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Joan Jett in “I Love Rock ‘n’ Roll”: Gender Boundaries and Female Address

**by
Megan Colleen O'Mera**

Winner

2013 Joyce Durham Essay Contest in Women's and Gender Studies

Joan Jett in *I Love Rock 'n' Roll*: Gender Boundaries and Female Address in 80s Rock

Joan Jett was not like other 23-year-olds. But, what else would you expect from a woman who grew up idolizing Black Sabbath and Led Zeppelin? When she grew into adulthood under the lens of the public eye, Jett's shockingly masculine style in *I Love Rock 'n' Roll* was not what the average 1981 MTV viewer was accustomed to seeing from a female music video artist. Her female contemporaries such as Cyndi Lauper, Pat Benetar and Madonna were more traditionally feminine, sometimes even overtly sexual. Instead bending her style to feminize or sexualize herself, Jett expresses her gender by exposing the audience to her raw, uncut personality. She was vulgar, genuine and the viewer got the sense that she had no intention to go out of her way to impress them. She was authentic, in the truest meaning of the word. Through the *I Love Rock 'n' Roll* music video with the Blackhearts, Jett expands and redefines the acceptable gender boundaries in early 80's culture by demanding response from her audience, taking possession of traditionally male experiences, evidencing the incredible breadth in potential of how "feminine" can be the visually manifested, and carving out a space for women in the male-dominated rock 'n' roll style.

One of Jett's groundbreaking practices that expanded and redefined gender boundaries in the 80's is the response she demands from the *I Love Rock 'n' Roll* viewers by directly addressing the camera. Jett is positioned mere inches from the camera and looks directly the lens as she lip-syncs, "I knew he must have been about seventeen." Jett rarely breaks eye contact with the camera as she aimlessly struts around the dingy bar, and even still when she approaches the young man at the jukebox. By repeatedly staring at and speaking to the camera, Jett breaks the dominant pattern of female's silence in film. Amy Lawrence calls this confrontation with the camera "direct address," which carries a profound effect for women in films because "Not only

is the audience shocked out of their voyeuristic reverie, but by addressing the audience in an explicit 'I/you' relationship, direct address demands some kind of response (167)" Through the seemingly insignificant act of making eye contact and thus speaking to her viewers directly, Jett implies that she is neither model nor muse – she is the primary mover of the plot. In reference to her confrontational tendencies, Jett explains, "I just do what I do, and make eye contact – which is natural for me" (Juno 81). Contrary to her female predecessors in classical Hollywood prior to the feminist movement (i.e. 1940s and 50s), Jett demands that the audience fully acknowledges her presence as the protagonist in *I Love Rock 'n' Roll*. She expands and redefines gender boundaries by dismissing the traditionally feminine practice of passivity that characterized music and film during her rise to fame.

In addition to demanding a response from the audience through direct address, Jett expands and redefines 80's gender codes by appropriating traditionally male experiences in *I Love Rock 'n' Roll*. Lisa Lewis refers to these experiences as "access signs," in which the female video musicians "challenge assumptions about the boundaries which gender, as a social construct, draws around men and women" (136-7). Throughout the course of the video, Jett engages in activities, situations and practices commonly associated with males. She plays heavy chords on the electric guitar instead of strumming a folksy acoustic, and appears in an oversized black leather jacket, matching gloves, a bandana, and unkempt hair. In harsh contradiction to the audience's expectations for women's roles in sex and dating, she confidently approaches a male five years her junior in pursuit of a casual sexual encounter. Additionally, Jett seems perfectly in control of the masculine video setting – a smoky, grimy bar – even climbing atop the bar at one point to lead the drunken crowd in chanting and clapping along the chorus of her song. These male-associated experiences take on new meaning coming from a female artist and effectively

reshape the social boundaries for activities previously believed to be the exclusive domain of men. Jett's *I Love Rock 'n' Roll* showcases a woman doing "male things," which causes cognitive dissonance in the audience's assumed male/female dichotomy. Jett's ability to challenge gender norms through the heavy use of access signs effectively transforms perceptions to illustrate that women can indeed take ownership of traditionally male musical styles, fashion choices, social settings and attitudes towards sex.

While Jett's explicit access signs were of definite significance in redefining and expanding acceptable gender roles in the 80's, it was her less explicit (yet still massively significant) discovery signs that enabled her to illustrate the incredible variety in which femininity can be visually appropriated. Jett's embodiment of male experiences in *I Love Rock 'n' Roll* may appear to be nothing more than a transposition of sex roles, which perhaps is why she is left out of much popular discourse concerning feminist pioneers on MTV. However, Jett's significance runs much deeper than the mere promotion of an idealistic world in which females can have equal access to male privileges. Indeed, she challenges Lewis's argument that discovery signs must celebrate experiences that are traditionally feminine to lend value to feminine culture (140). Jett instead implies that women can self-discover simply by celebrating their authenticity and originality. According to interviews with Andrea Juno in *Angry Women in Rock*, Jett reveals that celebrating traditionally feminine experiences would have contradicted to her character (76-7). She details the broad spectrum of femininity in her frustrated attempt to explain that androgyny is a true and honest aspect of her personal identity:

If you're a guy, at any age, 20 to 100, you're a bachelor and you have a swinging lifestyle. But ... there's no female equivalent. If a female is out there doing that, she's slut, instead of just being able to do what she wants to do... It really bugs me that women

don't get a chance to think about what they want in life, and feel railroaded into, "I must have children now, I must get married now, I must be a breeder." If that's what someone wants to do, and it's in her heart, that's beautiful. That's great. But you shouldn't feel pressured to do that (76-7).

Although Jett didn't appear traditionally feminine in *I Love Rock 'n' Roll*, denying her successful use of discovery signs directly is to deny the very idea that celebrating femininity most essentially requires exploring your interests and having fun. It just so happened that Jett's interests were more congruent with socially defined male experiences, which should by no means invalidate her worth as a pioneer of female discovery signs. By providing deeper significance to the methods that Lewis suggests are necessary for female video artists to activate discovery signs, Jett expands and redefines acceptable gender boundaries in 80's culture in *I Love Rock 'n' Roll* to suggest that acting feminine is not necessarily a critical component of celebrating women as artists.

The final method by which Jett redefines and expands gender boundaries in early 80's music is by creating a habitat for female artists within the male-dominated genres of rock through *I Love Rock 'n' Roll*. Like any truly authentic rock artist, Jett plays her own instrument and stays true to her style without considering how being a woman could or should influence how she performs or what her audience thinks about her music. Regarding her stage presence, Jett said, "It's hard for me to even notice that I'm sexual onstage. I mean, I'm just out there playing ... But I'm not really aware of it. I'm not onstage thinking that I've got to do this or that or to look sexy. I just do what I do" (Juno 81). *I Love Rock 'n' Roll* was a hit with both male and female fans, with the single selling over two and a half million copies, spending seven weeks on top of the Billboard Chart, and in heavy rotation on MTV (Kennedy 90). However, *I Love Rock*

'n' *Roll* is of even greater significance in the context of Jett's critical role in its massive success. Kathleen Kennedy argues "Jett's significance lies in her ability to use and invert rock and punk's masculinity to create a new space for herself at the precise moment in which that space closed for most women" (93). Unlike artists such as Cyndi Lauper, who created a new possibility for female artists to co-exist with males (Lewis), Jett invites women to actively participate in the existing male structure by blatantly disregarding gender and sexuality stereotypes in her performances. Jett challenges the perception that rock 'n' roll is exclusively associated with males, and broadens its meaning to apply to either gender. During a time when the pop culture audience decoded music videos according to the sexual roles presented in them, Jett blurs the male/female dichotomy and presents androgyny as a welcomed norm in rock 'n' roll expression.

Jett redefines and expands gender boundaries through her performance in *I Love Rock 'n' Roll* via four major practices: directly addressing the audience, appropriating male experiences, stepping outside gender norm for the sake of authenticity and fun, and carving a space for women in a male-dominated genre. Ironically, she makes these strides in pop culture feminism through her disregard for what traditional notions of femininity should mean for the celebration of her talent and character. Jett lead women in the early 80s by example, not by showing them who to point the finger at. Instead of drawing attention to feminism as a focal point for social concern, Jett takes indirect but effective route to empowering her fans and all those who tuned into MTV to watch her video. In a male-dominated era, Jett figuratively gave her critics the middle finger and kept on playing music exactly the way she wanted.

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