



Gender, Branding, and the Modern Music Industry

Thomas M. Kitts

To cite this article: Thomas M. Kitts (2014) Gender, Branding, and the Modern Music Industry, *Rock Music Studies*, 1:2, 183-185, DOI: [10.1080/19401159.2013.846630](https://doi.org/10.1080/19401159.2013.846630)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19401159.2013.846630>



Published online: 25 Oct 2013.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 597



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Book Reviews

Gender, Branding, and the Modern Music Industry

KRISTIN J. LIEB

New York: Routledge, 2013

ISBN: 978-0-415-89490-6

194 pp., \$29.95 (pb)

With *Gender, Branding, and the Modern Music Industry*, Kristin Lieb provides an insightful but often disturbing study of the contemporary popular music industry. By focusing on women artists in the post-MTV era (when, arguably, visuals made the music secondary), Lieb demonstrates that female pop singers are judged more than ever on their sex appeal—despite the advances of the women’s movement over the past several decades. Throughout her study, Lieb draws from both theorists and music industry insiders, giving her conclusions weight and credibility.

Lieb divides her text into six chapters. Chapter 1, “Critical Framework for Considering Pop Stars,” focuses primarily on the cultural diamond, a diagram developed by Wendy Griswold and on which Lieb heavily relies. The diamond explains the production of pop culture as a complex interaction of four points: the social world (social interactions, the influence of institutions), the cultural object (artist, performance, the music), the creator (artist, publicists, managers, handlers), and receivers (the consumer). In the same chapter, Lieb introduces the concept of branding, which, while seemingly ubiquitous these days, has been largely ignored by pop culture scholars despite the industry’s intense efforts to shape artists into easily definable brands. Lady Gaga’s brand, for example, might define her as a bold, innovative, and defiant outsider who speaks for the marginalized. However, as Lieb writes, “when you peel off Gaga’s meat suits, makeup, and wigs, what she really sells is the same old-school sexual fantasy offered by countless others—differentiated by a dash of modern freak, a heap of insecurity, and a series of exciting art installations” (1). In *Bad Romance*, winner of MTV’s Best Video Award in 2009, a group of women paw at Gaga as men watch from a nearby couch. Later, Gaga crawls toward the audience and camera, singing, “I want your love,” then dances in her bra and panties and ends up scorched in her bed. As Lieb points out, the video serves as an allegory “for life as a contemporary female popular music star” (2).

In Chapter 2, “Female Popular Music Stars as Brands,” Lieb studies the marketing of female musicians as “short-term person brands,” who, if they are to have a lengthy career, must “extend their brands into other entertainment realms” (39). CD releases for such stars as Christina Aguilera, Kelly Clarkson, and Beyoncé are well timed and marketed extensively to create great anticipation and demand.

Additionally, these stars must keep their brands in circulation between CD releases and tours through media such as television, film, and Twitter. Of course, artistic considerations become secondary to the brand's image. "It's about persona," as one manager put it. (65). Chapter 3, "The Modern Music Industry," addresses structural and industrial norms. A relatively recent development in the industry has been the 360° contract, which permits labels to share in all artist-generated revenue, not just that from the music. Some artists and managers have welcomed the contract. Jorge Hinojosa, who manages Ice-T, believes the contract encourages artists to experiment with different projects and to "build, strengthen, diversify [and] reinvigorate their brands" (78). Again, the emphasis on music is decreased.

Chapters 4 and 5 chart the stages through which female pop music stars pass. Generally, a star begins in the "cute girl" stage and after a few short years moves into the "temptress" stage—think of Britney Spears, LeAnn Rimes, and Miley Cyrus, for example. Lieb and others argue that these two stages are almost always necessary for a career to progress. After these stages, the female artist has options: she may change focus and de-emphasize music, like, among many, Queen Latifah; she may evolve into the enviable and respected position of diva (like Whitney Houston); she may rely on sex and transition into a "whore" (the Pussycat Dolls); she may promote her exoticism (Nora Jones); she can turn provocateur and showcase counter-normative behavior (Lady Gaga); or she may demonstrate publicly self-destructive behavior as a "hot mess" (Spears, Aguilera, Amy Winehouse). The stars can, of course, move in and out of these categories, and comebacks are possible. If a star achieves longevity, she will develop into a gay icon and/or legend: Cher, Barbra Streisand, Tina Turner, Aretha Franklin, Madonna. I often find such charts too neat, but I am hard pressed to find exceptions here—although it is safe to say that Courtney Love and Chrissie Hynde bypassed the cute stage. More importantly, the chart reveals the highly systematic approach to developing a female star, complicates notions of authenticity, indicates that female stars far more than their male counterparts are judged by off-stage behavior, and suggests that appearance is actually the most important aspect of a female pop star's portfolio.

In Chapter 6, "Theoretical Foundations for the Lifecycle," Lieb references various critical theories which might be said to operate under the umbrella of the cultural diamond. Theodor Adorno's theory that pop music is a highly standardized form controlled by the industry and "predigested" for the masses, is reflected in Hinojosa's statement that "music companies have a template they use over and over again ... like McDonald's" (138). John Fiske, however, argues that the producer's creation is modified by the receiver/consumer. In this way, Gaga has updated Madonna's playbook to consider contemporary culture and audience expectations. Lieb also references Antonio Gramsci's theories of cultural hegemony and class structure to explain why artists sign with major labels—the connection seems forced. Similarly, she cites Louis Althusser and Stuart Hall—references along with unnecessary chapter summaries intended, it seems, to make the text classroom

adaptable. More useful are Lieb's discussions of "everyday pornography," the male gaze, and objectification theory.

Despite its frequently bleak findings, *Gender, Branding, and the Modern Music Industry* is not overly cynical. Lieb has maintained her enthusiasm for pop music and pop artists, even highly contrived ones like Gaga, whose performance in drag as Jo Calderone at the 2011 MTV Video Music Awards "demand[ed] that audiences really *listen* to her for a change ... and demonstrated [her] sophistication with respect to gender norms in the music industry" (8, emphasis in original). More so, Lieb ends the book with profiles of performers who challenge the norms for female musicians. Adele's voice, for instance, triumphs over her "anti-pop star looks" (167) and the unglamorous Brittany Howard, lead singer and guitarist of Alabama Shakes, has rejected comparisons with Janis Joplin and Aretha and has, instead, evoked Ben Gross, original lead singer of AC/DC. Less convincingly, Lieb cites Ashley Judd and Kelly Clarkson for not yielding to hyper-sexualized objectifications of their bodies. Finally, Lieb salutes Madonna for her "power, and creativity, and constant innovation" and the fact that throughout her career she "appears to have called nearly all her own shots" (168).

A lucid and energetic writer, skillful in synthesizing theory with interviews, Lieb delivers an acute study on the development of female pop stars. The book will resonate with both scholars and students.

THOMAS M. KITTS

St. John's University, NY

© 2013 Thomas M. Kitts

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19401159.2013.846630>

Writing the Record: The Village Voice and the Birth of Rock Criticism

DEVON POWERS

Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013

ISBN: 978-1-62534-011-5

160 pp., \$80.00 (hb)

Beethoven had long since rolled over and Dylan had heralded the news that the times they are a changin'. By 1966 that change was palpable. It was a time of freedom, of experimentation in all areas, an opening out to whatever. It was an especially heady year for well-educated young writers, passionate about rock and its possibilities, who saw themselves as the vanguard of the new, and the not-so-new, that had been eclipsed or suppressed by mainstream interests.

Rock criticism began in the US in 1966. Paul Williams started *Crawdaddy!*, a 'zine that soon included Jon Landau (before his editor gig at *Rolling Stone* and then his Springsteen-guru career) and Richard Meltzer (Lester Bangs's style guru).