

## **ROCK ON: WOMEN, AGEING AND POPULAR MUSIC**

### ***MADONNA: LIKE A CRONE***

Reaching fifty in 2008 was a watershed year not just for Madonna, but also for her millions of fans. She is a vital figure for women across generations: through her performances she has popularised feminist politics and debate, and promoted a message of sexual empowerment.

Much of her career has hinged on this concept of self-liberation and sexual expressiveness. As a young star she was powerfully seductive - one of the first female performers in the pop mainstream to capitalise on video as a marketing tool, and to make that nexus between sex, pop and commerce so explicit. She also challenged notions of the male/female gaze with her book *Sex*, and videos like 'Justify My Love'. Much of her allure was centred around her visual image, and her ability to combine an inclusive sexuality with compelling costume changes and personae. Female stars in her wake, from Britney Spears to Lady Gaga, have been clearly influenced by her ideas on performance and sexuality

However, becoming a mature woman and a mother has presented her with a dilemma. She is fiercely competitive and it is a matter of personal pride to 'stay on top' in the singles market. But in having to compete with younger women, she is subject to the same pressures to look young, slim and beautiful. As a result, she has to continually sculpt and resculpt her body through rigorous workouts and diet regimes.

The sculpted body first emerged when she shed the voluptuous 'Toy Boy' look of her early career for her 'Open Your Heart' video. Then it became part of her iconic image with the pink John-Paul Gaultier corset and conical breasts of her 1990 Blond Ambition tour.

As fashion historian Sarah Cheang noted: “When she pulled on that JPG corset and showed the world her newly sculpted muscles, her combination of body-toning and body-taming combined all senses of the notion of discipline. She was presenting a body that had been subjected to a rigorous regime of self-discipline - an active body produced by exercise, but also a passive body that was contained, controlled and disciplined by the pink corset” (O'Brien, 2008/2007?).

Since then Madonna has kept to a rigorous daily exercise regime, reinforcing the idea that the female body at the heart of the pop mainstream is one that has to be controlled. Ageing and its effects need to be defied. Madonna's messages have often been contradictory, but this is one of her most problematic. She challenges the notion of 'growing old gracefully', but in so doing teeters on the edge of pastiche. As posited in my book, *Madonna: Like An Icon*, will this previous sexual crusader end up becoming a parody of her former self, a Joan Collins/Marlene Dietrich-style figure going on stage at the age of 80 warbling 'Like A Virgin'? In this essay I will explore how ageing has impacted on Madonna's performance strategies, and how this has affected her star persona.

**This pretty face...**

*"I need something more/ This pretty face don't work no more"*, Scottish artist Amy MacDonald sang in 2010. Her song 'This Pretty Face' accurately summed up the pernicious impact of ageing and celebrity pop culture. In the video paparazzi chase a beautiful pop star, but after a while another younger and prettier starlet walks by. They immediately lose interest in the first woman, who begs them to come back.

In the pop industry youth and attraction are pivotal, and female stars have different strategies for dealing with this issue. The same summer that MacDonald released 'This Pretty Face', experimental pop artist Laurie Anderson launched her seventh studio album *Homeland*. At the age of 63, Anderson showed a humorous disregard for the 'image question'. She appeared on her CD cover dressed in drag, sporting large eyebrows and a moustache. Anderson could afford to take that route because she has long established her identity as an alternative performance artist - she once enjoyed pop chart success (notably with her 1981 hit 'O Superman'), but she is not trying to slot herself into the fluctuations of pop marketing. She is recognised for her ideas and therefore has what Bourdieu (date) defines as 'cultural capital'. Shuker sums up this concept, saying: "In the case of allegiance to non-mainstream genres/performers, cultural capital serves to assert an oppositional stance..." (Shuker, 2005:64).

Singer/songwriter Tori Amos reflected this notion of cultural cachet when in 2007, after she had been in the music business for over twenty years, she said:

"Now in my early forties I feel that, by staying true, I've never had better treatment. If you're gonna fall, it'll be in your thirties. In your twenties you're the new car. But in your thirties you're the new car from five years ago, and there's nothing good about that. If you can make it to your forties, you become a classic car. You're that sexy Jag that nobody can get anymore. You have a story to tell" (O'Brien, 2007).

This may be true for women in genres like rock or folk (where artists such as Joan Baez, Joni Mitchell and Emmylou Harris can 'grow old gracefully' and still sell records), but the pop world that Madonna inhabits is much less flexible. As Helen Reddington notes in her book *The Lost Women of Rock Music*, "The professional life span of a female artist in the UK roughly corresponds to (passing for) the ages 17-23. After the five-year shelf-life, the business wants a new gimmick; in this case, new technology and new 'women'..." (Reddington, 2007:185)

It has not always been thus. When rock n' roll emerged in the 1950s, young women were still expected to be a facsimile of their mothers; groomed, graceful understudies for the parent culture. This was mirrored in the female stars of the day, women like Lita Roza, Alma Cogan, Ruby Murray and Connie Francis, who started out as big band vocalists singing jazz and novelty songs. Before she became one of the British 'beat girls', Dusty Springfield sang in Light Entertainment vocal trio The Lana Sisters, and had an image that was slightly frumpy. Then, young artists were trying to look older than their years - maturity and experience were valued over simplicity and amateurism.

By the early 1960s however, with the massive postwar rise in the teenage demographic, modern pop music arrived. And pop's particularly teenage image of youth and beauty was cemented during the girl group era with acts like The Ronettes, the Supremes and The Shangri Las. As Jacqueline Warwick observes in her book *Girl Groups, Girl Culture*: "girl group songs are at once conservative and radical, creating a forum for discourse about girls' issues and experiences" (Warwick, 2007). Or, as pop star Billy Joel described it: "The Ronettes' 'Be My Baby' oozed sex...Ronnie's voice - it sounds almost lubricated. It's got that smell to it, like sweat and garlic" (Spector, 1991: xiii).

Although the emphasis on a sexy commercial image was disrupted by punk rock in the 1970s, by the early 1980s the 'youth/beauty' template that had been set during the girl group era was firmly established. The rise of MTV meant that video was now an intrinsic part of record company promotion. During the 1980s record labels fine-tuned their strategies for marketing the newly-emerging corporate global star. Along with Michael Jackson and Prince, Madonna spearheaded this new generation - she used provocative sexual videos as inspired marketing, and ironically thirty years later is trapped by the very concept she created and popularised.

### **Mother: life (and credibility) begins at 40**

Throughout her career Madonna has played with the imagery of female archetypes - from Virgin to cowgirl, geisha and whore. She has dipped into art, religion and history for inspiration, and has appeared as a modern incarnation of an ancient icon. Writer Camille Paglia, for instance, argues that she "has rejoined and healed the split halves of women: Mary, the Blessed Virgin and holy mother, and Mary Magdalene, the harlot" (Paglia, 1992:11). Because of the range of Madonna's appeal and the fact she has been referred to as a modern pop goddess, it seems apposite to divide her career into three mythological phases: the Maiden, the Mother and the Crone.

Madonna started out as a modern Aphrodite, enchanting her global audience with the 'Boy Toy' role. As she approached 40, Madonna became a mother and left behind the blonde seductress of her 'maiden' years. According to metaphysical writer DJ Conway: "The Mother aspect of the Goddess is summer, the ripening of all things...(she) is associated with adulthood and parenthood...Adulthood means the accepting of responsibilities, particularly those brought about by our own actions or commitments." (Conway, 1997: 45). After the birth of her daughter Lourdes in 1996, Madonna went through a period of reappraisal and drastically altered her style.

She had already left behind the sexual dominatrix of the *Sex* era, adopting 'age appropriate' clothes with her classic '50s Hollywood look for *Evita*. She became interested in spiritual development, practising yoga and reading about Kabbalah. Musically she went into a more experimental direction with her 1998 album *Ray of Light*. Madonna described her mood for the album as "retrospective and intrigued by the mystical aspects of life." (O'Brien, 2007: 243). Encouraged by her (then) underground club producer William Orbit, Madonna went on a psychological journey. With the track 'Mer Girl', for instance, she focused on her mother who died of cancer when she was a child. In the song Madonna runs through a threatening dreamscape, until the ground opens up and she is buried alive with her dead mother. This was a far cry from the boy-meets-girl pop of her *True Blue* era.

*Ray of Light* was released in March 1998 to widespread critical acclaim. It won four Grammy Awards and attracted 'serious' music buyers, the so-called discerning music paper demographic of 20-35 year old men. With *Ray of Light* Madonna achieved that elusive artistic credibility (and cultural capital) that she had craved for so long. "I've been in the music business sixteen years and this is my first Grammy," Madonna said, blinking furiously during her acceptance speech at the 1998 Awards Show. "It was worth the wait." This album was a kind of resurrection. Approaching forty years old she had ditched the arch, glittering blonde of 1992's *Erotica* album to re-emerge with subtle make-up and flowing pre-Raphaelite hair. At this stage in her career, the emphasis was on the organic, 'natural' process of ageing - covering up rather than wearing revealing clothes, denouncing the former antics of her *Sex* book era, and being taken seriously as an 'artist'. She fully explored this phase with an album trilogy that still stands as her best work: *Ray of Light* (1998), *Music* (2000) and *American Life* (2001).

Recorded with leftfield Parisian producer Mirwais, the *Music* album moved from fractured electronic funk to acoustic folk and brought out a new side to Madonna's creativity. "Everybody knows her as a chameleon, or a businesswoman. I wanted to show her potential as a musician," said Mirwais (O'Brien, 2007: 252). Shortly before the release of *Music*, she gave birth to Rocco, her son with film director Guy Ritchie. "I feel complete," Madonna said with quiet satisfaction. That emotional stability enabled her to make bold creative decisions with music that was more textured than ever before. Psychoanalyst Elliott Jaques describes this kind of mid-life inspiration as "the process of forming and fashioning the external product, by means of working and re-working the externalised material." He distinguishes between "the precipitate creativity of early adulthood and the sculpted creativity of mature adulthood" (Jaques, 2006: 5)

Madonna developed this further in 2001's Drowned World tour. A cross between Comedia del Arte and high end Las Vegas spectacle, Drowned World was a deliberate challenge to concert-goers. It featured dark cyberpunk and a Geisha section, where Madonna appeared on stage wearing a black wig, kimono and 40-foot arms. This section had the terrifying intensity of Japanese horror films like *Ringu*, and puzzled some of her fans. According to the tour director Jamie King: "Her music for that moment was introspective and dark so the tour had to reflect that. It was important that Madonna didn't sell out and just do the hits, but she did really cover her new material because that was who she had evolved into." (O'Brien, 2007: 267)

The Madonna we see in videos is very different from the flesh and blood live performer. Usually she does the same complicated moves as her dancers, but as a fortysomething mother she began to change her performance style. At a warm-up promotional gig at London Brixton Academy in 2000, for instance, she was breathless, slightly chubby and found it hard to keep up with her dancers. Considering the fact she had given birth to

Rocco just three months earlier, this wasn't surprising. For her Drowned World tour the following year, her dancing was less strenuous than usual. "Madonna had Rocco, he was very young. She hadn't performed for eight years and needed to get back into shape," said her choreographer Alex Magno. "She didn't want to dance so much, she wanted to sing live and sound good." (O'Brien, 2007: 269). Drowned World was Madonna's most daring, avant garde show, with the emphasis on ideas and concepts rather than song-and-dance routines.

This questioning mood was compounded by the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Centre. Her next album *American Life* reflected the new social and political landscape with confusion, disorientation and anger seeping into most of the songs. She was 44 years old and experiencing what amounted to a mid-life crisis. *American Life* was her psychoanalysis. She name-checked Sigmund Freud in her lyrics, and threw out countless questions. Who am I? Where am I going? What does it all mean? Much of the album is suffused with sarcasm: from the disaffected ennui of the title track to the smooth yet sceptical song 'Hollywood.' "I've had 20 years of fame and fortune, and I feel that I have a right to an opinion on what it is and what it isn't. All everyone is obsessed about at the moment is being a celebrity. I'm saying that's bullshit and who knows better than me?" she declared (Rees 2003).

She was re-evaluating not just her celebrity status, but the nature of performance itself. *X-Static Process*, for instance, is one of Madonna's most fascinating projects. In a series of photographs shot in 2002 with Stephen Klein, Madonna deconstructed her own myth to devastating effect. Their exhibit and accompanying artbook focused on: "a performer in her rehearsal space where she creates and brings her ideas to life or death" (O'Brien 2007: 292).



A pristine white wedding dress, like the one in her 'Like A Virgin' video, sits on a tailor's dummy. In a series of 40 images the dress is gradually devoured by flames until there is nothing left but charred pieces of lace. Like an inverted image of the *Like A Virgin* album cover Madonna poses on a bare bed in a grimy leotard with laddered tights and bandaged knees, her hair pulled back with plain brown hairgrips. In another picture she wears a jewelled animal mask, dark red damask, and an ornate headdress, looking like a decrepit Elizabethan queen. Copyright on the entire exhibit is credited to Boy Toy Inc, a tongue-in-cheek reference to the '80's persona that she cheerfully destroyed. She was systematically dismantling images that no longer served her - the virgin/whore tease, the fame-hungry star, the Blond Ambition virago. "I'm not a pop star, I'm a performance artist," she said.

Madonna also adopted a challenging stance in her 'American Life' video, playing a gun-toting resistance fighter who throws a grenade at a President Bush look-a-like. She described the video as an anti-war statement, but after the US invasion of Iraq she was faced with public condemnation. Madonna toned down her message and withdrew the video, saying: "I do not believe it is appropriate to air it at this time" (Warner Bros 2003).

Sales suffered. Even though it has become a cult favourite amongs fans, *American Life* posted the lowest sales of any Madonna album to date. Madonna was shaken. She compared her producer Mirwais to Jean Paul Sartre, saying (slightly disparagingly): "We both got sucked into the French existentialist vortex. We both decided we were against the war, and we both smoked Gauloises and wore berets, and we were against everything...I was very upset with George Bush" (Garfield 2005).

Madonna breezily dismantled her own pop images when she was in control of the process, but the very real prospect of her career evaporating engendered panic. After

*American Life* Madonna retreated into a more conservative role, portraying a traditional image of motherhood. She wrote a series of children's books, and wore spectacles and a demure flowery dress to the launch party of her first literary offering *The English Roses*. The underlying message of Madonna's children's stories was one of retreat, nostalgia, and old-fashioned family values, and this was strikingly expressed in her Lady of the Manor persona. She was photographed for *American Vogue* on her Wiltshire estate wearing twin-set and pearls, embracing the upper crust hobbies of her husband Guy Ritchie. "I see England as my home. I now know how to ride. I know how to shoot. I know how to fish," she announced (Bowles 2005).

In 2005 she was listed tenth in *Country Life* magazine's 'Power 100 of the Countryside'. At a time when the Countryside Alliance was fighting the Parliament anti-hunting bill, Madonna was feted as one of the most powerful figures in rural Britain. This was a perplexing incarnation for Madonna fans, particularly British ones. "Madonna has little to add and nowhere to go as a cultural radical. She could genuinely embrace oppositional politics to mark herself as definitively radical in the early twenty-first century, but has instead embraced the trappings of an English aristocratic lifestyle," wrote Sean Albiez (Albiez, 2004:130 ).

Then on her 47th birthday she had a serious riding accident, suffering three cracked ribs, a broken collarbone and a broken hand. The traumatic fall provoked an extreme reaction. After three months of enforced recuperation, she propelled herself back into the limelight with a new album and a defiantly sexual image. She emerged, her PR Liz Rosenberg said, "like a bullet from a gun" (O'Brien 2007:319).

## Like a Crone

The third phase of Madonna's career began as she approached fifty. After experiencing life as Maiden and Mother, she was about to encounter the Crone. According to DJ Conway, "The Crone aspect of the Goddess is the third face...The Dark Mother is the most deeply hidden, the most difficult to understand, of the Goddess's faces. She is the unavoidable Time, the One with whom we must make our peace if we are to really grow in the greatest of spiritual depths" (Conway 1997: 83). A key influence on Madonna was the modern dance heroine Martha Graham, who at the age of 50 choreographed *Herodiade*, one of her most startling pieces. *Herodiade* confronted with stark minimalism the mythological power of women, ageing and fate.

Madonna briefly explored the Crone archetype for her 1998 'Frozen' video, where she flew through the sky like a ghostly witch, dressed in black with her long dark hair streaming behind her. Amplifying this with the Geisha section during her Drowned World tour, it seemed that Madonna was moving closer, Martha Graham-style, to a more conceptual view of performance and her pop star role. Drowned World could be described as thoroughly 'age-appropriate', with the focus less on the body and sexuality, more on visual art and the subconscious.

For her 2006 Confessions Tour, however, Madonna swerved in the opposite direction, sporting a shiny purple leotard and Farrah Fawcett-style flicks in her hair. She confronted her menopausal self in a defiant mood. She was keen to sell records, and knew the sex chick persona was the most straightforward way to achieve that. It was rumoured she instructed the producer of her Drowned World tour DVD to airbrush out any lines or wrinkles. She had been observing the competition and understood what it took to maintain her position as 'Queen of Pop'. Privately she told friends: "I have to stay

current. God help me, but I guess I have to share radio air time with Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera” (Taraborrelli 2001: 345). At the 2003 MTV Video Awards she asserted her dominance in a highly symbolic way.

Two young pop 'virgins' Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera appeared on stage dressed in wedding white, singing 'Like A Virgin'. They were joined by bridegroom Madonna dressed in vampiric black. The latter swooped on Britney with a vigorous french kiss, before launching into the song 'Hollywood'. “I kissed Britney Spears. I am the mommy pop star and she is the baby pop star. And I am kissing her to pass my energy to her, ” Madonna said later (Peterson 2007).

At that point Britney was her main rival and the quintessential teen diva. But determined to mould time and trends to her wishes, “Mummy Pop Star” Madonna simply devoured her prey. The Britney kiss brings to mind Roger Corman's 1959 horror film *Wasp Woman*, in which cosmetics magnate Susan Cabot develops a beauty cream derived from an enzyme secreted by wasps which is intended to make women look forever youthful. Obsessed with restoring her fading charms, Cabot insists on being the first test subject. The solution is at first remarkably effective, transforming her into a sultry, dark-haired vixen...until she begins to take on the predatory traits of a giant female wasp, setting out on a nocturnal killing spree. After she devours her victims, nothing - not even shoes, belts or cardigans - is left.

For Madonna to “stay current” she had to maintain a highly visible global presence. Her next album *Confessions on a Dancefloor* was a bold, ambitious record that recycled her New York disco past and sounded like “ABBA on drugs” (Garfield 2005). In revisiting the disco girl who waltzed into New York gay clubs in the late '70s, Madonna refashioned her 'little girl' pop persona. Britney Spears had set a trend for what Sheila Whiteley calls

“Paedopop”, with video images of classic soft porn schoolgirl fantasy. According to Whiteley: “The promotion of certain images within pop music - not least those of the pubescent girl who successfully blends innocence and knowingness - certainly appears to have had a strong influence on who is chosen for the uncertain pathway to stardom” (Whiteley, 2003: 59).

Against this backdrop Madonna sought to appeal to a younger generation of fans by attempting to ‘pass’ as a woman in her twenties, and initially it worked. *Confessions...* has become one of her most successful albums, holding the record for topping the most charts in the world. The lead single 'Hung Up' was Number One in 41 countries. To many, it felt like the old Madonna: upbeat and visually alluring. Buyers also responded to a very powerful marketing campaign. Disappointed by the sales of *American Life*, Madonna decided to do market research for her new album. Before the record was finished, she had her producer Stuart Price slip a few mixes into his live DJ sets. He filmed the crowd reaction on his mobile phone to give her an indication of which tracks went down best on the dancefloor. In this way Madonna used club audiences as a focus group.

“It suggests she feels a need for endorsement,” commented *Campaign* magazine editor Claire Beale. “Like a lot of people who work in advertising she is far older than her target audience. She may feel this is a useful way of reconnecting with a younger generation” (Hastings 2005). Her first single 'Hung Up' was featured on a global advert for Motorola's new mobile phone, and became a master ringtone. Filtered through every possible medium, *Confessions...* was touted as Madonna's big 'comeback' record. “With her last album, many naysayers were questioning her relevancy. This new album puts all that to rest,” said Warner Bros CEO Tom Whalley, with an almost audible sigh of relief (Paoletta 2005). Virgin Megastore merchandise manager Jerry Suarez summed

up the prevailing mood by saying: “It's all about Madonna right now...The last record suffered because she got so political. Less guns. Less tanks. More disco balls. More ABBA. We're good” (ibid).

This was a woman fiercely engaging with her public, exploiting brand opportunities with MTV as well as Motorola and iTunes. “I'm a businesswoman,” she said. “The music industry has changed. There's a lot of competition and the market is glutted with new releases - and new 'thises and thats'. You must join forces with other brands and corporations. You're an idiot if you don't.” She reassured the 'naysayers' by announcing: “I don't need to be going on about the war in Iraq. I made a lot of political statements...I don't want to repeat myself, so I moved to another area and that's 'God 'god' or 'good'?, I really feel like dancing right now” (ibid).

With the media focus on her record there was also renewed interest in Madonna's body, and reports focused on the youthful appearance of this “47 year old mother-of-two”. In maintaining that perfect body, though, Madonna left nothing to chance. Every day she did an hour of Olympic level Astanga yoga, an hour of Pilates, and an hour of aerobic exercise. She took business calls on her StairMaster, and ate a finely-tuned macrobiotic diet, allowing herself one glass of wine with Sunday lunch. A large proportion of her working day was spent, effectively, working out. According to fashion historian Sarah Cheang: “The 1980's aerobics, 1990's workout, and 21st century yoga trends have all encouraged women to create an internal corset of muscles that flatten the stomach through hard work and self-discipline. These are active bodies that subscribe to norms of beauty and must be continuously on show to the approving gaze of others” (O'Brien, 2007: 326).

Madonna situated herself firmly in what psychologist Margo Maine identifies as a global Barbie culture, where for young women "...preparation for a special event takes weeks, starting with tanning; waxing their eyebrows, bikini line, and legs; manicure and pedicure; colouring their hair; having their make-up done by an expert; maybe even having a cosmetic plastic surgery procedure. The dress and the date have become almost incidental. The body is the project, and the process is endless" (Maine 2004: Introduction).

In contrast to the curvy shape and a round tummy of 1980's Madonna, her post-millennial look was skinny and digitally perfect, echoing 'Lollipop Lady' celebrities like Nicole Ritchie and Victoria Beckham who were so thin their heads appeared too large for their bodies. Madonna liked to give the impression, however, that her image was the result of hard work rather than slimming and cosmetic surgery.

"A body sculpted by the knife of the surgeon would not signal Madonna's power and discipline in the same way as a body sculpted by hard work and strength," comments Cheang. "To support the Madonna myth, her body must display the signs of strength above the signs of beauty" (O'Brien, 2007: 327). This was a question that presented more and more of a challenge. Madonna felt the pressure to look young and vital in a market where competitors were twenty years younger, but she also didn't want to appear ageing and desperate. In the mainstream media there was a discourse of disapproval: "Even with muscles like these, Madonna can't beat the hands of time" shrieked a *Daily Mail* headline. The article referred to the "virtual roadmap of veins" in her hands as "something the toughest exercise regime just can't solve" (Simpson 2006).

The "roadmap of veins" brings to mind Louise Bourgeois' 1996 sculptural piece with old bones and cocktail dresses. As art historian Griselda Pollock observes: "The evocation

of a delight in the feminine body's self-adornment...is uncannily at odds with the outsized bones, the knobby joints, the formal contrasts of softness and fineness with the solidity and potential sharpness of the bones" (Pollock, 1999:page. A message conveyed by the popular media (and echoed ironically in Bourgeois' fine art), is that the ageing female body is offensive, and should therefore be hidden away. *Billboard* writer James Dickerson, for instance, voiced disapproval of Cyndi Lauper's performance while promoting her 1997 album *Sisters of Avalon*: "At 44 she seemed less like a playful free spirit and more like a scary old woman who lives in the attic. Seeing her attempt to fit into the little girl persona she'd worn so well in the 1980s was painful..." (Dickerson 1998: 168).

In her book *Too Much, Too Young* Sheila Whiteley notes the absence of older women on the "oldies and goldies" circuit; that past a certain age they are redundant. "Does this mean...maturity all too often equals obscurity?" (Whiteley 2003: 186). She cites Cher's appeal as being able to pull off a confidence trick. "At 58...she exerts a strong appeal that is not confined to her older fans....it demonstrates that the physical status quo remains an intrinsic part of a pop star's appeal, and that Cher's ability to project her youthfulness...remains central to her status as 'the singer/actress/icon of indestructibility'" (ibid: 194). Much depends on the mature woman's ability to "pass" as younger, but there will always be tell-tale signs (like Madonna's "hands of time").

As Gillian Granville notes: "the concept of 'passing'...has been used in gerontological theories in the metaphors of 'masks' and 'masquerade', describing how people put on a mask to solicit a certain 'gaze', and pass themselves off in a false disguise" (Granville 2000). Madonna is a pastmistress at masquerade, and by her 2006 Confessions Tour she was adopting a kind of disguise - colouring her greying hair, disciplining loose muscles, and presenting the image of a woman twenty years younger. On one level this



could be seen as a confidence trick, an airbrushed illusion manufactured for the global market. On another level, she is a healthy woman who likes to work out and stay at the peak of fitness required for her grueling world tours. As her former personal trainer Tracy Anderson says: “She has the body of an athlete” (personal communication, 2009).

And Madonna clearly relished her sexual power as an older woman. In the video for ‘Hung Up’ she walked down the street with a celebratory swagger, while a *W* magazine shoot depicting her as horsewoman with riding crop was both seductive and authoritative. The reassertion of her sexual self at this point could be seen as positive and liberating. In her study of menopausal women (‘Menopause is the “Good Old”’), Heather Dillaway argues that many women, released from the burdens of contraception and menstruation, ‘rediscover’ sex. “While...menopause has been characterized as the end of sexual desire...many interviewees reported feeling ‘sexier’ and more ‘womanly’ than before” (Dillaway 2005).

But while Madonna enjoyed projecting a mature sexuality, she was also keeping a weather eye on pop consumers. Her shift from the dark tones of *Drowned World* to the glitz of the *Confessions* tour echoed an earlier pattern. At thirty Madonna let her natural brown hair grow out and recorded *Like A Prayer*, a critically acclaimed album that explored her Catholic upbringing. But after this introspective phase she dyed her hair blonde again to please director Warren Beatty for her role in *Dick Tracy*. For Madonna the commercial considerations of global stardom have always taken precedence. But as she ages this sets up an impossible dichotomy between the private, mature woman - well-read, politically motivated, culturally curious - and the two-dimensional pop image.

For her 2008 *Hard Candy* tour Madonna seemed less certain, more brittle. Her live shows are usually impeccable, but this one was flawed - more of a rehash of tried and

tested ideas. Her ex-husband Guy Ritchie echoed the sexism of the industry in his ridicule, saying that onstage with her dancers, Madonna “looked like their grandmother.” As if to disprove the notion that she was too old for pop music, her dancing was more strenuous and athletic than before - she became the multi-faceted woman who can sing and jump a furious pace with a skipping rope. “Madonna's over it now. She'd say she isn't because she has to but she is,” says her video editor Dustin Robertson. “How can she say goodbye? How can she let go of all this? It's an epic process to go through for the woman, the artist, the icon” (O’Brien 2007: 350).

The emphasis of *Hard Candy*, Madonna’s last album for Warner Brothers, was on sex, dancing and muscular funk pop. It was co-produced by the top-selling Timbaland, and a key collaborator was Justin Timberlake. A former Mickey Mouse Club star who sang with boy band N' Sync, Timberlake had reinvented himself as a cutting edge pop star. By working with them Madonna plugged directly into a massive, young audience. The other top production team for the album were The Neptunes. With their futuristic drum sounds, falsetto hooks and raw 'sawtooth' synth lines, The Neptunes had produced records for artists as varied as Kelis, Jay-Z, Britney Spears and The Rolling Stones. In 2003 it was estimated that they had produced 43% of the songs on US radio. After a spell with left-field European mavericks like William Orbit and Mirwais, Madonna opted for the US mainstream and that year’s hippest, most expensive producers. Despite this her *Hard Candy* album sounded rushed and formulaic, and there was a new note of insecurity in her approach. “I work with people who are half my age, so I feel like I have to work even harder to keep up with everybody,” she said (Hack 2008).

When it came to promoting *Hard Candy* her fans wondered if, as she approached fifty, Madonna would let go of the sexy leotard for something 'age-appropriate'. *Vanity Fair* writer Rich Cohen noted: “Madonna has made her fortune selling sex - what will she sell

when the thought of sex with Madonna seems like a fetish?" (Cohen 2008). The first promotional shots however, showed Madonna in an unrepentant mood. Dressed like a boxer-cum-dominatrix in a punishing black corset, thigh-high boots and spikey head-gear, she was defiant. "I'm not going to be defined by my age," she declared. "Why should any woman? I'm not going to slow down, get off this ride, stay home and get fat. No way! I would never get fat" (Gannon 2008).

While the maturing sexuality of her *Confessions...* album was joyful, the aptly titled *Hard Candy* promotion seemed like hard work. At this point her marriage to Ritchie ended in divorce, and she had a much publicised relationship with 'Baby Jesus', a young man in his twenties. She worked at her youthful image; there were endless paparazzi pictures of Madonna going jogging, or coming out of the gym, or hurrying from a Pilates class. What emerges is the sense of rock-hard discipline, a rigorous control over her body and her work. Madonna is a trained dancer, and her body has always been her medium of communication. She is a prime example of what Steven Van Wolputte calls "the self as an embodied process of self-making" (Van Wolputte 2004:page). When Madonna was in her twenties and thirties, her constant refashioning of her body and the way she honed her muscles was admired. But by her fifties she elicited a more ambivalent response from her audience; this is mirrored by the tension in her promotional pictures. The mass media culture that she had previously been comfortable with was now severely limiting, and her identity less certain. Jameson points to postmodern culture as leading to a fragmentation of self, "the end of a coherent or centred self" (Jameson 1991: 26). Ochs and Capps echo this view, saying: "the body-self is often incoherent or inconsistent, precisely because it arises from contradictory...experiences (and social tensions)" (Ochs & Capps 1996).

## Californication...

With her digitally perfect heart-shaped face and blonde locks, the public pop star Madonna embodies what Brodwin defines as “Californication”. He argues that though the body can be “customizable and adaptable”, whether through tattoos, piercing or surgery, the “dominant ideology promotes looking young and beautiful (“californication”) as a way of being healthy, successful, and morally right.” (quoted in Van Wolputte 2004:page). If this is the case, where is Madonna’s centred self? As she ages, there is a disjuncture between her pop performative self (audacious, unsettling) and the private older woman, working for African charities and taking on an ambassadorial role in the global fight against poverty and AIDS.

Madonna always demonstrated her mastery of the pop mainstream - bringing taboo subjects into the heart of her work. Maybe ageing is one process that she cannot popularise. Maybe she too, will have to accept that the place of a mature female star is on the margins. For the mainstream music industry the menopausal woman is a difficult 'sell'. How will Madonna negotiate this difficult position?

As argued in Miriam Bernard’s book *Women Ageing: Changing Identities, Challenging Myths*, “None of us are immune to the impact of ageism, and, for women in particular, it often intersects with sexism to produce particular pressures on us in terms of ageing and physical appearance” (Barnard 2000: insert page number). What does it mean for Madonna to lay her sexy persona to rest...will she no longer exist as a pop star? Miriam Bernard writes that “(in their) experiences of mid-life and older, women remain invisible.” For Madonna, invisibility is an anathema. She has constructed her life and performance around supreme visibility - it is the way she remains a pop icon. As part of the ageing process women have to construct and reconstruct their identity. Madonna, mistress of

reinvention, has to reconfigure this public self. Part of that reconfiguration is to rely less on the pop industry, and she seems to be doing this by diversifying, as they say, her portfolio.

In 2010 Madonna directed *W.E.*, a feature film inspired by the story of Wallis Simpson. She also launched the Material Girl clothing line, which she designed with her daughter Lourdes. Soon after the 1980's inspired line went on sale, however, she was sued by L.A. Triumph Inc. who said that they have been selling clothes under the name Material Girl since 1997. As the lawsuit continued, Madonna announced plans to open fitness centres around the world. Named 'Hard Candy Fitness', the first gym opened in Mexico City, a place that Madonna believed "will serve as a great test market." With its advanced yoga salon, iPod docks on the cardiovascular machines and a Zen balcony, she aptly defined it as "a mash-up of 'hard body' and 'eye candy'" (Eisen, 2010).

As Madonna focused on the fitness business, her interest in music seemed to wane. She said she hadn't the "time or energy" to make another record. Whether she retires from the music industry or returns to it on her own terms, the modern pop world she helped to create is now her biggest challenge.

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