹² The clues are there not just in her prominent cheekbones and bulging eyes, but written into the grooves of the records. She sang of a tortuous world full of strangers on 'I Won't Last A Day Without You', of being a misfit on 'Rainy Days And Mondays Always Get Me Down', where everything is coloured by a vague shadow of unease. In the same way that Billie Holiday took schmaltz and made it her own, Karen infused a corny song with a rare intelligence and integrity. Like all the major interpreters she didn't sing a song so much as inhabit it, and despite the 'squeaky clean' epithet, crying out from many of the tracks was a genuine white suburban blues. It was as if Karen was channelling

all her existential unease into songs like 'Superstar' and 'Solitaire'. Had she followed a solo path, she might well have ended up like Helen Reddy, singing strong narrative songs of women's experience.

As it was, Karen didn't let go of her internal strictures and never fully explored what it meant to be a woman. Protected by a close-knit family and jealous of Richard's affairs, she found it hard to form romantic relationships 'outside'. There were rumours of an engagement with Alan Osmond, another member of a squeaky-clean clan. 'There's really nothing in it,' she said, when asked about the affair. 'We're on the road so much there's not really much time for *that sort of thing*' (my italics). Apart from a few doomed suitors, Karen's only real public relationship was with property businessman Tom Burris. She married him in 1980, only to divorce him shortly before her death in 1983.

In an entertainment world where women were socialized to please, Karen, ever-polite and witty on the surface, showed alienation by developing a covertly hostile disorder. Analyst Susie Orbach writes of the similarities between anorectics and political prisoners who go on hunger strike, the suffragettes and IRA detainees who used starvation as the final means to fight for their cause.¹³ In Karen's case, the cause was her own sense of self. In 1979 she made a last, decisive bid for independence when Richard was in drug rehabilitation for his addiction to Quaaludes. Moving back to the East Coast of her birth, she went to New York to record her solo album with producer Phil Ramone. Although scared at first ('I'm not real good at being away from home by myself'), Karen flourished in the studio. The record was weak, but Karen was beginning to discover a sense of her own musical identity.

Disappointed that she'd taken a step without him, Richard made it obvious when the album was later previewed with Herb Alpert and A&M co-founder Jerry Moss that he'd rather concentrate on new Carpenters material. The guys were not enthusiastic, and Karen's solo debut was never released. Although she put a brave face on her disappointment, Karen was clearly bewildered. 'Why is this happening?' she asked Phil Ramone at the time. 'What did I do

wrong?' She always saw the hits more as Richard's achievement than her own. In the end power over her own body, fuelled by the pressure to present a desirable pop image, became for her the only tangible achievement. 'She looked absolutely terrible, you could count her ribs, and every bone in her body was sticking out. The sad thing was that she thought she looked terrific, but still needed to lose "a little more",' said Richard.¹⁴ Part of the nightmare was the fact that Karen began wearing revealing clothes because she believed the more weight she lost the better she looked.

When the illness took hold, at five foot four and a half inches tall and broad-shouldered, Karen weighed just five and a half stone (seventy-seven pounds), yet still felt over-exposed in the media glare, believing that too much fat was on display. Richard apparently said at one point before she developed anorexia that he didn't like 'chubby women'. While his influence was considerable, he was only voicing a truism that holds in the business. When a woman's body is sold as sexual product and slimness the most desirable image a girl can have, female performers inevitably focus on their weight. International fame and feeling vulnerable in the spotlight can take this obsession to extremes.

In 1975, a year after the disease took hold, The Carpenters had to cancel a thirty-eight-date sold-out British tour because Karen was too weak to perform. In the next eight years she was in and out of hospital seemingly immune to recovery. She bought a new home where an eight-foot stuffed rabbit sat mournfully on a love-seat and the kitchen was full of sparkling pots, pans and cutlery that remained unused to her death. Shortly before she died in February 1983, though, it seemed as though Karen was beginning to put on weight again, making psychological headway with plans for a new album and tour. Cruelly, her body couldn't take the extra weight and she had a sudden cardiac arrest. Caught in the claustrophobic, rootless world of the 'conquer all territories' music business, Karen Carpenter literally made herself disappear.

Material Girls?

In the late '70s when Karen was wrestling with her weight, there was a counter-movement to image tyranny in the deliberate anti-exploitation stance of punk. Women used image as a weapon they could turn against the industry, either by ignoring it (e.g. The Raincoats' 'dressing down' and concentrating on the music) or amplifying it (e.g. Siouxsie Sioux's peephole bras and bondage gear). Both approaches were aggressive tactics that survived the brief explosion of punk, but which, in the '80s video age, were completely marginalized.

As Gil Friesen, former president of US A&M Records, said, 'It was no longer a free-for-all expanding market. It was, going into the '80s, an industry where there was tough competition for market share, with business principles that governed.'¹⁵ The teen buyers who had fuelled industry expansion in the '60s and '70s thinned out by the end of the decade, leading to the 1979 'crash'. Singles sales slumped to 10 per cent of all record sales, and major record company CBS lost 46 per cent of annual profits, selling assets and stocks in order to survive.

The '80s coincided with the rise of the corporate artist. CBS may have been releasing 150 albums a year from a roster of 200 artists, but their profits were made on the strength of two stars: Michael Jackson, whose 1984 album *Thriller* netted twenty-five million sales, and Bruce Springsteen, whose *Born In The USA* sold twenty million. Hit albums from acts such as U2, Lionel Richie, Phil Collins, Dire Straits, Prince and Madonna all helped pull the industry out of its five-year slump.

'The superstar is the giant bonanza. The big hit is to develop superstar careers. That is the biggest win you can have,' said CBS Records' Al Teller.¹⁶ In an industry where of forty albums released a year by newcomers only a third are heard of again, it is inevitable that superstar success sets the standard. With an industry decline in the production of new albums, groups were signed and developed on a very tight leash. The demand for short-term profit throughout

the '80s and '90s saw an industry playing safe with saleable images, and one of its most dependable agents was MTV.

Warner Communications' MTV opened for business on 1 August 1981, and within two years the first American cable music channel Music TeleVision became second in importance only to radio as a music-industry promotional vehicle. Pop images became crucial mass-marketing tools, creating a demand for slick sexual presentation, whether it was Laura Branigan succumbing to simulated rape by a masked intruder in her 1984 'Self Control' video or Olivia Newton John pumping out 'Let's Get Physical'. There was a growing place for performers *au fait* with the power of advertising and its shadow sister, the soft-porn industry. Into this gap jumped Madonna.

For a late-twentieth-century phenomenon, her entry was inauspicious. In 1983 she appeared on *Top of the Pops* with two backing dancers, singing 'Holiday'. The single went to No. 3 in the UK, No. 16 in the US, received as lightweight chart pop. Madonna began her career dancing with Patrick Hernandez's disco revue in Paris, and looking like an ambitious Europop *ingénue*; the tackiness showed. This didn't alter much with the release several months later of 'Like A Virgin' with its accompanying video that had her writhing on a Venetian gondola and gliding through marble rooms in a white wedding dress. Hindsight and masterful redefinition of that song in subsequent stage shows gave this early promo a gloss that it didn't necessarily deserve. Despite protestations by the academic Camille Paglia that 'Like A Virgin' had 'coruscating polarities of evil and innocence',¹⁷ in 1985 it came across as cheap tack promoting well-worn pictures of madonna/whore stereotypes.

'She can offend people . . . yet, if you look at what she's saying, it's no big deal – it's just a tease . . . she can seem so outrageous when she's really the girl next door. That's a very unique mix,' said her former co-writer and musical director Patrick Leonard.¹⁸ True to the capitalist ethics of tantalization without real satisfaction Madonna has always promised more than she actually delivers – like the girls on telephone porn lines who sucker customers by never saying anything substantial, or advertising for the joys of car



Madonna at Live Aid USA, 1985: sporting the cuddly thrift-store Boy Toy look, plus crucifix. (Ebet Roberts/Redferns)

consumerism: this year's model is guaranteed to rust with inbuilt obsolescence. Madonna has instinctively understood how much business is about manufacturing pleasure and stimulating desire: it seems right that she was born near Detroit, home of that dependable metaphor, the Ford production line. Her follow-up hit to 'Like A Virgin' was a two-dimensional, jokey celebration of that very ethic – imitating Marilyn Monroe in 'Material Girl', yet adding the neat catchline '80s-style that, unlike Monroe, Madonna was In Control, Not a Victim.

Because she became so famous, she also became the media hold-all for post-modern academic theories on pop culture, sexuality and capitalism. She was looked at as a phenomenon rather than a

person, and became a 'metatextual girl', an example of 'female spectatorship and agency', 'the staging of the body' and the 'heat of surface desire'. However, these disconcertingly vague buzz phrases do nothing to illuminate the process that led to Madonna's domination of pop. She did not ascend into the firmament like a self-contained pop miracle. A product of the industry that made the scaffolding to put her up there, she had an ability to skim off underground trends (club dance music, Vogue-ing, androgyny) just before they hit the mainstream, riding the wavecrest with deceptive ease. Working with muscle and acumen, she moved quickly, making sure she was in place before competitors. Madonna may not have the originality, the wallowing messiness of the artistic muse, but her gift is in packaging the results, with soundbites.

Canny about the prime movers in any scene, in 1982 she persuaded Michael Jackson's manager Freddy DeMann to represent her and she drew to herself designers, producers, photographers, dancers and directors such as Jean-Paul Gaultier, Jellybean, Shep Pettibone, Steven Meisel, Herb Ritts, Mary Lambert, and Alex Keshishian to mastermind images for her. Pouring money into visuals, she was the first female artist to exploit video fully. She also had a clear idea about the music to go with those images. Musical director Patrick Leonard recalled how Madonna secured him for her 'Like A Virgin' tour. When her manager first approached, he turned her down flat, unimpressed with the album. 'It was too poppy for me.' The phone then rang again, this time with Madonna on the line. 'I've never known anyone so direct in my life. She knew exactly what she wanted and what she expected. She was so clear in her thinking. She told me that I could have *carte blanche* putting a band together, sorting out the songs, everything to do with the music. It typified Madonna.'¹⁹ Leonard accepted the offer, eventually making well over \$5 million from that association.

This business sense reached a peak in 1991 when she formed a joint company with Time-Warner, receiving a \$60 million advance for the multi-media Maverick and renegotiating her recording contract with a \$5 million advance for each of her next seven

albums, along with a 20 per cent royalty rate. Rivalling Michael Jackson as the ultimate corporate artist, Madonna generated sales for Warners of over \$1.2 billion in the first decade of her career, shifting seventy million albums. She envisaged Maverick as capitalizing on the talented people she had gathered along the way. 'It started as a desire to have more control,' she said, 'and became a kind of artistic think-tank.'

If Madonna was just about putting a lucrative sheen on mediocrity, however, countless dancing-revue girls would be up there with her. Back in 1985 something interesting was happening. First there was the 'Like A Virgin' tour, where her raw girl energy pulsed through a set of superlative dance routines. This was the fuller-figure Madonna with the flashing smile, her charm deepening and radiating out. It was a persona consolidated by Susan Seidelman's film *Desperately Seeking Susan*, in which Madonna played an amplified version of herself, an enjoyable hustler with fiery lipstick and a customized leather jacket. She was the insouciant gum-chewing leader of the girl gang who roused millions worldwide at Live Aid when, with bare, bold reference to *Playboy's* publishing of early nude shots, she shouted, 'I ain't gonna take shit off today.'

Within the space of a momentous first year, Madonna turned from being a female sell-out to a feminist icon. But because it was success driven by sex appeal, a tricky package at the best of times, she has regularly shifted in and out of favour ever since. Artistically, too, it was never plain sailing. Marriage in 1986 to celebrity brat-packer Sean Penn and the release of a sophisticated finely tuned pop album *True Blue* did nothing to ameliorate the loss of face she must have suffered in trying to negotiate Hollywood. For the first time there was a desperate edge to her determination as she played one duff role after another in *Shanghai Surprise*, *Who's That Girl*, then *Bloodhounds on Broadway*. Even in 1990's big budget *Dick Tracy*, she had a wooden, self-conscious air.

Unable to let go of 'Madonna', the star has never made it as a film actress. By 1989 the strain was telling. After a traumatic, violent divorce with Penn, she went underground and came up with what could have been a major turning point – her fourth

album, *Like A Prayer*. 'She was upset and in tears a lot of the time. Normally she's a very fast worker, but it took maybe three or four times as long to make the record because she kept breaking down,' recalled Leonard. 'We called it her divorce album.'²⁰

The new colour of her hair spoke volumes; growing out the blond to become dark reflected an inner tension and the surfacing of brooding emotion. The break-up with Penn devastated her, but from that trough and loss of control there emerged a nascent, human, artistic self. On reaching her thirtieth birthday she was re-evaluating her childhood, expressing pain, delving deep into anger, grief and a visionary sense of joy. The title track was pure devotional pop while the accompanying video, with the tableaux of gospel choir and Madonna kissing a sorrowful black Christ, was pure inspiration. Never mind that it was condemned by religious groups, never mind that Pepsi halted the campaign to go with the album's release, and it shot to the top of the charts in the wake of controversy – the album was genuinely moving, from the ebullient call to arms of 'Express Yourself' to the semi-autobiographical 'Oh Father' and the tender 'Promise To Try', a song dedicated to the mother who died when she was a child.

One of the biggest challenges for a woman in pop is to express herself from the core. Creative art is as much about encountering the uncontrolled self as it is about selling the capable side to the world. For once, Madonna had allowed herself to let go. 'The "Like A Prayer" video was about overcoming racism and overcoming the fear of telling the truth. I had my own ideas about God and then I had the ideas that I thought were imposed on me . . . I believe in the innate goodness of people,' she said.²¹ Madonna could have gone on developing this new adult potential, but she was offered the chance to play gangster's moll Breathless Mahoney in *Dick Tracy* on the condition that she retrieve one of her most saleable assets, her blond hair. 'Along with the album, which was much more personal, I felt great having my own hair colour for the first time in years . . . that was the avenue I was going down – and then all of a sudden I had to change it.'²²

As if scared by the introspective road she had started to go



Madonna in 1990: cool and sculpted for her 'Blond Ambition' tour. (Michel Linssen/Redferns)

down, Madonna acquiesced to director (and celebrity lover) Warren Beatty for the film, and dyed her hair blond again. With that she had switched back on to the baubled Gentleman Prefer Blondes show circuit, only this time with the air of an old lag. Blond became a habit that would be harder and harder to break.

The 1990 'Blond Ambition' tour to promote her *Like A Prayer* album was a triumphant spiritual journey through masturbation, Catholicism and Gaultier-designed pop. It also marked Madonna's changing body. Aware that her physique was a prime commodity, she rigorously worked off the puppy fat that made her 'Like A Virgin' tour so endearing, and re-emerged with sculpted muscles for the high-octane vision of 'Blond Ambition'. It's no accident that many female performers dramatically lose weight when they reach a certain point of fame. As Madonna's fat disappeared, in its place came rituals, special diets, frantic exercise regimes and a sense of regimented control. As with Karen Carpenter ten years before, physical fat for her had become a metaphor for weakness and lack of

control. It was a hard look, in tune with the new toughness of her videos, and the tour documentary *In Bed With Madonna*, a 'frank' behind-the-scenes film that gave her the box-office cred she so badly needed. The downside was a growing sense of cold commercialism.

While Madonna set her stamp through a kind of video situationism, her first major competitor Cyndi Lauper found the process less easy. Also from an Italian-American lower-middle-class background, with a keen knowledge of pop and therefore an ability to subvert it, but with a more erratic temperament, Lauper is arguably the more musically talented of the two. Arriving a year earlier than her soul sister, Lauper hit the charts in 1984 with her unashamed feminist anthem 'Girls Just Want To Have Fun'. Voted 'Woman of the Year' in 1985 by *Ms* magazine, she continued to pepper the pop scene with her sparky personality, whether it was lighting up the dreary Live Aid video when she leaped at the microphone like a raw, multicoloured terrier, or yelling out 'I Drove All Night' at the top of her lungs in 1989. 'I dyed my hair at nine with green food colour on St Patrick's Day,' she recalled. 'My mom was modern, she let me go with it. I had that sense of fashion. My Barbie dolls looked great! I just extended that in the '80s.'²³

She wore thrift-store clothing and sang accessible dance music in a helium voice, just as Madonna did later with the tattered tulle, lace and crucifixes. She sang of female masturbation in the Top Ten hit 'She Bop' six years before Madonna writhed on a stage bed in an orgy of self-consummation. Interviewed in 1994, she said,

'I wanted success out of anger. People would give me grief about the way I dressed, then Boy George's success opened the door for me. At the time of "Girls Just Want To Have Fun" I was shocked at the reaction. I'd go out on stage and the audience would be filled with girls screaming, ripping at my clothes. I'd never heard girls screaming over a woman before, and at first I thought, They think I'm gay. The only bad thing is I wasn't! You can't live in that sort of atmosphere as a meteoric phenomenon, it doesn't go with being creative.'

Both were hard-working products of the New York club scene, but where Lauper, alienated by the constant pressure to be 'commercial', lost momentum and direction after her initial huge success (her first solo album *She's So Unusual* sold more than four and a half million copies, yielding four Top Ten singles in 1984), Madonna made a point of restlessly building on every achievement. 'It's always been a struggle for me to sell myself,' said Lauper.

Her motivations are different, this much was apparent during her London shows at the end of 1994, when she did heart-rending scat and played an array of different instruments. Considering the dichotomy between her mainstream career and her artistic credentials, in a strange way Lauper is pop's Biggest Secret. She took a cool appraisal of Madonna's success:

'I actually passed her one evening coming out of a studio. I was dressed like a nut, a bag lady. I said hello to her, but I don't think she recognized me. She seemed kind of alone, with all her bodyguards. I hailed a cab and went home where the light was on and my husband and cats were waiting for me. I felt like I had the charmed life. As a writer I need that. Madonna's a terrific businesswoman and entertainer, but I don't know if her dream is to sing that great song, or hit that perfect note. I don't know if moving people is important to her. I wouldn't compromise that.'

Later Lauper adjusted her view, looking at Madonna with a fond, almost sisterly air. 'I think God put us on the earth at the same time, and it's so strange. Sometimes I see a picture of her and I think it's me. I look, think, Hey I didn't wear that – then I see her face. Her face looks like mine and it's *her*,' she said when her 1994 Greatest Hits compilation *Twelve Deadly Cyns . . . And Then Some* came out. She went on,

'We like a lot of the same things but are very different. When she approaches the rhythm she comes from that dancer place. It's almost like Eartha Kitt. She was going to see Eartha Kitt for a while . . . She certainly presses buttons on everybody. I think every woman has a sexuality and shouldn't be castrated.'

'They always compare us – but they do that to women. It's like, no matter what I said or she said it would always come out like a cat fight. It's silly.'²⁴

Lauper displayed a girl-pop solidarity that was rare in the mid-'80s. While Madonna encapsulated the image of modern competitive sexual female, another image dominating the decade was that of Prince's Women, glamorous acts tending towards the basque/suspender school of video like Vanity/Apollonia 6 and Sheena Easton, who earned a reputation of being His Purpleness's appendages. As a stylist once remarked to me, 'Basically they have no choice. They're his walking fantasy. He's outrageously rude: "I want to lick your cherry", "twenty-two positions in a one-night stand" – it's grit sex, no bullshitting. He's saying, "This is who I am, these are the women I like and this is what I write my songs about." Good on him, at least he's honest about it.'

Though Sheena Easton admitted that she was playing a role, slapping on the ham, even she got touchy when I suggested that the Prince connection overpowered her, compromising any sense of being an artist in her own right. 'I'm sick of being asked whether I had a relationship with Prince. It's boring having to answer the same question twenty-five million times. I think it's a sexist attitude, assuming that if a man and a woman work together they've gotta be sleeping together. It's very narrow to assume they can't have a friendship and mutual respect.'²⁵

After leaving her working-class Glasgow roots to set up home in LA, Easton became a million-seller in the States as well as a successful health and fitness expert and celebrity actress, appearing alongside Don Johnson in *Miami Vice*. In 1984 parental watchdog PMRC tried to ban her Top Ten hit 'Sugar Walls', a saucy song penned by Prince in his monumental *Purple Rain* period. After the court-case controversy with PMRC it took Easton a long time to shake off the Prince Connection.

It became an industry truism that if you were a woman and Prince wrote you a song, he was making a move. On a personal level that may have been the case, but professionally it was more to



Cyndi Lauper at Montreux Rock Festival, 1984: presenting her version of the thrift-store look. (David Redfern)

do with business acumen and ego. A prolific songwriter, his songs were the equivalent of a product stamp. For a woman to be bequeathed a Prince song for her new album meant instant credibility: in pop terms she had arrived. Martika was a purveyor of trite pop and soufflé cover versions until Prince got hold of her and gave her 'depth' with 'Martika's Kitchen'; ditto Cathy Dennis and Lisa Stansfield; even Mica Paris's career took a boost when he noticed her singing at his party after a London show.

Attention from Prince meant immediate access to top players in the industry. Because of the widespread respect Prince has within the business, his approval and patronage act like a calling card. He prefers working with women, and has empowered many in his

career: Meli'sa Morgan consolidated her early success with a song from his *Controversy* album, Chaka Khan had phenomenal attention with her classic version of his 'I Feel For You'. 'Any artist working with Prince has to come away enriched. His spontaneity is so infectious, as is his courage and belief in his music,' said Easton. 'He's always given great respect to women – he's worked a lot with women engineers in a generally male-dominated field. He doesn't pigeon-hole and label.'

Easton's is a positive view, but Prince's influence works like a double-edged sword. He is pro-women to the exclusion of men, maybe because he is less afraid of dealing with them. Prince's bass player Mark Brown once said: 'He knew them better than he knew us [the men]. He would open up to the women. They would hang out with him, go shopping with him, and he'd spend money on 'em. But with us, it was never like that.'²⁶

In his biography *Prince: A Pop Life* Dave Hill suggests that the star focuses on women to fuel a passionate kind of narcissism, 'gazing at his own reflection and seeing a girl look back'. Prince has cultivated a charming effeminacy to counteract his masculine poise. His is a flattering, intense gaze. One memorable day in 1988, I inveigled my way with another journalist into his studio at Paisley Park, hoping to stumble on an interview. I was sitting looking at a yellow pad with the words to 'Lovesexy' scrawled on it in a purple pen when His Highness walked in and sat quietly in the corner, exuding a palpable charisma. 'Oh my God,' I said, involuntarily. He wore a silk Paisley shirt, and even though it was the middle of the day, was clean, coiffured and scented. There was a smile, a short 'Hi', and it wasn't until after we had been diplomatically ejected that I remembered his appraising, assessing look, from the top of my peroxide-blond hair to my black shoes. It felt flattering, yet at the same time disquietingly direct, as if mixed in with the sense of mentor/protégée potential was a business brain fast at work, totting up a prospective product.

If I could sense that from a single look, working with him as a woman could be an overpowering experience. In many ways he is a symbol of what any woman confronts in getting her art out into

the world – an inevitable wrestle over who controls image and musical interpretation. More malleable personalities have lost out. Vanity/Apollonia 6, for instance, one of Prince's first girl groups specializing in lingerie, high heels and soft-porn references, never rose above being a smutty, shock-tactic joke. Their name was linked to what tabloid editors describe as a 'nipple count', a connotation worsened by the knowledge that Prince originally planned to call the girls The Hookers.

Among the Ones That Got Away, Sheila E., daughter of Santana percussionist Pete Escovedo, escaped the titillation ghetto by emphasizing her role as a shit-hot drummer and instrumentalist. Likewise Wendy & Lisa, who always maintained an ironic muso detachment when playing in his band The Revolution (witness Wendy Melvoin's self-possessed guitar strumming on the 'Kiss' video; in a neat reversal of roles she is the one 'doing stuff' while Prince flits around as the decoration. Only a man with such power can play around with that role of powerlessness). Virtuosos in their own right, Wendy & Lisa had to leave The Revolution to establish themselves as independent artists.

As Prince was always the bigger star, women were obliged to bow to his version of *Lovesexy*. Even Jill Jones, no mental slouch and an artist whose eponymous solo debut of funky dance pop was critically acclaimed, was continually assessed in relation to Prince, her collaborator. Capitalizing on gender confusion and male fantasy, Prince encouraged women to 'get sexy' in a very traditional, decorative manner, yet somehow stretch their artistic potential. His peculiar message sums up the contradiction that lies at the heart of women's image in pop.

Cleavage City

As the '80s progressed into the '90s, the music industry became increasingly corporate, with multinational takeover of not just independents, but middle-ranking majors. Sony bought CBS, while EMI took over Chrysalis and Virgin. BMG snapped up

RCA and Arista, while Polygram incorporated Island and A&M, and the Japanese giant Matsushita became 'passive' owner of MCA. George Michael took Sony to court in 1993 in an attempt to get out of a contract binding him to a company that treated him as mere software for their hardware. Although he was arguing that he had grown up since Wham! and wished to be treated like a serious artist rather than a number-crunching sex symbol, the irony was that in his videos women still played an unreconstructed (albeit 'tasteful') role as erotic decoration. 'Freedom '90', for instance, featured the supermodels *à go go* – Naomi, Linda *et al.*, while 'I Want Your Sex' became famous for its focus on female erogenous zones.

Michael occupied one end of a spectrum in which women had become increasingly commodified, with the use of models in videos a sign of a male artist's virility. The better-looking the model/dancer, the greater the rock star's supposed pulling power. In 1986, for instance, the besuited rock lounge lizard Robert Palmer sang 'Addicted To Love' with a collection of mannikin models playing guitars behind him. All wearing identical little black dresses, ruby-red lipstick and blank automaton stares, they were the MTV equivalent of the Stepford Wives. 'Intuitively I know that's about as misogynist as it gets,' singer/songwriter Michelle Shocked said in 1989, shortly before she mimicked that transgression, with a succession of Schwarzenegger beefcake types performing in the background to her video for the song 'On The Greener Side'.

At the more low-budget end of the scale there were standard heavy metal images such as Mötley Crüe's 'Girls, Girls, Girls' 1987 video where women in bikinis danced in a sleazy club, wrapping themselves around poles Thai-butterfly style. And hip hop outfit 2 Live Crew picked up on soft-porn imagery with their 1990 *As Nasty As They Wanna Be* record sleeve depicting a row of barely bikini-clad butts so obviously sexist that many shops refused to stock it. George Michael's lingerie may have been more expensive, but the impulse came from the same source.

'Shit, she's a major babe. Do you know what it feels like, on a rudimentary level, to watch a girl dance like that to a record you've made? Fuck world peace, man,' self-stylized 'sex-on-a-stick'

soul rocker Terence Trent D'Arby told journalist Dylan Jones at his home in Hollywood Hills. D'Arby was watching a video casting of semi-clad girls auditioning for his next promo. Pressing the pause button he said to the dancing model on the screen: 'You should never trust a mystic without a dick. Never.'²⁷

Madonna tried to turn these erotic codes on their head with mocking humour – the starkest expression of this being her 'Open Your Heart' video where, clad in a black bustier, she performed to a line of sad male voyeurs. With a complete understanding of the camera she turned it into a fetishistic gaze. The exuberance of her control, together with the fact that she was the highest-earning woman in pop, meant that Madonna became the yardstick for executive decisions on marketing. From the mid-'80s onwards there was a proliferation of blonde wannabes in the charts, from Vanessa Paradis to Wendy James and Patsy Kensit, all shedding clothes and spouting a contradictory message about 'control'.

Reservations about Madonna's blatant selling of sex were legion, with many women artists feeling the pressure to follow her agenda. Kylie Minogue, Lisa Stansfield, Martika, Cathy Dennis all underwent the transformation from girl-next-door to sex siren, with varying degrees of success or credibility. Stansfield's make-over for her second album *Real Love* in 1991 entailed a concerted effort to make the northern Rochdale lass 'get sexy'. Instead she just looked staged and lit, a kind of middle-of-the-road Housewives' Choice, even when cavorting naked in a pile of flowers. When I interviewed her in 1990, she had a firm handshake, on-the-edge soul and an exuberance that were later smoothed down – visually at least. 'I want to stay self-contained in Rochdale,' she said. 'The streets in London are not paved with gold, and even with success things are totally normal. Even limos don't make a difference.'²⁸ This was before the international marketing team really took over.

Wendy James, singer with late-'80s UK group Transvision Vamp, went in the opposite direction. Starting out as a Madonna-clone blonde saying 'I'm in Control of my Sexuality', she spent several years making mediocre albums which were critically trashed – although she was featured pouting and bare-breasted on the cover of every British magazine aiming to boost its circulation – but reappeared in

1993 dressed in penitent black, singing sober Elvis Costello-penned songs and admitting, sorry folks, 'I was Out of Control.'

By the early '90s a heated public debate about what was acceptable and what let the side down raged among performers, audience and critics. Miki Berenyi from top indie rock band Lush voiced the reservations of many women in her analysis of the diminutive Australian singer Kylie Minogue and her dramatic change of image in the late '80s:

'I have a massive problem with her because she epitomizes the acceptable role. She makes records for men. Loads of blokes like the Manic Street Preachers and Bobby Gillespie [of Primal Scream] go on about her being a great pop star, but can you remember the words? It's a shame she gets so much credibility when there are so many women worth a hundred times that; it annoys me that Sinéad O'Connor has a great voice but people slag her. As a woman going on stage you have to have a degree of responsibility. It's war; you shouldn't stick up for Kylie, she should be fought at every turn.'²⁹

Labelled Gender Traitors, these blonde bimbos and 'men's women' brought to the surface female anxiety about power and exploitation, along with the questions of who owns the pop sex fantasy? and who is the fantasy for? In 1987 I saw hungry, rising young rap stars Salt 'N' Pepa posing for a magazine cover in a New York SoHo loft lying on the ground at the feet of their producer Hurby 'Luv Bug' Azor while the photographer pointed his camera down and someone showered them with dollars. At this, their normally taciturn British record-company representative intervened. 'No,' he said. 'Not that.' The girls had begun the shoot standing proud in their trainers; by the end they were literally reduced to the floor, Luv Bug imitating a pimp.

Even Chaka Khan, one of the most respected and influential soul artists in the business, has never been free from the pressure. She once turned up for an *NME* photo shoot in the late '80s wearing a flouncy, off-the-shoulder cotton dress, announcing,

'For this interview I've put on a dress. I don't feel like wearing a dress. I would have preferred something more comfortable, less contrived, less

constricting. My manager asked me to wear it. It's part of business and reluctantly I have to go along with it. There are some things I won't forfeit but I have to be realistic and go along with the dress. It's supposed to make me look pretty, show me off: cleavage city.³⁰

Young female video director Tamsin Haughton told me that it's not simply a case of men pushing women into being sex objects:

'I worked with a singer who's an intelligent songwriter. The band didn't want to bother with styling, apart from her. She was the only one with make-up, and beforehand she said to me she wanted to look glamorous, to bewitch. She was wearing a white dress, and as there was water in the video, of course it got wet. "Is my body showing through?" she asked. Yes, it looks sexy. "I don't want to project that image." The girl didn't want to project that, but all the messages were that she wanted to be fancied.

'Women have a lot of problems understanding their sexuality – if you're intelligent you're not meant to be part of that scene, you're meant to be appreciated for your mind. But women also like dressing up, enjoying their sexuality. I get women saying to me, "If I wear that my tits will stick right over the top and it'll look sexy." Image is so important; a woman will do better if she's got a great body and a great face: it's a world people want to be part of. People buy a reflection of what they want. Also, a singer won't wear anything she doesn't want to. It's her video, her money. If she argues long enough, she'll get what she wants.'³¹

Women may describe it as control, but there is usually a degree of acquiescence to the sexual norm, if only because it's good for business. Haughton, who has also worked as a model and appeared in pop promos, unconsciously highlighted the nub of the problem. 'It's intriguing, fascinating to play with an image of who you can be. I like to see *how people express me*' (my italics). When an artist no longer expresses herself, what is she compromising?

She may get what she wants, but at a price. Pamela Hunter, former creative director at Virgin Records, recalled a campaign in the early '90s for acid-pop duo Kiss Of Life, when for the visuals on the first single (CD sleeve and promotional shots) singer Victoria

Maxwell wore a loose, low-key dress she felt comfortable in. 'When the record didn't sell that well, the whole campaign then revolved around the state of her dress. The head of marketing said to me, "There's a problem with styling, someone will have to take control of that girl, put on clothes that'll sell her".'³²

For Hunter there was always a nail-biting moment when she would try and sell a video to 'the salesmen on the road' before it went out to the public. 'We'd all watch the video in a marketing meeting and wait for everyone's response. There'd be silence, then, "Fantastic . . . but where's the sex?" The head of the company would be saying, "Can we put the girls in sex outfits upfront?"' Referring to a video she had once seen of Alice Cooper on tour playing with a blow-up doll in fish-net stockings, a hose pipe strangling its neck, Hunter said, 'Music is meant to be revolutionary, making you look at things in a fresh way, but people are still voyeurs, sexually aroused by images of women being strapped or locked up. Men are more susceptible to putting those images in video treatments, they'll push further for them.'

Photographer Kevin Davies, who works in fashion editorial as well as music-industry visuals, said frankly, 'People say, "Make her look gorgeous." Make her look fuckable, that's what they really mean. When male photographers shoot women, it is about their fantasy, that old '60s thing of "Burn that lens, baby, lick the camera." A lot of them do fashion because they want to fuck women, it's as simple as that.'³³

Creating the fuckable fantasy woman has long been a preoccupation of pop music, especially now the medium has become so visual. While a woman rightfully takes pleasure in looking beautiful or exploring her sexual power, too often this is marketed as homogenized youth erotica, a mass-market version of beauty that, like dicing with the tabloid press, is for many too powerful to take on and win. MTV's executive vice-president Judy McGrath was fully aware of the Frankenstein's monster that had been created in the '80s when women often became a superfluous sexual presence, playing no instrument, having no say in the music and just providing the 'horny' factor.

'I think we hit a real low spot in the mid- to late '80s, when there appeared to be a preponderance of videos where women were relegated to the background . . . The pinnacle of that was the Sam Kinison video with Jessica Hahn, with lots of rock gods surrounding Jessica writhing. Someone said to me around that time, "I understand you had to play it, but did you have to make it a hit?" And that's when I realized that we could be more than just passive programmers here, and how we play it is up to us . . . it was too easy to just sit back and say, "Hey, we don't make the videos."'³⁴

Block video-watching would reveal a simple visual language in which women were just ciphers or body parts. By the early '90s McGrath was championing many female artists and mixed-sex groups where 'girls are not just sitting there for visual appeal'.

'You have to get your image sorted out from the word go,' said stylist Tanya Haughton (sister of Tamsin), who in the early '90s worked with New Order, The Shamen, Lena Fiagbe and a host of young dance bands. 'People always remember you from your first hit, and it's difficult to shake off that first image.'³⁵ Madonna has played it with a strong mixture of suggestion and aggression, a combination that rap/singer Neneh Cherry also tried, wearing girlie Lycra shorts but keeping her hands wrapped like a boxer for the cover of her 1989 debut *Raw Like Sushi*. 'They'd love to stereotype you as a bimbo if they could,' she told me shortly before its release. 'That's why you have to try and keep one step ahead, be provocative.' Her stylist Judy Blame, a gay man who has the knack of bringing out a woman's individuality, added, 'She wanted a strong, sexy image – one that said, "I know I'm good-looking, but keep away."³⁶ Cherry then found that when she let go of her raunchy image for her second album *Homebrew* in 1992, she met with widespread record-company disapproval. Blame explained,

'She'd made it at home, with a very homey vibe, and said to me, "No bra and panties this time, Judy, I'm sick of seeing Madonna in it." So we did shots in Sweden and came up with a very homey image. When I took it to the record company [Circa, part of Virgin, and now of the EMI empire], they said, "Oh shit, it's not bra and panties." They'd prefer her stomping around in a leather miniskirt. At one point, when the album wasn't

selling, they blamed it on the visuals, saying she didn't look sexy enough. I thought she looked relaxed and gorgeous, but because it wasn't obvious, marketing men were moaning, "Oh my God, is Neneh a hippy now?" They couldn't categorize it – but on a fashion tip, it was actually pre-'90s grunge. It's good to be subtle sometimes.'

Blame, who started out styling Boy George and who now operates at a high level in fashion and music, feels that women like working with him because he is not a threat. 'It's always a problem for women that the music industry manufactures them to a male fantasy rather than a woman's point of view. I like to feel I'm breaking that up with artists like Björk, who does it on her own terms.' To a certain extent, being on the margins himself makes him more sympathetic:

'The business is very homophobic. Most people see me as a Queen Bitch, don't mess with him. I promote that image, otherwise they just think you're a nancy, and a lot of men feel intimidated. Especially if you're dressing a band: two of them might be queens, but the other two that aren't are really jumpy. I don't get that with women because there's no threat from me sexually.'

No matter how long they have been in the business, women still have to deal with the sex imperative. Even when she was approaching fifty, Cher seemed to be a female Dorian Gray, getting younger as she became older. Buying cosmetic surgery as a way of maintaining the illusion, she would display the results in skin-tight rubber and leather, and show her famous butt tattoo at every opportunity. Spokesperson for a US health and fitness chain and the 'step' aerobics workout, she needed to spend a lot of time and energy to keep up her image. One night before a concert, a *Newsweek* journalist saw her sitting on the floor of her dressing room staring at a mountain of cosmetics. 'My body's just going to shut down soon, and I'll have to stop,' she said. 'I don't know how many more times I can beat this face into submission.' But the show must go on, and according to her sister Georganne LaPierre, 'She loves the glamour of who she is.'³⁷



Cher on *Ready Steady Go!*, London, 1964: pre-nose job and step aerobics. (David Redfern)

The fortysomething singer screamed out almost cartoon-style the extremes that women can go to in the image business. Allegedly nipped and tucked more drastically than Michael Jackson, Cher adheres to the American dream of reinvention of self: 'Getting old doesn't have to mean getting obsolete . . . If you really want something badly enough, you can figure out a way to make it happen. I mean, in America, you can grow up to be President.' With an estimated annual earnings in 1991 of \$10 million, it may have paid off financially, but at forty-five, after innumerable best-selling albums and Oscar-winning Hollywood success, she still said, 'Sometimes I just don't feel proud of what I've achieved . . . I think, "Someday soon you'll do something worthwhile, something that's really great."' ³⁸

Manufacturing herself as a male fantasy meant that she encountered a split between Cher, the glitzy character ('Sometimes I'm not even sure what being Cher is'), and Cherilyn, the woman

who'd sooner appear on stage in sweatpants and a T-shirt singing songs by Bonnie Raitt and Bob Seeger. Once when she had a reunion with former partner Sonny, she suddenly wanted to 'cover up my arms, my legs, everything'. As if she was trying to reclaim her body for herself.

Nice Record, Shame about the Face

Considering that the pop ideal is slimness, youth and health, what of talented women who are old, overweight or disabled? It sounds unsexy as hell, but women like Tina Turner, Alison Moyet, Etta James and Martha Wash (former Weather Girl) have ignored the pop prescription for success. 'If someone handed you a brief. "There's this 45-year-old black woman, she once made it in the business as someone's sidekick, but she's going to be a megastar." you'd be like, fuck off, no way,' says stylist Tanya Haughton. 'But if you're confident you can wear anything, be anybody. Because she's older Tina Turner has depth. Yeah, she looks good, she's this age, she's been through these traumas; listen to that voice, see that figure. It's an honest role rather than a con.'

Deborah Harry found it difficult to let go of the blonde, slim image that characterized her in Blondie, but in getting older and letting her brown hair grow through, she found new freedom of expression.

'Sexuality comes from within. It was scary at first, confronting the world with my own hair, but now I can say, "Well, you're not getting any younger, are you?" I don't care, I really love it, because I was trapped for so long. I used to have a compulsion to be as thin as possible. I'll never be that way again because I've got used to my body type and I know what it can and cannot do . . . Actually, I always felt I could sing better when there was more meat on me.' ³⁹

One artist who has never tried to reconstruct her body for a commercial image is Alison Moyet, the British vocalist who rose to

success in the early '80s as one half of Vince Clark's whizz-kid pop duo Yazoo (Yaz in the States). Although she has always been heavy, it's never been a simple case of sounding the trumpet for weightier women. Sanguine about the 'fat girl made good' image perpetuated by the tabloids, Moyet says, 'I don't think I've ever sold a record for the way I look. But in that sense it's easier for me than for a girl whose whole image and marketing is based on the way she looks. I mean, she's got a lot to worry about.'⁴⁰

It is often argued that a sexy image is there to distract the audience from limited talent or average material. Moyet, the spiky ex-punk from Essex with a blue-eyed stare, has an arresting, pulsating voice in any medium. In a way, she received the ultimate accolade: being respected for her voice and songwriting talents first, her looks second. She sees this as a double-edged sword: 'It's never fun to be publicly humiliated. When I was twenty-two I sold loads of records and no one wanted to shag me then. Your size determines how people perceive you. If you're a fat bird you're weak, unsexual and self-indulgent.' Moyet went through an air-brushed period during the mid-'80s when Yazoo split and she recorded two best-selling MOR pop albums, but she was uninterested in parcelling herself up as a 'nice package'. Although she lost her way with supper-club pop hits ('It was never really me'), like a homing pigeon, she found it again with the self-written, bluesy album *Hoodoo* in 1990 and the upfront beat pop of *Essex* three years later.

Another woman who resisted attempts to package her up was Tyka Nelson, Prince's sister, a pop singer/songwriter whose self-titled debut came out on Chrysalis in 1988 – it was ironic that in contrast to her brother's lithe and svelte fantasy women, Nelson was overweight and painfully shy. Interviewed that year, she said,

'I get bothered by people saying I should slim. Weight may be a way to hide, and putting a brownie in my mouth may be a way of pushing down the pain, but at least, let me have my viewpoint. Maybe I'm testing everybody to see. If you really like me, you'll accept me the way I am and not just think about my physical appearance. It'd be great to break stereotypes: look at Oprah Winfrey – she looks like nobody else on

television, yet she's the top in her field. I don't think she was holding on to her weight; maybe it needed to be said. When I'm ready to lose weight I will.'⁴¹

Another group of women excluded by the pop world are those who are disabled. A blind Stevie Wonder could get away with it because of the rich tradition of blind bluesmen behind him and the sheer breadth of his talent. Former polio sufferer Ian Dury didn't hide his limp and withered arm as the singer of the best-selling Blockheads, and singer/songwriter Robert Wyatt reached the top of the charts while sitting in a wheelchair, his plaintive anti-Falklands-war song 'Shipbuilding' becoming a hit in 1983.

Women with disability, however, are almost invisible, apart from America's most popular jazz singer Diane Schurr, who is blind, and girly punk singer Toyah Wilcox, who danced with a club foot. In the late '80s, a bright girl with multi-coloured hair extensions called Kata Kolbert tried to break through. Her debut single 'Live Your Life' on her own Nevermore label had cool songwriting and soft vocals that invited comparisons with Nico and Kate Bush. The only drawback was that, restricted to a wheelchair with severe arthritis, Kolbert was unable to promote it in the acceptable way. Her wheelchair was not sexy. While trucking her demo tape round record companies, she was met with both uncomfortable comments and blank rejection. 'I couldn't be a singer in a wheelchair on my own terms,' she said. 'They wanted me to be a brave struggling cripple in a nice long dress.'⁴²

Trained by Mavis Bennet, star of the '40s D'Oyly Carte Opera company, Kolbert could have pursued a career in light opera, 'warbling religious tunes on God-slot programmes'. She is, however, of a different generation, her musical influences spanning folk, Asian music and pop, her interests centred on DIY fanzines and alternative poetry. An active member of the disability arts movement in Britain, Kolbert was frustrated with her polished pop being restricted to the disability circuit. On a practical level, though, until venue access improves, disabled performers will be limited to a cultural ghetto. 'Disabled people generally seem outside

of normal life,' says Kolbert, 'not part of it. People only think of us if they're made to.'

Supermodel Superficial

In the face of pressure to be pretty many female performers, from Tracy Chapman in her dreads to Scottish singer/songwriter Eddi Reader with her librarian spectacles, have adopted a deliberate anti-image policy. Maria McKee, former 'cowpunk' Lone Justice vocalist, who established a successful pop career in the late '80s, remembers,

'I felt no one would take me seriously unless I looked really ugly. I got fat, I didn't bathe for months at a time. Before I'd go on stage I'd untuck my shirt. That's all I'd do to change. I'd wear the same shirt for months, and put on black eyeliner, rubbing it around my eyes so it was just a black mess. I thought, OK, now people will take me seriously. Going solo, I had pressure to keep myself together, only for myself. I don't want to be a slob. I wash now.'⁴³

Before they grow in stature or confidence, women often start their career either rebelling against or acquiescing in the sex norm. By the time she has made it, whatever her stance, every successful female performer believes fervently that she is dressing or making up to express herself. As novelist Kathy Acker remarked, 'Make-up isn't frivolous; it's another form of art.' But Riot Grrrl fanzine *Pawholes* has asked the legitimate question:

Make-up can be an interesting form of personal expression, but when millions of women are applying make-up every day to mimic a few models who represent the ideal beauty as determined by the fashion and cosmetics industries, just how personal, how unique is this expression? . . . Mass production of cosmetics has led to mass production of 'beautiful' women.⁴⁴

The biggest competitors to Madonna in the early '90s came not from the pop industry, but supermodels and superwaifs like Naomi Campbell and Kate Moss, fantasy-thin girls marketing high glamour. The fashion industry has always worked in tandem with the music business, one feeding off the other. Hip 'rock 'n' roll' designer Gianni Versace summed it up simply when he said, 'Young people buy things and go and dance in them, basically.' The model-pop star crossover is a familiar combination: French *chanteuse* Vanessa Paradis, for example, took flight as a bird in the Chanel commercial; at the lower end of the scale, topless Page Three girl Samantha Fox launched her pop career with breathy cover versions of '60s hits, while top runway star Naomi Campbell signed to Sony in 1992, anxious to make it in the rock sphere.

Two years later her debut album, coyly titled *Babywoman*, came out. Although Campbell had worked with a phalanx of top producers including Bruce Roberts (Cher, Donna Summer), Tim Simenon (Neneh Cherry, Bomb The Bass) and celebrated rappers PM Dawn, and *much* was made of her supposedly ground-breaking vocal skills, the record was a flop. It was as if she was on the runway, modelling songs.

But while the musical influence of high-profile models-turned-pop stars is minimal, their visual impact has been striking. When supermodels became bigger stars than those in Hollywood or pop, many women found the results oppressive. Anjali, vocalist and guitarist of British all-girl band The Voodoo Queens, wrote the song 'Supermodel (Superficial)' in response to the media proliferation of Naomi, Christy, Linda and Kate.

'Everywhere I looked they were staring me in the face. It was offensive that they were seen as an ideal form of womanhood. Being bombarded by such pictures when I was young made me bulimic. Problem pages are full of girls saying, I want to kill myself because I don't look like Kate Moss. After the song came out, there was a pandemic sigh of relief from women. They'd come up to us at gigs to say thanks; and both women and men would write to us saying they were so used to seeing it, but no one was saying anything against it. It was about time.'⁴⁵

After a while image is just about manipulation of style. Even Madonna found limitations in the visual sex role when her 'coffee-table porn' book *Sex*, published in 1992 to coincide with the release of her album *Erotic*, failed to stun the world. The *Sex* pictures, parodies of perversion and female fantasy featuring Big Daddy Kane, Los Angeles lesbians and bubbling faucets, coupled with a clumsy approximation of Anais Nin writings, seemed curiously flat. The album, with its disco work-outs and thinly sung version of the taut Peggy Lee classic 'Fever', reflected the fact that it was recorded nine-to-five to a three-month deadline. This audio-visual package was a job, a Warholian facsimile of the peroxide sex persona the public had come to expect. What came across, though, was less erotica than lack of engagement.

The tone of critics became weary. Under headlines like 'Madonna's Anticlimax', she was dismissed as past it by the 'straight' press, and accused by the gay press of being a 'sexual tourist'. 'She's the pure playing with the perverse,' lesbian photographer Della Grace said scathingly.⁴⁶ Madonna said later that she was being punished 'for being a single female, for having power and being rich and . . . having a sex life. For enjoying it and for saying that I enjoy it.'⁴⁷ On one level *Erotic* was a powerful statement of women's fantasy, but on another she was oversold, overstretched and over-exposed. As the various wannabes in her wake found out, there is a thin line between provocation and pandering. Although some may appreciate the sex-toy joke, the irony is lost on a large portion of her audience. Norman Mailer wrote of how she had become 'secretary to herself',⁴⁸ while another writer remarked on her 'steely reasonableness'.⁴⁹

Madonna's solution to the Image Problem was to go into androgyny – a place where theoretically a woman can escape the tyranny of the Body. Throughout the '80s and '90s women began to experiment more with cross-dressing and sexuality, finding through their own view of the male world a new kind of freedom.