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PREFACE

Rock and roll, and all the various genres that have always rocked, rapped and crooned along with it, has always had its uses for women. We were the objects of desire, the false sirens, the temptresses in the garden, the ones to blame for everything that went wrong in the lives of rock's angry young men. We were Maybellene who couldn't be true, Miss Molly rockin' in the house of delight, the breakers of hearts and the purveyors of venereal disease in the House of the Rising Sun. When we weren't a topic of inspiration—or at least discussion—we were a literal source of material, singing original records that were covered with greater success by others. And that was just in the first two generations.

When women did contribute to rock and roll as writers, performers and producers, it was often only to support the status quo. The masochistic material sung by the early girl groups gave voice to the sirens and virgins the boys had always sung about. That some of this material was written by women was ironic but inconsequential—Carole King could cry until September over an absent boyfriend, the Chantels could apologize for unknown offenses upon finding he was gone, and the Angels could warn off a rival suitor by declaring that the boyfriend was back. Of course, as in any vital art form, there were also exceptions: Dionne Warwick could break into the mainstream singing a male-created song asking that she be accepted as she was, and Paul McCartney could worry about his own unknown offenses as he longed for yesterday.

Men singing about women, men singing to women, women singing about and to men, and to other women (often about men)—this all persisted even after the political scene contributed protest and social commentary in the mid to late '60s. But along with this came some men, and shortly thereafter some women, who told their own stories for themselves. From the vantage of the twenty-first century it seems no time at all from the advent of Bob Dylan to the emergence of Laura Nyro and Joni Mitchell, who divided the world between them in 1968, but for those of us who were teenagers at the time, it seemed like a very long time indeed between the emergence of the prophetic male and the female who was suddenly allowed to sing for herself. The sugary-sexy commercial disco singers coexisted with the self-determining Patti Smith and actual women-run bands performing female-centered material. African-American

women artists on the order of Etta James and Aretha Franklin, many of them heirs to the great traditions of gospel and the blues, established and maintained strong public presences of their own and continued to influence artists of other ethnic origins. And the sexual minorities who were not even a topic of conversation for the men of early rock were now able to speak for themselves and discover their audiences as well.

Rock and roll started out as a reaction to social barriers, and then ironically—and inevitably—erected barriers of its own, or imported unexamined (or at least unrejected) cultural habits of sexism. The ways women make their music are shaped by their resistance to the barriers they face in the culture from which the music springs, as well as in the business by which it is propagated. An independent woman, making her own music in her own way, will have problems (like Laura Nyro) or form her own company (like Joan Jett). And not infrequently, she will write songs that comment on this situation, both as it affects her own working situation and as it relates to larger issues of economic and social justice. Whatever the barriers in the music or the music business, the compelling vitality of the beat and the sound draws women as well as men into participation, and, as some of these contributors argue, provides a space where the barriers can be broken and the old social constructs demolished, fulfilling the rest of rock and roll's freedom-ringing mandate.

Most of these essays began as conference papers selected by members of the Women's Caucus for the Modern Languages/Midwest, an associated organization of the Midwest Modern Language Association. Since 2001 the Women's Caucus has hosted two sessions on women in popular music, and most of the essays in this volume are expanded and augmented versions of papers given at MMLA conventions from 2002-2006. Some came from other sources. David Jones contributed his essay on Etta James after attending an MMLA session in 2005. Monica Berger submitted her annotated bibliography of writing on women in rock and pop after a discussion with the editor at a poster session at New York City College of Technology. Deborah Kennedy contributed a new essay on Patti Smith, as did Kathleen Torrens, chair of our 2003 MMLA sessions, on the Indigo Girls. To keep this volume to a reasonable length and assure some logical structure, a number of otherwise interesting submissions were not included, but the number of proposals for the sessions each year and for this volume indicate the vitality of the subject.

The essays in this anthology, by scholars in a range of disciplines, approach the work of women in popular music from a wide variety of

perspectives, and this collection indicates something of the range of approaches. We open with a group of essays that consider some major single artists and singer-songwriters from unusual angles, by authors with long personal interests in their subjects. David Jones explores the career and influence of Etta James from the viewpoint of a scholar and avid fan. My own piece considers Laura Nyro as creator not just of songs but of song cycles, centered on the physical structure of the LP. Deborah Kennedy examines Patti Smith's uses of Christianity in her work, while Susan Booker Morris reads the work of Ferron through the lens of Eastern thought. The writers in this section have, in some cases, been following their subjects since the days before academic writing on women in music was a serious possibility; our decades of thinking and research have borne fruit here.

The next part is about groups, and takes a more theoretical turn. Kathleen Torrens looks at the ways the work of the Indigo Girls challenges heteronormativity. Samantha Thrift examines Destiny's Child's quest for identity and autonomy in a milieu of sexual objectification, and Kimberly P. Bowers discusses the politics and art of the Dixie Chicks.

The two essays that follow take up less-considered aspects of two other artists' work. H. Louise Davis discusses Bjork's videos and feminism, and Ellen Lansky considers Melissa Etheridge's cover versions of other writers' songs.

Three essays on various aspects of the Riot Grrrl phenomenon follow in the next section. A pioneer in the movement, Joan Jett, is the subject of Chloe Johnson's "Grrrls with Gibsons," and Michael Dwyer continues the discussion with a focus on Kathleen Hanna and Sadie Benning. Hilary Chute's discussion of Le Tigre completes the triptych.

Finally, Monica Berger's annotated bibliography points the interested reader toward some of the growing body of literature on women in pop and rock before this collection, and will be useful to students of the subject looking for further resources.

The Women's Caucus for the Modern Languages/Midwest plans to continue to offer sessions on women in popular music. We invite all interested scholars to participate, and we invite all interested readers to join us here in these pages.

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Thanks first of all to the Women's Caucus for the Modern Languages/Midwest for its ongoing support of new scholarship in the area of women in popular music. The multidisciplinary annual sessions at Midwest MLA conferences continue to showcase new work and stimulate further investigation.

When the Midwest MLA sessions had been sufficiently productive to suggest the possibility of a published collection, Cambridge Scholars Press was most receptive to our proposal and worked effectively with us to produce the finished work. Thanks to editors Amanda Millar and Andy Nercessian for helping this come into being.

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Finally, W. W. Norton has graciously granted permission for quotations from Patti Smith's *Early Work*.