

**Diva Redux – the modern home of enterprise and agency.**

SLIDE 01 Lister: title of essay

In 2001 the American journal *Popular Music and Society* published an article by Dr. Linda Lister. She titled it *Divafication – the deification of modern female pop stars*. This neologism ‘divafication’ meant the assigning of divine attributes to particular female singers. In this way, Lister claimed, we were moving back to the classical use of the term in place of the derogatory meaning that supplanted it. She opened by suggesting that the deification of female singers tended to be a cyclical phenomenon. Now, I misread this sentence (which is often a danger when I read things on-line). I thought she meant that the phenomenon of popular female singers was cyclic. So, I started to check this claim that she hadn’t actually made. And I discovered that it was cyclic, kind of, or at least periodic. Here’s how my list turned out:

SLIDE 02

Of course, the chronological boundaries are a little loose, [5 groups: 3 yrs, 6 yrs, 7 yrs, 8 yrs].

SLIDE 03

Inside you get these clusters where artists otherwise unrelated become babes in arms. Of course, you might say, ‘That only works by missing out some singers. Where’s Madonna or Lauren Hill?’

SLIDE 04

Yes, well, if you put them in, a related pattern emerges – lightships appearing midway between the populated bays.

SLIDE 05 (as Slide 4)

What might this signify? Fervent competition, where singers must avidly pursue distinction within the market, and thus the differences become more extreme. In contrast, sorority – artists are able to capitalize on contacts, interactions and alignments of mutual benefit. Rihanna, for example, was signed up to Def Jam Records by Shaun Carter, otherwise known as Jay-Z, the husband of Beyoncé Knowles. Detractors of Rihanna call her Rioncé. But there's another aspect to the effect of this clustering, which I'll come to.

#### SLIDE 06 Save The Music

In Lister's article she went on to refer to a charity event in 1998 that was organized by the video channel VH1. As part of a campaign to revive instrumental tuition in American public schools, it ran a televised show called *Divas Live*. This featured Celine Dion, Gloria Estefan, Aretha Franklyn, Shania Twain, and Mariah Carey. Now, at least three of these have occasionally been branded as divas in the negative sense, but let that pass. Lister's point was that they were named here as divas 'in the operatic sense', she wrote, 'in recognition of their sheer vocal talent'.

I feel that this is fair, and to support Lister's claim, here's Celine Dion duetting with Barbra Streisand:

#### SLIDE 07: DVD Tell Him 00:46

Lister then pointed out that, in 2001, 'diva' was being employed in a broader sense across the media. It was used to identify a range of competing, young, popular music singers. She tried to make sense of this by suggesting three categories into which these younger singers may fit.

#### SLIDE 08

The first category is Prima Divas, of which the prototype is Barbra Streisand, whose 'vocal chops', writes Lister, cannot be disputed. She also refers in this regard to Whitney Houston.

#### SLIDE 09

The second is 'Innovators' or 'earth mothers' who give birth to new aspects of pop culture. The supreme exponent of this is Madonna. She has 'Imagegenius', a term borrowed from Elizabeth Wurtzel, on whom more later.

#### SLIDE 10

The third is 'Songwriters', who Lister associates with the Lilith Fair Festival which took place between 1997 and 1999 and was revived last year. In this case Suzanne Vega is judged the progenitor, and three kinds of songwriting are described: passive romanticism, syrupy idealism, and Sheryl Crow-style realism.

Lister's three main categories are useful. What's missing is the category of dance. Artists successful with the public – certainly since Janet Jackson and Madonna in the 1980s – have become increasingly dancers who can sing rather than singers who can dance. But if we incorporate that factor into Lister's third 'creative' category, then they fit the facts more. They indicate that divafication registers skill in a field of public credit applied uniformly to the aural, the visual and the kinetic. What seems to have happened in the last ten years since Lister's article, is that these categories have become sub-categories of a more integrated formation. The three attributes to pop divahood remain in place – the voice, the look, the work. But the term 'diva' is applied most to the artist who can claim a signature distinction in each of these fields concomitantly. This position is achieved through the employment of others brought into service to realize these

goals on behalf of the subject. Personal identity conceals corporate practice. I was told that Beyoncé's appearance at the Glastonbury Festival this summer was realized by around fifty workers in her retinue. Beyoncé is what they are, and what they make. Mrs. Carter sits at the heart of it.

So, the corporate nature of this enterprise is concealed by the character of the diva. This is why – in order to fortify the effect of divafication – elements of Lister's 'derogatory' meaning of diva have re-emerged. They're re-employed in order to shape an air of volatility around the disposition of those whose ascendancy is otherwise plotted through. In her book of 1999 titled *Bitch – in praise of difficult women*, Elizabeth Wurtzel makes the case that in public life the one statement a woman can make to declare her surefootedness is by being antisocial – by being a *bitch*. However, a *diva* must be unpredictable in behaviour while reliable in performance. The late Amy Winehouse had it the other way around. This has led to the cancellation of her last tour, which opened in June at Belgrade in this fashion:

SLIDE 11 Amy Winehouse, Belgrade 18.06.11 00:35

The ultimate reason for this phase of divafication is to be found here in this chronological table:

SLIDE 12: 1980s LIST

This appears to be an exceptionally extensive list in contrast to the other four periods I showed earlier. The previous competitors, who we might have recognized at the time, fell away, leaving a smaller tally of divas. Of this recent group, some will disappear (though hopefully not in the same way as Winehouse). But I believe that what is significant here – and what principally

defines this phase – is that these singers are by and large competing within the same generic terrain. There are exceptions such as Beth Ditto. But twelve others contend directly in the same dance-oriented contemporary R&B market.

By Contemporary R&B, a standard term of the music industry, I mean a genre named in homage to the Rhythm & Blues style of the 1950s and 1960s, where secular songs about romance and sex were sung with dramatic, melismatic vocal lines, supported by motivic bass lines and drum patterns to facilitate dancing. Contemporary R&B tends to use electronically-generated instrumental sound, often in imitation of the first-era domestic synthesizers of the 1980s, a sound made popular in R&B by artists working for Janet Jackson.

#### SLICE 13

However, it's comparatively rare for artists to talk coherently in terms of genres. They're much more likely to refer to other artists as specific influences. This is so in part to sharpen their identity at the same time as widening their market. This is surely the case in this statement from Rihanna, otherwise known, as I said, as Rihoncé. Although born in 1988, she identifies herself with a 1980s to which the current soundworld also pays homage. She includes Destiny's Child, of which Beyoncé was a member.

#### SLIDE 14

Sometimes the marketing department goes too far. Here, a blogger catches out Kesha's claims to her acquaintance with alternative culture.

#### SLIDE 15 1980s list again

Several of these artists have been making studio albums over the last decade, and we can see in their efforts attempts to blend sub-genres into the basic dance-

oriented electronic frame in order to gain a distinctive soundworld. They do so by employing producers who specialize in signature sounds. Britney Spears works with Scandinavians, which explains her trancey timbre and adventures in dubstep, while Beyoncé sticks to African-American innovators such as Babyface and The-Dream. I'd like to dwell on this for a moment.

#### SLIDE 16 Aguilera

Christina Aguilera has made the most varied records, not always successfully in terms of sales or media reception. The fourth column of this table, labeled Genre, uses terms applied to the album by chart organizations, HMV record stores, and Wikipedia. Notice in the last two columns, the numbers of writers and producers involved to make each Aguilera album. She is nevertheless billed as a co-writer, which meets Lister's third category of song-writer. While I'm sure that Aguilera is a good one, it's commonly known for some artists to change a few words in the lyrics in order to secure their co-writing credit (and royalty). The writer column in each of the tables I show includes those writers who have been sampled.

#### SLIDE 17 Spears

Britney Spears has made seven studio albums so far, each one incorporating a sub-genre of dance music in fashion at the time of recording. Again, the number of writers and producers involved shows the need to distinctively elaborate the basic material.

#### SLIDE 18 Beyoncé/Gaga

While Lady Gaga's albums are constructed by a tight-knit assembly of practitioners, it's interesting to see that Beyoncé takes on a substantial number of writers and producers for each track. However, in Beyoncé's case there tends to be more control, as she imposes an aural reference, in her debut album North

African popular music and in her latest, West African Afrobeat. However, my overall points are, firstly, that the artists will tend to meld a variety of sub-genres to a basic soundworld of contemporary R&B, and secondly that, under the rubric of that artist's name, are employed many creative functionaries who provide the intellectual assets that become obligated through the marketing process to a single nomination. The competition seems to take place in a surprisingly constricted domain.

They compete visually, too – again in the same aesthetic field – and the campaign is hardly a war of independence:

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SLIDE 20

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SLIDE 22

This has been noted by some fans. On YouTube a 'dissing' culture has emerged where followers and detractors of certain performers edit together videos and images in order to report appropriation. They emphasise creative cannibalism in the three categories. Here is a fan of Lady Gaga and a detractor of Kesha, attempting to show how far the latter is dependent on the former:

SLIDE 23 Kesha copies Lady Gaga 01:15

Meanwhile, here is the video of someone who wishes to show that Lady Gaga herself has depended on Christina Aguilera:

SLIDE 24 Gaga copies Christina A 00:51

SLIDE 25 1980s list

So, it appears that a greater concentration of competing artists doesn't augment the field, but conversely dilutes it. This may explain the current pattern of collaborations. Divas Live, which Lister referred to, had been a collaboration for the sake of charity. But in 2004 Britney, Beyoncé and Pink collaborated for the sake of commerce. They put their sisterhood image in the way of Pepsi Cola, as you can see:

#### SLIDE 26 PEPSI GLADIATORS

At another level of commerce (of more direct benefit to the music industry) there is a current tendency to issue versions of successful songs with the collaboration of other artists. It's derived from the 'featuring' (as it's called) of guest rap artists to cover the middle 8 section with speech. Instead of the traditional practice of 'cover versions', here both artists benefit financially, gaining the fan base of the other as well as a performance royalty. By this means Beyoncé gets to sing with Rihanna, Britney with Beyoncé, and, here Britney with Rihanna, covering Rihanna's most recent hit, *S&M*:

#### SLIDE 27 S&M

#### SLIDE 28 1980s list

It can hardly be surprising that two artists aged 23 and 29 respectively would be interested enough in sex games to want to sing about them. Most R&B songs deal with sex; in fact, as the composer Richard Strauss liked pointing out, most songs deal with sex, when they aren't dealing with death. Nevertheless, this generation of artists is at present facing criticism from a number of conservative organizations, some real, some made-up for the occasion.

#### SLIDE 29 Daily Mail.

They claim that these artists contribute to the sexualisation of children. There's no evidence for this, only journalism of the kind scribbled in spit that is characteristic of the Daily Mail's Jan Moir, when she saw raunchy dance moves on the *X-Factor*. In fact, I would suggest that most of the 1980s artists I've mentioned today are anything but radical in ideology. After all, Beyoncé's *cri de coeur* appears to be 'Come on girls, lap dance you way to a husband'. In contrast I'd suggest that there are two well-defined divas within this group who represent a more progressive trend away from the dust-of-ages platitudes of much popular music. They are these:

#### SLIDE 30

Both Janelle Monae and Lady Gaga employ surrealist tactics to endorse and promote the nonconformist, the disenfranchised and the modestly liberated. It's often said that Lady Gaga, an American Italian, is modeled on the American-Italian Madonna, that Thatcherite neo-liberal. But, in her championing of gay rights, Gaga is far closer to the socialist Annie Lennox, a credible model, whose debut album of 1992 was titled *Diva*. But now I'm straying into a different topic even though I'm using our keyword.

My conclusion is that Dr. Lister's useful term divafication currently describes a process through which a successful artist gains promotion to the status of a brand. At that point they are given the freedom to appropriate images, styles, techniques and performance practices from others without penalty. Divafication is a strategic process within the systematic construction of celebrity. The contemporary image of the diva, as an indulgent and indulged being, is necessary to artists at the highest level of achievement. It is so because the volatilities and

idiosyncrasies conceal from their fans the corporate nature of their identity. It hides from their fans those who toil inside the workshop, that workshop known as Beyoncé, Britney or Rihanna.

To conclude, I suppose I ought to thank the 30 students from Edge Hill (whoever they are) who wrote this paper for me. Thankyou.

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