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On: 30 October 2014, At: 15:50

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Journal for Cultural Research

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rcuv20>

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Published online: 13 Feb 2012.

To cite this article: Georgina Gregory (2013) Transgender Tribute Bands and the Subversion of Male Rites of Passage through the Performance of Heavy Metal Music, *Journal for Cultural Research*, 17:1, 21-36, DOI: [10.1080/14797585.2011.633835](https://doi.org/10.1080/14797585.2011.633835)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14797585.2011.633835>

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Transgender Tribute Bands and the Subversion of Male Rites of Passage through the Performance of Heavy Metal Music

Georgina Gregory

This article looks at how by reversing gender expectations, female musicians are making use of musical texts associated with male artists to subvert and transgress the conventions of male bonding rituals at heavy metal concerts. Critics of tribute bands usually point to their lack of originality and their unshamed exploitation of other artists' work. Indeed, many feel that this form of entertainment is responsible for limiting creativity and upholding a conservative hegemony of commercially successful popular music. However, this article shows that female tributes to male bands provide exciting opportunities for women to resist dominant cultural discourses, metanarratives and stereotypes, while allowing them to demonstrate their virtuoso music and performance skills. Previous studies of heavy metal music have uncovered the important role that this music and culture plays in providing a right of passage for young men and enforcing patriarchal masculinity. This article shows how female bands such as AC/DShe, The Iron Maidens and Lez Zeppelin use blank parody to disrupt the sacred codes of masculinity through their performance of gender and their enactment of the masculine-coded genre.

This article looks at the transgender tribute acts, currently a minority form of live entertainment, emanating from the USA. I use the term "transgender band" to describe female tributes which replicate a repertoire originally performed by male artists, and vice versa. In addition to performing the music, they may also attempt to simulate the appearance and performance style of the original artists. For this article, the particular aspect of interest is their capacity to subvert and critique the discourses of gender and sexuality which inform popular music and its culture — especially as regards the more masculinist genres of hard rock and heavy metal. While they have made significant inroads in certain genres, it is generally agreed that women have found it harder to gain acceptance as rock virtuosos (Bayton 1998; Cohen 1997). Through gender reversal and the appropriation of what are generally agreed to

be male-dominated genres, the transgender bands are able to disrupt some of the tropes of masculinity associated with rock performance. Furthermore, by operating outside the more tightly controlled parameters of the record industry, their flawless imitation confronts an established hegemony of male virtuosity within the rock music canon, thereby challenging low expectations of female musicians. The article will also show how female artists contest the gendered conventions of the metal concert by subverting the event's role as a rite of passage for disaffected males, as identified by Walser (1993) in his study of gender and heavy metal music.

Beginning with a description of the characteristics of the tribute scene in order to provide a context, the article will then examine the role of the rock canon in informing taste, maintaining stereotypes and marginalising female musicianship. This will be followed by a discussion about the gendered nature of the rock and metal music scene. Finally, the relationship between heavy metal music and male rites of passage will be discussed in order to show the extent to which the transgender bands effect a transgression of the conventions attached to this event.

The Tribute Scene

Tribute bands perform the music and identity of existing and well-known artists from the past as well as the present. They do this by copying the repertoire and, in some cases, by impersonating the identity of those artists. A famous and typical example, referred to in certain quarters as the "Manchester United" of tribute bands, is Björn Again — a tribute to the Swedish pop group Abba (Viner 2000). This form of imitative entertainment is growing in popularity, particularly in the USA, Australia and the UK, and some indication of the scale of the phenomenon can be gathered by reflecting on the fact that there are around 85,000 Elvis tributes worldwide and over 150 Abba tributes currently in employment in the UK alone (see Bernstein 2003).

Tribute bands emerged during the late 1970s to fulfil a variety of purposes — from acting as a substitute for dead and defunct artists, to providing a more economic means of enjoying the music of well-known but no longer accessible performers. More particularly, the proliferation of rock tributes is closely linked to the resurgence of big-stadium touring and the reappearance of iconic groups of the classic rock era on the live music scene. It is generally accepted that the classic era for arena or stadium rock was the second half of the 1970s, when "larger than life" rock bands such as Queen, Boston and Led Zeppelin held sway, performing to ever larger audiences in monolithic live music tours. As the style progressed, stadium rock developed an identifiable aesthetic characterised by grand-scale, slick production values, memorable anthemic hooks and choruses, the use of pyrotechnics, video screens and spectacular light shows. As the 1970s came to a close, the majority of bands associated with stadium rock were at the zenith of their careers, but by the

early 1980s the bombastic style fell out of fashion as younger fans turned to new genres such as punk, new wave and indie rock. This eventually led to declining ticket and album sales, and a return to smaller, more intimate live venues better suited to the presentation of the new genres.

Although no longer fashionable, interest in stadium rock was not entirely extinguished and the music continued to be presented across a variety of media platforms dedicated to preserving what came to be known as “classic rock”. Broadcast media channels such as Rock Radio helped to maintain a core audience but, more recently, the reappearance of the rock dinosaurs on the stadium scene has witnessed a resurgence of interest in live rock music (Gibson 2007). When this is added to the growing enjoyment of music video games like *Guitar Hero* and *Band Hero*, which introduce a new generation of younger fans to the classic rock genre, it is easy to see why tributes to Led Zeppelin, Iron Maiden and AC/DC are so much in demand. Furthermore, due to economies of scale, while these artists are no longer able to play smaller clubs, tribute bands are able to satisfy audience demand by providing the classic rock repertoire in a more intimate setting.

Tribute acts are undoubtedly attracting a sizeable share of the live music audience, and many of the popular artists of the post-war period have managed to spawn a sizeable following of tributes, with various factors playing a role in determining the likelihood of being imitated. This has led to some performers having more than their fair share: tributes to Elvis, ABBA and The Beatles, for example, are legion, whereas those attempting to copy the style and repertoire of The Sex Pistols or The Eagles are less commonplace. Taking into account their growing presence and the fact that they clearly provide an additional dimension to the fields of popular culture and live entertainment, their contribution could hardly be deemed marginal. However, regardless of the fact that some tributes have performed before six-figure audiences and are enjoying working careers far longer than those of their archetypes, like other examples of imitative culture, they tend to be dismissed or ignored by critics on the grounds that their output is somehow insignificant or inferior to the work of original artists.¹ To critics, tribute bands like Björn Again, in copying an original text, are doing little more than extending the life of a musical product by capitalising on another’s artistic output. As a consequence, they embody a stagnant, Jamesonian end-stage vision of consumer capitalism where the commodification of the past compromises innovation and the capacity to generate any worthwhile original statements in “a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible [where] all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum” (Jameson 1983, p. 115). For this reason, they are blamed for cultivating and feeding the condition of nostalgia, particularly one of its more negative aspects — a tendency to react to temporal dislocation and the

1. For example, in 1994, Björn Again played to an audience of 300,000 at the London Gay Pride event held in Brockwell Park. See <http://www.bjornagain.com/news.htm>.

inevitability of the future with either sentimentality or resistance to change. By reviving the music of the past, they avoid progress and the more radical, reforming tendencies which characterise the modernist text. Instead, they hold us firmly locked to a past from which those in favour of progress wish to maintain a distance.

To interpret the tribute band as little more than a vehicle for the transmission of nostalgia underestimates the power of blank parody to act as an agent of critique. The main problem with negative judgements rooted in the modernist aesthetic tradition is that they attempt to measure the work of tribute artists against a set of discourses which privilege notions of authorship and originality. By these criteria, musicians who deliberately copy the work of another artist lack the credentials to be taken seriously. As they make no attempt to conceal their imitative intentions, the open transparency of their theft tarnishes them further still, and, as a consequence, their efforts are thus viewed with a mixture of amusement and contempt. Unlike the more respected practices of adaptation, quotation and interpretation, the wholesale re-presentation of another's original text is castigated on account of the resulting hollowness of the end product. The postmodern practice of humourless pastiche was especially abhorred by Jameson (1991, p. 18), who claimed that although pastiche shares parody's capacity to imitate a particular style, it has none of the latter's "satiric impulse". Due to their failure to perform original material or reinterpret an existing repertoire, tribute bands, like their predecessors the cover bands, are largely ignored within official histories and other critical platforms concerned with the documentation and judgement of popular music. Furthermore, because critical judgements of their worth centre so forcefully on the lack of authenticity and originality, other potentially interesting lines of enquiry have been eclipsed.

This study will show that whilst it could be argued that the majority of tribute bands may, indeed, offer little more than a perfunctory rendition of someone else's creative output, others go beyond hollow pastiche and, through their representation of an established or classic text, use performance to invoke a challenging critical discourse. An examination of the work of Lez Zeppelin, AC/DShe and The Iron Maidens will reveal how, by reversing the conventions of gendered performance style which characterise rock and metal, the female band members expose the constructed nature of rock's masculinity. In doing so, they undermine the mythical status of the original artists and texts, thus challenging the rock canon which upholds their significance.

The Impact of the Rock Canon on the Tribute Scene

The rock canon is a conceptual paradigm which embodies the existence of a set of values and assumptions about music. A major function of the canon is to establish the exemplary and the normative by which all other works will be measured. As Kärjä (2006, p. 4) writes: "[The] collection of famous names and

precious pieces of music can be seen as the backbone of modern music historiography and canon formation.” The values of the canon, which are circulated via a range of media platforms, help to reinforce the hierarchies of power and control which characterise the cultures of popular music.² Within this framework, particularly with regard to rock music, the work of white and male artists dominates, whereas the creative output of female artists is marginalised. For example, an analysis of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame’s “500 Songs That Shaped Rock and Roll” reveals that of the 500 songs, only 35 were recorded by female artists.³ While it could be argued that the popular arm of the canon simply panders to the undiscerning and there are alternative means of canon formation, Appen and Doehring (2006, p. 21) argue that: “Among the diverse forms of canonizing pop and rock music, compiling lists like ‘The 100 greatest albums of all time’ is one of the most prominent and influential.”

As music production and the associated journalism are a product of patriarchy, it is hardly surprising that most of the “list makers” invested with the agency to formulate such hierarchies also happen to be white and male, and, in this sense, the canon simply reinforces an unequal set of power relations which has traditionally limited the participation of women and minorities in popular music practice. This point is articulated by McLeod, who argues how:

[The] ideology of rock criticism that shapes the critical reception of contemporary artists and helps to write the history of rock has functioned to exclude the voices of many kinds of pop artists and audiences. Whether they be sexual exhibitions or cultural displays, there are certain types of expression that are not deemed to be acceptable or legitimate by many rock critics and the communities they represent. (McLeod 2001, p. 52)

A similar ideology permeates homage-based entertainment, hence, there are far more tributes to The Beatles, The Rolling Stones and Elvis than there are to female or non-white artists. This is confirmed by data provided by the UK Performing Right Society. In a quantitative survey of the most popular live music undertaken in 2004, of the top 10 tribute acts, the only female artists included are the ABBA vocalists Agnetha and Frida:

Most Tributed Artists in the UK in 2004

1. (1) Elvis Presley
2. (3) ABBA
3. (7) Robbie Williams
4. (—) Neil Diamond

2. Examples of the popular arm of the canon include annual televised events such as The Brit Awards, the music press league tables (<http://www.rocklistmusic.co.uk/>), and books such as Larkin’s (2000) *All-Time Top 1000 Albums* and Christgau’s (1990, 2000) eponymous record and consumer guides to the albums of the 1980s and 1990s. There are also charts and tables from more mainstream media sources — for example, *Time* magazine’s ‘All-Time Top 100 Albums’ (<http://www.time.com/time/2006/100albums/>) and the *Independent* newspaper’s top albums of the century chart.

3. The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame’s ‘500 Songs That Shaped Rock and Roll’, <http://www.infoplease.com/ipea/A0150472.html>.

5. (4) Queen/Freddie Mercury
6. (—) Frank Sinatra
7. (2) The Beatles
8. (—) Meatloaf
9. (—) Rod Stewart
10. (6) The Blues Brothers. ("Most Tributed Artists", 28 March 2004)⁴

This tendency is mirrored in the websites of entertainment agencies, where a preponderance of white and male rock acts is featured. Out of a list of 167 artists on Dansatak's website, only 31 are female. A similar picture emerges within the testosterone-fuelled programme of Glastonbudget, a UK tribute band festival. Here, the gendered nature of the music at the event is clearly signalled by the absence of any female artists.⁵ Taken collectively, the data indicates how, following the canon, the tribute scene plays a major role in reinforcing and upholding the work of a limited range of artists and genres. Hence, there are far fewer tribute bands devoted to obscure genres or the work of more sexually ambiguous or avant-garde artists than there are to the hetero-masculine icons of rock who dominate the lists. Furthermore, the fact that there are so few tributes to female artists simply compounds and reinforces the existing prejudices and inequalities uncovered by Mavis Bayton (1998) in one of the few ethnographic studies of female musicians. Among other things, Bayton found that women struggled initially to gain acceptance as musicians and then had to fight a constant battle against sexism in all areas, from the patronising remarks of guitar salesman to doubting promoters and groping male fans. These problems were augmented by the difficulties of combining childcare with the rigours of touring — a very practical issue for women who want to take their music to a wider audience and even more so when they are operating competitively in what has traditionally been designated a masculine sphere.

Rock Music's Masculinity

The conflation of rock and metal with masculinity has been observed by a number of writers (Arnett 1996; Frith & McRobbie 1990; Walser 1993). Classic rock's particular version of masculinity is naturalised through a range of practices, which include the exclusion of women and an exaggerated form of the homosociality defined by Sedgwick (1985, p. 1), who uses the neologism as a descriptor for the "social bonds between persons of the same sex". This is a particularly useful term when applied to the intimacy which men establish with

4. The previous year's position is in brackets.

5. Dansatak claims to be the 'UK's largest Tribute Band and Tribute Agency'. Its website can be found at <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Dansatak-Entertainment-Agency/236972490095>. The UK Glastonbudget tribute band music festival is held annually in Leicestershire. See <http://www.glastonbudget.org/>.

one another within the culture of rock music. The intimate relationships forged between male band members are notable for the high levels of tension and jealousies they generate.⁶ Grant contends that these fraught relationships are a product of the exclusivity of the male connection:

We can even say that the more closely a subculture (in this case, a rock band) is contingent on male connection and the exclusion of the feminine, the more it exists on a continuum with sexualised relationships of men loving men. It is a paradox that the more masculine the subculture the more closely it is conceptually related to homosexuality. The more sexualised it is, the more that sexuality is hypermasculine, the more that erotic energy is channelled into the relationships among band members themselves to form the homosocial bond. The homosocial bond is, in that sense, related to the exclusion of the female. Men can be men together because women are excluded. (Grant 2007, p. 221)

In classic rock and heavy metal music, great emphasis is placed on the rejection or repression of femininity, while the importance of the masculine sphere is fiercely upheld. The lyrics, music and performance style operate in unison, as a force designed to diminish the threat presented by the feared other: women, gay men and all things designated unmanly. Hence, the narratives of rock songs alternate between idealising and denigrating femininity, presenting women either as out-of-reach fantasy figures or sexually available, and therefore unworthy whores (Whiteley 2000).

Jarman-Ivens (2007, p. 9) explains how, in popular music, “[g]endered operations occur on the levels of visual and aural signifiers, the latter of which includes verbal and non-verbal signifiers”, arguing that “musical genres are gendered spaces and operate according to highly codified conventions”. In the heavy metal and hard rock genres, the form is gendered through a combination of signs such as electric guitars, high volume and the use of distortion. Other signifiers of masculinity include displays of virtuosity, such as rapid playing, operatic screaming or gruff, guttural vocalising and an action-oriented performance style. These are combined with an aggressive stage presence which makes use of predatory or intimidating sexual gestures, all of which are designed to eliminate, or at least contain, the threat posed by femininity. Furthermore, it is argued that heavy metal is stratified along socio-economic lines and that the music articulates a particular type of working-class masculinity which rests on the denial of the feminine (Weinstein 1991). Walser (1993, p. x) contends that the blue-collar affinity is linked to the genre’s role as a substitute for manual work in urban areas where manufacturing has declined, claiming that “heavy metal bands now labor in spaces abandoned by industry”.

6. A fascinating study of the homosocial bond and resulting tensions between Kirk Hammet and Lars Ulrich of Metallica is offered by Judith Grant (2007). For the uninitiated, ‘headbanging’ is a form of dance where the head is shaken wildly in time with the music. The term ‘headbanger’ is sometimes used as an alternative descriptor for the heavy metal fan. Although I have encountered female headbangers at some concerts, they still constitute a minority.

Through its connotations of strength, physical prowess, endurance and aggression, the music establishes itself as both proletarian and unfeminine, thereby embodying Butler's (1990, p. 33) observations concerning the constructed nature of gender, which she describes as "the repeated stylization of the body as a set of repeated acts within a rigid regulatory frame with congeals over time to produce the appearance of substance of a 'natural' kind of being".

This naturalisation occurs through regular exposure to the enactment of masculinity and is transmitted in heavy metal culture, primarily, via the concert and the live music video, both of which provide powerful visual reinforcement to the narratives and song lyrics. While artists operating in other genres employ fantasy environments or the closed-off world of the recording studio in their self-representation, the live concert has become synonymous with the rock and metal identity. The live concert, in particular, plays an important role as a theatrical stage for the enactment of gender. Here, the musicians can battle with one another in live physical displays of virtuosity, while demonstrating their masculine bond in a homosocial staging of male unity. Furthermore, it is suggested that the live concert transcends the boundaries of mere entertainment by offering young men the equivalent of a ceremonial rite of passage (Walser 1993; Weinstein 1991), a point which will be explored next.

Traditional Rites of Passage

Typical Western rites of passage, many of which are religious in origin, include bar mitzvahs, confirmations, school graduation ceremonies, baptisms, weddings, retirement parties and funerals. The aim of these ceremonies is to help the individual make the transition through an emotionally charged life experience. In most cultures, there are also specific rites of passage which serve to validate the transition of young males to adulthood and sexual maturity. The ceremonies can involve painful or frightening experiences such as circumcision or scarification and, in these circumstances, boys may also be introduced to drugs typically reserved for adulthood. Within contemporary Western culture, for various reasons, many of the traditional rites of passage have disappeared. Factors leading to their demise include family breakdown, increased geographical mobility and declining affiliation with formal religion, all of which have weakened the bonds within communities, creating a chasm that rock music has been able to fill. For young males in particular, rock and metal concerts provide a symbolic setting for a range of activities where masculinity can be acted out and celebrated publically.

The Heavy Metal Rite of Passage

There are certainly similarities between the classic rites of passage identified by Belgian anthropologist Arnold van Gennep and the rock music variant. During

the early twentieth century, van Van Gennep (2004, p. 11) was the first to discover the universal nature of the ritual ceremonies used to celebrate cultural transitions. His observations led him to the conclusion that “rites of passage” have three distinct components: the preliminal, liminal and post-liminal phases. At the heavy metal concert, the phases translate in the following manner: the theatre, club or stadium environment acts as a preliminal or separation phase, where the participant is cut off from the everyday realities of home or work in preparation for the liminal stage. Transition takes place as groups of young males enter the liminal state, which is marked by a change in consciousness. This is accomplished by drinking large quantities of alcohol, taking drugs, “headbanging” and imitating the antics of the rock gods by playing air guitar. Adolescent male identification is heightened through communication with the artists and with one another. Individuals may also engage in the potentially dangerous displays of strength and aggression of moshing or slamming, where audience members shove or push one another forcefully, but women are discouraged from participating in these activities due to fear of intimidation and injury.⁷

The overt exclusion of women is important to the traditional male rite of passage, as it is in the overall discourse of hard rock and metal, since both require that within the parameters of the concert, a masculinist hegemony must prevail. For this reason, protection from seduction or dominance by the feared other is needed to allow males to reinforce their bond. Walser (1993, pp. 114–117) explains how in order to deflect male anxieties concerning the need for and dependence upon women, hard rock and metal bands use the complementary activities of exscription, androgyny and misogyny.

By keeping women out and by appropriating and incorporating feminine signifiers to dilute their power, the male musicians resort to misogynistic behaviour as a form of protection. The hyperbolic and defensive nature of their masculinity does little to encourage women to work amongst them as fellow musicians and, although there have been some successful female hard rock and metal acts, their success has been relatively short-lived and I have not been able to uncover any tributes — male or female — to the all-female bands Fanny, Vixen or The Runaways.

The Alternative Tribute Scene and Transgender Bands

All of the female musicians I encountered on the transgender tribute scene were paying homage exclusively to iconic male groups. On the surface, their efforts could be viewed as further reinforcing the subjugation of female musicians, since they are validating the creative output of men. While it is true that the mainstream tribute entertainment scene essentially mirrors and amplifies the gendered conventions of the music industry, within the alterna-

7. The levels of danger involved are discussed in Pogrebin (1996).

tive tribute scene I would argue that a challenge is presented to the status quo, for reasons which will be explored next.

The transgender bands consist of a minority of male tributes to female pop performers. Examples include the Madonna tributes Mandonna and We Got the Meat, and a gay male tribute to the Go-Go's, known as the Ga-Ga's.⁸ Unlike the female tributes to male artists, these male tributes rely heavily on the use of camp and comedy to entertain the audience. For instance, Mandonna, a seven-piece American band which features a bearded Madonna, make no serious effort to achieve a credible female impersonation and, rather than attempting to imitate the female voice, all members sing in their natural bass and tenor range. The representation of femininity is achieved more through elaborate costume changes, exaggerated "feminine" gestures and camp dance routines. This depiction of pop femininity has overt connotations of misogyny, thereby illuminating Robertson's (1996) observations regarding camp's potential to affirm patriarchal oppression and the marginalisation of the feminine. Arguing that while, on the one hand, "[c]amp may appropriate and expose stereotypes", she makes the point that "it also, in some measure, keeps them alive", attributing this to camp's dual capability to act either as "a mode of excess" or as "a method of containment" (Robertson 1996, p. 142). Therefore, rather than representing the strength of Madonna's femininity, through deliberately clumsy portrayal, the band ridicules and undermines it. From the outset, everything from the toned male torso to the beard suggests that Mandonna's lead singer is a man acting an awkward, unconvincing parody of Madonna's identity, and the audience is denied any element of surprise regarding his true gender identity. Therefore, the performance lacks the fascination surfacing in the break with gender normativity offered by the female tribute bands' more subtle, blank parody of rock masculinity.

Female Tributes to Male Artists

Tributes like Mandonna are hugely outnumbered by female tributes to the work of classic male rock bands. My research so far indicates that the vast majority of these acts imitate the work of a small group of iconic hard rock and heavy metal bands. They include the tributes to AC/DC — AC/DShe and A Whole Lotta Rosies; an Iron Maiden tribute — The Iron Maidens; and several bands paying homage to Led Zeppelin — for example, Lez Zeppelin, Zepparella and Mz Led. This is interesting because the bands to which they pay homage have gained notoriety for the sexist or misogynistic content of some of their music and, as we have already seen, the hard rock/heavy metal genre is already much more masculine-coded than the related styles of indie and new wave. The fact that I could find no female tributes to male pop bands is also signifi-

8. See <http://www.mandonna.com> and <http://www.wegotthemeat.com>. The Ga-Ga's are mentioned on the official Go-Go's website at <http://www.gogos.com>.

cant, but less surprising in view of the successful inroads already made by women in the pop genre.

Launching any band on the live music scene is fraught with potential problems — it is by no means easy to earn a living from rock performance. For the women in transgender bands, by playing the work of AC/DC and Led Zepelin, for example, they have the opportunity to secure an existing audience and an ideal chance to demonstrate the strength of their performance skills. Several of the women on the scene said that one of the main reasons they belonged to a tribute band was because this enabled them to perform live, whereas trying to break into the industry performing their own music was more problematic. In the words of Linda McDonald of The Iron Maidens:

In my life, when I was doing an original band called Phantom Blue, it got to the point that I was so frustrated and fed up with the people, the musicians we were meeting and just the industry. I wanted out. I took pictures of my drums and put them online for sale. Then I got a phone call out of the blue, about this Iron Maiden tribute. I thought, you know, that's the whole reason [Iron Maiden] that I started playing so why not go and try it out. (McDonald, quoted in Bansal 2010)

It could be argued that male artists face similar problems when trying to establish themselves, but at least when seeking an audience they are not handicapped by the sexism already discussed. By appropriating the music of male rock icons, women can claim an existing fan base, a series of canonised texts and prove their musicianship; however, even taking into account the advantage of playing an established repertoire, it should be emphasised that the task of convincing fans still presents a challenge. As Leigh Westee, who played bass in the Kiss tribute Black Diamond, explains:

We feel like we have the same right to show our love for KISS by forming a tribute band. And we do as much as any guy band would do, from costumes to fire breathing! We feel like we probably have to work twice as hard to prove ourselves and be taken seriously because we're girls. (Personal email, January 2007)

Aja Kim, a respected singer-songwriter and former member of The Iron Maidens, also encountered some audience resistance:

Initially, especially with the Maidens and due to the fact that we were the ONLY all-female band in the world playing this music at the time, there was a lot of resistance to the idea of what we were doing — at least until they came to a show. (Personal email, April 2011)

However, for drummer Clementine, an alumna of AC/DC who formed the Led Zeppelin tribute Zepparella, it is the very act of playing an instrument which allows women a way of establishing credibility in a sexist industry:

I would say that there are quite a few sexist barriers in music, as someone who played for 8 years in a metal band can attest. However, I've always just tried to do the best that I could do musically, and really that's the only way to combat these barriers. Study, practice, perform from the heart. (Personal email, February 2011)

The Subversion of the Metanarratives of Rock and the Male Rite of Passage

By challenging the myth that women cannot play rock, bands like AC/DC, She, Black Diamond and The Iron Maidens expose the sexism which excludes women from performing, and gaining the performance skills and experience which have enabled men to achieve international exposure and canonic status. The mythology insists that only men have the ability to become rock gods, but by demonstrating that they can play the masculine-coded music to an equally high standard, female tributes show that this is a fallacy — something which can shock the audience. In the words of Wanda Ortiz of The Iron Maidens:

When it comes to playing live, there will be people in the audience who don't believe that we will be able to pull it off since they are unaccustomed to hearing women play this genre of music. It's fun to watch their surprised looks after the first few songs — at that point, preconceptions go out the window and everyone just starts having a good time. (Personal email, August 2007)

Her views are echoed by drummer Linda McDonald:

The first three songs you'd be greeted by an audience with crossed arms, then once you started playing that's all out the window. What they're trying to do is see if you're going to crash and burn and really choke on the material. (McDonald, quoted in Crawford 2007)

By parodying the performance style of their male counterparts, the female bands expose the constructed nature of rock's masculinity, and by reclaiming signifiers appropriated from the sphere of femininity from metal artists, they draw attention to the source of, as well as the threat posed by, the long hair, satin flared pants, make-up and high-heeled boots.⁹ When Steph Paynes of Lez Zeppelin appears onstage in a replica of Jimmy Page's "Dragon Suit", there is a frisson of excitement as soon as the audience realises that she is a woman. Imitating the aggressive and thrusting masculine-coded performance style, the women show that they are a force to be reckoned with, and that the music's "masculinity" is neither natural nor transcendent. This message is enforced by Clementine of Zepparella, who writes:

9. During the 1980s, a number of bands were eventually labelled as 'glam' practitioners of metal due to their appropriation of feminine-coded long hair, tight pants, high-heeled boots and make-up. Walser (1993) describes this appropriation of feminine signifiers as 'a tactic for dealing with the anxieties of masculinity'.

Successful and evocative performers are 100% original, and that is the real tangible power. When I play, I try to be as big and strong and monstrous as possible. But I'm not trying to be a man, just trying to be as big and strong and monstrous as possible. (Personal email, February 2011)

Gretchen Menn, who plays Jimmy Page's guitar parts in Zepparella, is also clear that, in her opinion, narrow-minded thinking on gender should not influence the reception of her performance:

I don't play music with gender — mine or anyone else's — in mind, and never with the thought of converting anyone with backwards ideas. Bigots can always find a reason to dismiss you, as they'll always be looking for one. I play music because I love to play music. Learning the music of my heroes enables me to expand my vocabulary. If people like what we do, my hope would be it's because we are doing a good job, not because of our gender. (Personal email, February 2011)

Their work disrupts and undermines the gendered hegemony of the heavy metal concert where male fans have traditionally dominated. The audience for Lez Zep and The Iron Maidens concerts contains a far higher number of female fans than would normally be expected, and some of those I have spoken to have said that they feel safer and enjoy the atmosphere more when the audience is more evenly gendered.

By showing that they can play rock and exposing the constructed nature of rock's masculinity, and by claiming an audience, the female transgender bands transgress and subvert the traditions of the heavy metal rite of passage and a male-bonding exercise. Instead, their presence onstage positively welcomes differing audience perspectives from the anticipated male heterosexual standpoint, and they illuminate Fast's (1999, p. 257) observations regarding the fact that despite the fact that they have not been engaged in constructing the discourses around the music, women can and do engage with hard rock and metal in the same ways as male fans. Indeed, regardless of their gender and sexuality, all fans can relate to the music in a variety of ways. With women performing the classic texts, the heavy metal concert is less obviously naturalised as a masculine-gendered space, which means that anyone who wants to be transformed by the music can join in and engage with the bonding rituals in whatever ways they choose. As Gretchen Menn writes:

I always hope that our shows empower women ... that's generally the vibe we get after the shows. I hope that our shows reengage the audience with the music, maybe they love Zep but haven't listened in a while, or maybe they've never been a fan and now see the music in a new light. If women do respond in new ways to Zeppelin because we're doing it, then great. Zeppelin always seemed to be a very female-friendly band to me, but I can see it becoming even more accessible to women by other women playing it as if they own it. Maybe the lyrical intent of the songs becomes more global in a way ... the songs are about love, and maybe by turning the gender the meaning gets even a little wide-reaching. (Personal email, February 2011)

Audiences at Lez Zeppelin concerts certainly appear to be very diverse and show the ever changing nature of music consumption, and where Led Zeppelin's fan following in the formative years may have included a high proportion of young men, lead guitarist Steph Paynes says of her tribute:

We get all sorts. Twelve year old kids and their parents who saw Led Zep play in 1974. We get guys, girls, and gays of all kinds. It's a completely eclectic crowd, but everyone has one thing in common, and that's a mutual adoration of Led Zeppelin. (Paynes, quoted in Hundley 2007)

While most fans of transgender tribute bands are respectful and appreciative, Gretchen Menn of Zepparella finds that when confronted by an all-female band, some male fans are unable to contain their excitement, resulting in inappropriate actions: "The behavior of male fans can be extreme. We've had people jump on stage and try to kiss us . . . they were pretty quickly escorted out of the venue" (Personal email, February 2011).

Lez Zeppelin: A Case Study

In conclusion, the work of Lez Zeppelin draws together some of the points raised by the article and offers a current example drawn from the transgender tribute scene. The New York-based female band courts controversy in the media by refusing to confirm the true nature of their sexuality and whether, as their name slyly infers, they are, in fact, lesbians. Their refusal automatically subverts the rock stereotype of the female as the object of male desire. This transgression of the codes of hetero-masculinity is heightened by their giving a female voice to Led Zeppelin's erotically charged lyrics. Songs like "Whole Lotta Love" and "Black Dog", which celebrate male heterosexual freedom, take on a whole new meaning when sung by women — even more so if they are potentially addressed to other women. In doing this, the band evokes an uncustomary figure in rock music — the sexually voracious female protagonist who has no desire or need for a man, which is a clear transgression of the original metanarrative of rock and a rejection of the notion that women should submit to the will and desires of men. Predatory sexual behaviour is now no longer confined to the masculine sphere — instead, the band exposes the universality of sexual desire, lust and hedonism, inviting participation from men and women, regardless of their sexual orientation.

The original band's performance style, instruments and clothing are all painstakingly copied in an enactment of rock masculinity which allows the audience to adopt alternative readings and to shift, for example, between the binary poles of masculine/feminine and active/passive. Their guitarist told me she believed this allowed some of their male fans to indulge repressed homoerotic fantasies which they had harboured for the original band, and for female fans there are opportunities to identify with the sense of power and freedom evoked by female musicianship.

Through the appropriation of Led Zeppelin's music and identity, they challenge the objectification of femininity and, by renegotiating the conventional image of woman as feared other, reclaiming the gendered space of the metal concert, they subvert the preferred meanings of the metal rite of passage. Their work demonstrates how, outside the corporate power structure of the record industry, tribute bands are able to transcend Jameson's definition of blank parody by turning it into a medium of resistance to gender normativity. The sexual economy of popular music is thus disrupted, illustrating the power of popular culture generally and the tribute band more specifically to adapt, revise and redefine the politics of identity.

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