The Attraction of Women:  
A Comparative Study of 60's and 80's Rock Music

An Honors Thesis (ID 499)
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Muncie, Indiana
May 1, 1990

Graduation date: May 5, 1990
The image of women has changed dramatically since the 1960's. Nowhere can these changes in attitudes and perceptions be seen more clearly than in popular music. This paper seeks to compare the images of women in the rock and roll music of two decades: the 1960's and the 1980's. A study of this type has involved interpreting lyrics, reading between the lines, and most importantly, refraining from placing blame for the plight of women. Although I have found through my research and study that the lyrical messages and musical content of rock music have become more complex, common themes tie both decades together. Today I will discuss three: The Missing Woman, the Unattainable Woman, and the Cherished Woman.

First, the theme of The Missing Woman. Songs in this category deal with a man who has lost his woman, and now he wants her back. The first recorded excerpt is from 1969 and is by The Jackson Five: I Want You Back. The man in this example has made a mistake with his lover, and is now asking for a second chance. Before we discuss this song further, let's listen to an excerpt from Richard Marx's Right Here Waiting for You. In this 1989 example, the man and woman are "ocean's apart" and the man is promising to wait for her regardless of what course her life may take.

Comparing these two, there is a definite difference in overall tone and mood. In the Jackson Five example, the song is upbeat and
exciting. This suggests not only an urgency to his plea, but also hope or promise that she will indeed take him back. In fact, the singer doesn't consider the possibility of her not taking him back. In contrast, the Richard Marx example is a ballad in which the singer exposes his deepest emotions about his missing lover.

There is also a difference in the basic focus of these two pieces. *I Want You Back* focuses on the man's need to have his woman back. We hear the pronoun “I” in almost every line; No mention is made of her needs. Although the man in the Marx example also wants his lover to come back, he vows to put her needs first by waiting for her. He sings: *Wherever you go, whatever you do, I will be right here waiting for you.* Although the man in the 80's example may seem more sensitive and sincere, it is fair to say that the woman in both cases will take him back. As human beings, it is not often that we ask for something if we don't have a gleam of hope that our wish will be granted.

The second theme is that of The Unattainable Woman. These women seem out of reach to men. The man doesn't feel he's worthy of her love. Listen to the man's dilemma in The Temptation's *I Can't Get Next to You.* In this excerpt, the man has everything money can buy, and even has the power to “turn the grey sky to blue”, but for some unknown reason, he is unable to get next to the woman of his dreams, and it is driving him crazy. Now, listen to *She's Like the*
"Wind" by Patrick Swayzee, from the movie *Dirty Dancing*.

The main difference between these two examples is with whom the concentration of power lies. In the 1960's example, the man has God-like powers of being able to "turn water to fire", and to "build a castle", but in the 1980's example the woman is the one with the power. Interestingly, she is compared to the wind. This Goddess-like image suggests that she is both strong and powerful. She can have an incredible soothing or calming affect, but she can also disrupt or cause violent change. He suggests this dichotomy when he sings: *She leads to moonlight- only to burn me with the sun.* The sexual imagery of the wind is also important here. The first line of the song is an example of this: *She’s the wind through my tree.*

This is not to say that the woman in the 1960's example is without power. Obviously she is powerful enough that she has somehow escaped his attempts at getting close to her. However, there is a difference in tone here. The singer in the 1960's example expresses disbelief that he can't win this woman, while the singer in the 1980's example expresses his lack of confidence in being worthy of her love. The 1980's man seems less confident than his 60's counterpart. Perhaps though, it is that the man in the 80's is more willing to admit such a lack of confidence when it comes to love. Or maybe as a society we are more accepting of men expressing such a
lack of confidence.

This theme of the Unattainable Woman accurately depicts the changes that have occurred for women. The women of the 80’s are much more independent: both economically and emotionally than they were in the 1960’s. Songs such as *She’s Like the Wind* support this image of an independent woman. However, as a side note: Although Patrick Swayzée says that his lover is “out of his league”, if you have seen the film *Dirty Dancing*, you know that he ultimately catches his love.

The final theme is that of The Cherished Woman, and a vast majority of songs fall under this category. These songs are about love, and what it’s like for a man already to have the woman of his dreams. These women are described as Objects of Worship. The 1960’s example is *My Girl*, by The Temptations. In this song, the singer is certainly proud that a particular woman is his, and she certainly is powerful. When it’s cold outside, she can make him feel like the month of May. She obviously has an intoxicating effect on him. Now, listen to the 1980’s example: *Three Time a Lady* by The Commodores. In this ballad, the singer is expressing his deep love and admiration for his woman. He cherishes the time he spends with her with every beat of his heart. Furthermore, the number three is of importance. Three often symbolizes the trinity: the father, son, and holy ghost. This image suggests that the woman also has Goddess-
like powers. Furthermore, this song is in 3/4 time.

The difference between these two examples is, again, the actual focus of the lyrics. The focus of My Girl is the man's celebrating the fact that she belongs to him. On the other hand, Lionel Richie is sending a personal message to a woman in Three Times A Lady. He is celebrating not that she belongs to him, but that she is a wonderful person whom he cherishes a great deal. Although both of the women in these examples have intoxicating power over their lovers, the woman in Three Times A Lady is worshiped for who she is—not to whom she belongs.

Several conclusions can be drawn about these differences in 1960's and 1980's rock and roll. First of all, the woman in 1980's rock music generally has more power. Second, men seem more sensitive and emotional about the love for women in the music of the 80's. While 60's rock music seems to deal with love on the surface, rock music in the 80's deals with love in a deeper, more meaningful manner.

Why is this? I think these changes have occurred for several reasons. First, discussion about love, sex, and marriage is much more acceptable and open now than it was in the 60's. Furthermore, as a society we no longer look at men who openly express these types of emotions as weak. Instead, we see them as sensitive and understanding. Second, the age of the audience has changed. In the
1960's, those listening to rock and roll were young people who were falling in love for the first time. Today, besides a teenage audience, baby boomers listen to the top 40 on the radio. And they are experiencing more mature, meaningful relationships now. Third, the age of the musicians has changed. The singers in the 1960's were of the same generation of their audience. Today, the singer is often times middle-aged. Lionel Richie, Billy Joel, and Rod Stewart sing of women and love to an audience ranging greatly in age and experience. Finally, I think the themes and images of rock music are more complex because life and love are more complex. Times have changed: the Woman's Movement along with the ERA and the sexual revolution have changed our whole perspective about sex roles and love. However, one thing has remained constant: woman is a complex creature. This last song seems to tie together everything I've talked about today. Listen to an excerpt from Billy Joel's She's Always a Woman to Me. Certainly this song depicts a woman at her best and worst. Billy Joel sings of a woman's power and the effect she has on him. Both the positive and negative attributes expressed in this song permeate both decades; perhaps these complexities are the Attraction of Women. Thank you.