H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Sheila Whiteley, ed. *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender.* New York: Routledge, 1997. xxxvi + 353 pp. $19.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-415-14671-5.

Reviewed by Susan M. Alexander (Saint Mary's College)
Published on H-PCAACA (February, 1999)

Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender, edited by Shelia Whiteley, offers multiple perspectives on popular music as a gendered environment. Focusing primarily on rock and alternative music, the essays include a range of contemporary musical artists from Mick Jaggar to Bikini Kill. Together, the articles in this volume provide a persuasive argument about a male-centeredness in popular music. As men exercise control over the creation and distribution of music and related ventures like music videos, women are relegated to the sidelines to support men's musical careers or women become "the other" in a masculine world. Indeed, the very discrepancy between the public's general knowledge of Mick Jaggar versus the largely unknown female group Bikini Kill reveals the gendered nature of the music industry. As a whole, the contributors to this volume explore how the social production of meaning is mediated by popular music, and how gender impacts this mediation.

The book is divided into five sections. Part I, Rock music culture, explores gender differences in four popular culture sites: recording collecting, a Liverpool England recording studio, women guitar players, and "women in rock." From Straw's "Sizing Up Record Collections" to Bayton's "Women and the Electric Guitar", the systematic exclusion of women from the masculinist culture of rock music is evident. Whether women attempt to play music publicly or collect music privately, they are disadvantaged in this male world. Even when women do succeed in forming a band or becoming part of a musical group, as Coates discusses in "(R)evolution Now: Rock and the political potential of gender," they become not simply rock musicians but "women in rock." Women as other permeates rock culture.

Part II, Masculinities and popular music, includes essays on Mick Jaggar, Bruce Springsteen, and the Pet Shop Boys. What is intriguing in this set of essays is that they simultaneous explore the idea of "authentic maleness" in music culture while exposing the cracks in performance: Jaggar's androgyny, Springsteen's identification with working class powerlessness, and the Pet Shop Boys' ironic take on masculinity and patriarchy.

Part III, A time of growth and change: Feminities and popular music, moves chronologically. It begins with the essay "Can a Fujiyama Mama be the Female Elvis: The wild, wild women of rockabilly," which discusses women in the 1950s who challenged the male centered rockabilly performance, and ends with two articles exploring the 1990s women centered alternative of riot grrrl. Along the way essays touch on issues of childbearing, motherhood, lesbianism, androgyny, sexuality, feminism, zines, and how a female performer's identity is constructed. Two articles in the section focus on particular artists. Negus' article "Sinead O'Connor – Musical Mother" and Bruzzi's article "Mannish Girl: k.d. lang – from Cowpunk to Androgyny" vividly capture the difficult choices that a woman as mother or woman as lesbian faces as a professional singer and songwriter. While exposing music as a gendered activity, I found this set of essays to be empowering. To learn the histories and hear the stories of women who, despite structural inequalities, found ways to create music and to share that with others give hope to a new generation of women musicians.

Part IV, Music, image, and identity, offers three approaches to examining music videos. Whiteley's essay, "Seduced by the Sign: An Analysis of the Textual Links between Sound and Image in Pop Videos," uses a case study of Madonna's video 'Justify My Love' to examine how video image reinforces the meaning of the song. McDonald's chapter "Feeling and Fun: Romance, Dance, and the Performing Male Body in the 'Take That' Videos" highlights the way male bodies serve as spectacle for both a heterosexual and homosexual audience. In the final article in the volume, "Rolling and Tumbling: Digital Erotics and the Culture of Narcissism," Cubitt critiques classical film studies as a method for analyzing music videos. Instead, Cubitt draws upon Freud and psychoanalysis to examine the music video 'Vogue' by Madonna, an artists known for constructing and reconstructing her

image. This set of articles raise questions about the impact of image on music. MTV as a global corporation shapes youth culture. As more individuals are exposed to music through videos a change is bound to occur. These three essay contribute to our understanding of that impact.

Part V is an annotated bibliography that would be useful to beginning researchers. Included are texts in cultural studies, culture: policy and politics, popular culture, popular music, masculinity and culture, feminism and culture, queer sexuality, fan culture, literary theory, film and video, and postmodernity. A list of relevant journals is also presented. *Sexing the Groove* convincingly identifies the masculine culture of popular music, and it provides a glimmer of hope by presenting women who have succeeded in the culture of popular music despite the obstacles. The volume, however, would more accurately be subtitled "alternative music and gender" for it is in the marginalized spaces that the women musicians presented here flourished. We are presented with analyses of women who understand and resist their marginalization within the music industry. What is missing from this volume on gender and popular music are the large numbers of women who rely upon stereotypes about gendered behaviors to tell a story and to sell their music.

As I read this volume and reflected on the MTV's Total Request Top 100 Countdown of 1998, there was a discrepancy between the gender and popular music presented here and the one MTV viewers request. There is no Brandi and Monica in a video performance fighting over a man. No Janet Jackson with abundant cleavage dancing for and drawing in the presumable male viewers. Ironically, although this volume presents evidence for a masculinist culture in popular music, the emphasis placed on the relatively small number of white women who present a women centered vision leaves the impression that women are significantly changing and shaping popular music. However much I welcome these feminist inroads into the masculine culture of popular music, this volume does not accurately reflect gender in popular music. Despite this flaw, I found the volume insightful and it would be a useful text to include in courses in women's studies, popular music, or popular culture.

This review is copyrighted (c) 1998 by H-Net and the Popular Culture and the American Culture Associations. It may be reproduced electronically for educational or scholarly use. The Associations reserve print rights and permissions. (Contact: P.C.Rollins at the following electronic address: Rollinspc@aol.com)

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Susan M. Alexander. Review of Whiteley, Sheila, ed., *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender.* H-PCAACA, H-Net Reviews. February, 1999.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2728

Copyright © 1999 by H-Net and the Popular Culture and the American Culture Associations, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact P.C. Rollins at Rollins@osuunx.ucc.okstate.edu or the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.