Review

Ros Jennings and Abigail Gardner, eds, *'Rock On': Women, Ageing and Popular Music*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2012. 182 pp. ISBN 978-1-4094-2841-1 (hbk).

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On reading the title of this book one might ask: 'Why women? Men age too; why should the ageing of women be treated as a separate issue?' In fact, it covers a rather neglected area which is one of the most important factors for the female performer: the shelf-life issue. It still seems that women artists are compelled to cram as much of their output into as short a time-period as possible before disappearing...where? Into motherhood? Opening a shop, where they don't irritate the public by growing old disgracefully? Or conveniently dying young, perhaps, so we don't even have to imagine what they might look like beyond the age of 27?

In the introduction, Ros Jennings and Abigail Gardner explain the rationale behind this much-needed anthology. Some of these artists were active at a time when pop was cutting its teeth as the voice of teenagers; arguably, these mature artists have a greater understanding than today's audiences of rock and pop's meaning and context as the newly developing music form battered down the restrictive rules of post-war parenting and schooling. The editors weave pop music, a cultural practice that I would say has the function of an essential extra limb, into narratives of ageing that include performativity, relationships with the media and the music industry and, perhaps most importantly, the fans.

The book is divided into two parts: 'Renewal, Recycling and Renegotiation', and 'It's Not Over...' and begins with Lucy O'Brien's chapter, 'Like a Crone', which examines Madonna's simultaneous embracing and resisting of her age through music and videos and the relationship between her performative 'two-dimensional' pop persona and the mature woman that she has become both physically and mentally.

The following chapter by Ros Jennings discusses the way that Shirley Bassey's showbiz persona overrides the ageing of the star; the artificiality of the diva acts as a protective armour that the more natural and accessible persona of Petula Clark lacks. Clark's 'normality' causes her palpable discomfort as she publicly demonstrates her negotiation with her older self through 'comic parody' (48). Jennings

successfully uses auto-ethnography to contrast her experience at concerts by the two performers.

Delia Poey's essay tells the extraordinary story of an extraordinary woman, Celia Cruz, who appeared to progress through the cultural maze of Latin American music by taking everyone by surprise. She constantly absorbed cutting-edge musical styles in a way that ensured that her pioneering activities in this area were more notable to the listening public than the fact that she was getting older.

Abigail Gardner discusses the mediation of Grace Jones's performance at the 2008 Meltdown event at London's South Bank; many of the broadsheet journalists were still reading Jones as being a construct of the 1980s, using this notion of her artificiality to make cruel and racist comments about her that demonstrated how little progress had been made in journalistic attitudes towards black female performers since Josephine Baker first hit the stage in Paris in the 1920s.

In part two, 'It's Not Over...' Norma Coates explores the phenomenon of Mom Rock, pointing out that reporting of this activity is sited in women's-interest sections of the media and thus marginalized and given novelty status. Coates is disappointed by the lack of progress contributed to feminism through these rockers' engagement with noise, which is ghettoized through the prioritization of home life by its protagonists: Mom first, rocker second.

Paula Hearsum critiques the stern media morality that followed the premature death of Kristen Pfaf (very much along the lines of 'if you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen') and the monetization of the fans' memories of the artist. Even in death, there is something unnatural about a woman who played bass in a rock band.

Catherine Strong's chapter on Courtney Love follows on neatly from Hearsum's, discussing Love's resistance to definition by anyone other than herself, and her relationship with her fans via social media. One of Love's many apparent problems has been the perceived abandonment of her former persona and what it represented to these fans, who expected her to somehow remain the person they had engaged with in their youth.

Finally, Paul Watson and Diane Railton give us further insights into Madonna's mediated self, introducing us to the idea of the capitalist feminist who refuses to grow old gracefully and who is savvy enough to use careful editing techniques in her videos to incorporate the youthful energy of the dancers into her own routines.

This book covers both mainstream and alternative musical trajectories; the different interests and writing styles of the contributors complement the variety of different genres covered. It is an excellent catalyst for what I hope will be many future studies. There is a gender gap in writing about ageing and popular music; it is time we took our heads out of the sand and acknowledged that inspirational

and productive musical life continues after forty for women as well as men. Books on ageing and the popular musician are few and far between: Whiteley (2005) and Bennett (2013) are other rare acknowledgements of the fact.

The editors are, respectively, Director and Principal Lecturer at the Centre for Women, Media and Ageing at the University of Gloucestershire, and the fact that they are based outside the mainstream academic pop and rock music discourse has allowed them to assemble some fresh voices to articulate the 'problem' of older women in what has always been assumed to be a youth-based cultural area. In the words of Jennings and Gardner, 'The pleasures of ageing in relation to women performers are, at the very least, resistant, inspirational and also nostalgic' (14).

References

- Bennett, Andy. 2013. *Music, Style and Aging: Growing Old Disgracefully*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Whiteley, Sheila. 2005. *Too Much Too Young: Popular Music, Age and Gender*. London: Routledge.