angry young men:
precursors and prototypes for rock rebellion

‘One is still bound to the mother. All one’s rebellion was but dust in the eye, the frantic attempt to conceal this bondage.... “Forever outside! Sitting on the doorstep of the mother’s womb.” ’

Henry Miller (on Arthur Rimbaud)

Rebels come in all shapes and sizes. Some are goaded into revolt by the constraints of their specific social environment. There are the perennial rebels without cause (like Marlon Brando’s biker in The Wild One, who, when asked what he was rebelling against, retorted ‘what have you got?’). And there are rebels who look for causes to validate their insurrectionary temperament. What, if anything, unites these boys, these men? Precisely their masculinity.

That is, after all, what springs to mind when we think of The Rebel. Our argument is that, whatever the ostensible pretext or context, a large part of the psychological impetus of any rebellion is an urge to separate from the mother. Male rebellion is a re-enactment of the primal break that constitutes the male ego: the separation of infant from the maternal realm, the exile from paradise. The rebel re-enacts the process of individuation in endless and diverse rites of severance, continually flees domesticity. Inevitably, this flight is alloyed with regret, and often – as in the music of the Rolling Stones and Jimi Hendrix – leads on to a quest for a new home; unrest subsides and comes to rebirth in a mystical or idealised maternal idyll. As Nietzsche put it: ‘to build a new sanctuary the old sanctu-
ary must be first destroyed.’

So the rebel may simultaneously worship an abstract femininity (a home away from home) while ferociously despising and fearing real-life women. He can long for the womb and for an idealised mother-lover, while shunning or abusing the flesh-and-blood women in his vicinity. In the rebel imagination, women figure as both victims and agents of castrating conformity. Women represent everything the rebel is not (passivity, inhibition) and everything that threatens to shackle him (domesticity, social norms). This ambivalence towards the feminine domain is the defining mark of all the classic instances of rock rebellion, from the Stones through the Doors, Led Zeppelin, the Stooges, to the Sex Pistols, Guns N’ Roses and Nirvana.

Jean-Paul Sartre’s distinction between the rebel and the revolutionary is useful here. For him, the rebel is secretly complicit with the Order he revolts against. His goal is not to create a new and better system; he only wants to break the rules. In contrast the revolutionary is constructive, aims to replace an unfair system with a new, better system, and is therefore self-disciplined and self-sacrificing. Because of his irresponsibility, the rebel has access to the ecstasy of dissipation and living in the now; the revolutionary enjoys the satisfaction of merging his identity with the collective, long-term project of improvement whose fulfilment lies in the future. We take it as read that rock is not a revolutionary art, that its insubordination and ego tantrums are complicit with or bound within the terms of capitalism and patriarchy.

For the most part, the rebel’s main grievance is that a particular patriarchal system doesn’t let his virility flourish freely, but instead offers a life of mediocrity. He languishes as a cog in the machine, while dreaming of a life fit for heroes. Meanwhile, women have been left stranded between the status quo of patriarchy, and the alternative filiarchy of the rebels, the rock’n’roll brotherhood of Prodigal Sons. Here, too often women’s only scope for self-
fulfilment is as the muse, moll, and groupie: hangers-on admiringly watching the male rebels' derring-do.

'We are victims of a matriarchy here, my friends.'
Harding, psychiatric ward inmate in Ken Kesey's One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest (1962)

Rock'n'roll rebellion emerged at roughly the same time as post-war 'mom-ism', a fashionable critique which singled out the mother as the cause of a hefty proportion of America's ills. The term 'mom-ism' was coined by Philip Wylie in Generation of Vipers (1942), a virulently misogynistic tirade against the degeneration of American culture at the hands of 'the destroying mother'. Wylie argued that America was being engulfed by materialism and shallow popular culture, which he associated with women. Soap opera, fashion, TV, radio, sentimental pop songs, Hollywood, department stores: these 'degraded' forms of mass culture, designed to appeal to feminine sensibilities, were undermining the virility of American culture. The radio is mom's final tool, for it stamps everyone who listens with the matriarchal brand,' ranted Wylie apocalyptically (a few years later, he would have said 'the television'). Wylie railed against the mass media's tyranny of 'matriarchal sentimentality, goo, slop, hidden cruelty', seeing in it 'the foreshadow of national death'.

Analysing Wylie's rabid discourse, Jacqueline Rose notes how 'the dangers of femininity and the dangers of mass culture stand in the most intimate and isomorphic relationship to each other'. This association of popular culture with women was standard fare in criticism in the '40s and '50s, as in Dwight MacDonald's 1953 essay 'A Theory of Mass Culture', which claimed that 'staying power is the essential virtue of one who would hold his own against the spreading ooze of Mass Culture'. Ironically, such gender-based snobbery reappeared later within pop culture, in the form of the rock v. pop distinction. Here the correct response (male connoisseurship, discerning and discriminating) is opposed to degraded feminine fan-worship (superficial, hysterical, idolatrous, at once fickle and blindly loyal).

The negative association of femininity and popular culture has a long history. Andreas Huyssen traces it back to Flaubert's Madame Bovary, in which one of the fathers of modernism ('an aesthetic based on the uncompromising repudiation of what Emma Bovary loved to read') presented an unflattering portrait of a woman addled by Romantic fiction. The reflex endures. Public Enemy's 'She Watch Channel Zero' (from 1988's It Takes A Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back) blames black mothers for gawping at soaps and counselling shows like Oprah Winfrey and neglecting their duty (rearing strong black warriors). On the title track of his 1993 album Home Invasion, gangsta rapper Ice T's animosity towards White America is aimed specifically at 'yo moms!' (perhaps because of the matronly public image of the rock censorship lobby PMRC). The threat that Ice wields with such relish is his influence on white kids, who grow up wanting to be black and street-wise and to throw off the stultifying thrill of mom's white-bread values.

In post-war America, fear of mom-ism linked up with anxieties about Communism and the democratisation of culture. Like the cod-Freudianism from which it was ultimately derived, anti-momism filtered down into popular culture itself: it became a way of attributing blame for the bland conformism of '50s America. Wives and mothers were administrators (rather than, as would seem to be obvious, the principal victims) of domesticity, enslaving their husbands in the 9 to 5 regime of breadwinning. Mothers were also to blame for delinquency and crime because they brought up their sons badly, smothered them with love. In a curious double bind, women were regarded both as architects of the conventional life (with all its limits and shackles on male wildness), and as its most visibly crushed victims: both castrators and castrated.
This sub-Freudian analysis percolated throughout mass culture in the '50s and '60s, via movies like *How to Murder Your Wife* and *Psycho*. In the latter, Norman Bates—having murdered his mother when she threatened to shatter their near-incestuous intimacy by remarrying—interiorises her personality out of guilt. This phantom-Mom is similarly jealous whenever Norman finds a woman attractive, and each time forces Norman to eliminate her rival. More relevant to rock'n'roll is the rampant anti-momism of *Rebel Without a Cause*. Right at the start, in a scene in which the drunk and disorderly Dean has a heart-to-heart with a sympathetic police officer, the film establishes that the teenager's delinquency is caused by a domineering mother and a weak father. In fact, Dean's home has two castrating mothers (his maternal grandmother lives with them). Dean wails: 'They eat [Dad] alive... they make mush out of him, just mush', adding 'if he had the guts to knock Mum cold once, then she'd be happy and stop picking on him'. His character's agony is the absence of a strong paternal/masculine principle with which to identify, leaving him vulnerable to the monstrous regiment of womankind.

John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* had a role similar to *Rebel Without a Cause* for a generation of malcontents in Britain. On the surface, the play is a vitriolic response to Britain's post-Imperial decline, to the inertia of the '50s, in which the reconstruction hopes born during the Second World War turned sour and a Conservative government attempted to patch up an inglorious version of the pre-war social order. This was how the play was received by admirers and detractors alike. But *Look Back in Anger*'s real psychosexual subtext is strikingly close to *Rebel Without a Cause*: the absence of a strong patriarchal principle with which to identify, the anguish of young men in a world of derelict, impotent fathers, and above all a venomous fear and loathing of females, representatives of an all-pervading mediocrity.

The play's anti-hero, Jimmy Porter, lost his father when he was young. (In real life, Osborne's beloved father died when he was ten years old, leaving him prey to a detested, domineering mother.) Porter's virulent monologues are directed at his impassive, upper-class wife Alison, who covers stoically behind her ironing board. Jimmy likes Alison's father, empathising with this desiccated relic of Britain's imperial glory, who, like the socialist Jimmy, has no role in the post-war order. Alison's mother, however, is a terrifying matron, a threatening incarnation of social snobbery, petty materialism and prudish propriety. Alison and her mother merge as a phantasmic threat to Jimmy's masculinity. One of the most striking passages in *Look Back in Anger* has Jimmy imagining being sucked into Alison's entropic womb: 'Me, buried alive down there, and going mad, smothered in that peaceful coil... She'll go on sleeping and devouring until there's nothing left of me.'

Porter is suffering from demobilisation blues. He dreams of a 'burning virility of mind and spirit', but is smothered in the damp claustrophobia of cold war England. Jimmy Porter's angst is that there's no channel for his manhood, no scope for heroism; he's literally a rebel without a (political) cause. All the energies galvanised by the war have petered out, the idealism of the immediate post-war period (with its massive shift towards the Left) has curdled. Porter's rage has nowhere to go. His marriage to Alison (against her family's strenuous resistance) was a last gasp, a kind of guerrilla attack against the upper class who had conspired to stay in power. But Porter's is an empty victory. Mired in low-rent domesticity, all he can do is fester in his own bile. Abusing his wife is the only way he can feel like a man, the only terrain left for his class warfare.

The rebel discourse of the '50s is haunted by the figure of the matriarch as the chief organiser of conformism and mediocrity. Poet Ted Hughes described the mainstream English literary tradition as a 'suffocating maternal octopus'. Alice Jardine has identified a matrivial tradition of twentieth-century American writers like Norman Mailer,
Henry Miller and William Burroughs, in whose work the mother figures as an 'almost always evil, cancerous, viscous, chaotic, uncontrollable, essentially monstrous phallic power'. Particularly in Burroughs's fiction, adds Robin Lydenberg, 'the mother, as defined by conventional notions of sexual difference and family structure, is a necessary instrument in a larger system of patriarchal power which seeks to dominate the individual from his earliest moment of life.'

Rock in the '60s was founded on just such an opposition between rebel masculinity and Woman as conformism incarnate. Rebellious women found themselves caught in a double bind, as Ellen Willis noted in an essay on Bob Dylan: 'At the time I did not question the idea that women were guardians of the oppressive conventional values: I only thought of myself as an exception. I was not possessive; I understood men's need to go on the road because I was, spiritually speaking, on the road myself. That, at least, was my fantasy; the realities of my life were somewhat more ambiguous.'

Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) — arguably the seminal text for rock rebellion — propounds a very gender-specific quest for self-discovery. The story concerns two young men, Dean Moriarty and Sal Paradise (based on Neal Cassady and Kerouac himself) who embark on a spiritual odyssey that, while dependent on female support and funding, pushes women to the margins of the text. It is women (in particular Sal's aunt) who continually subsidise their wanderings. On one of their jaunts, they pick up a hitchhiker who promises to repay them by borrowing money off his aunt. 'Yes!' yells Moriarty gleefully, 'we've all got aunts.' Then there is the long line of long-suffering girlfriend, like Galatea, who foots the bill for one adventure with her savings. When she runs out of cash, they give her the slip. There's a huge disproportion between the amount of quoted speech uttered by men and by women in *On the Road*. Women are a sort of vaporous presence in the background. They prepare meals, sew socks, listen respectfully, and are usually quoted verbatim (rather than in reported speech) only when protesting or bitching.

The beatniks combined this cavalier attitude to womankind with a mystical longing to fuse with some kind of cosmic Natural Essence. (Kerouac is said to have once made a hole in the ground and fucked it in an attempt to have congress with Mother Earth.) If the beatniks abandoned any domestic set-up as soon as it got too comfy, it was because they were searching for some grander kind of home, a blissful merger with an Eternal Feminine. The holy grail they searched for was *satori*, which Norman O. Brown defines as 'the experience of the unborn'. As Kerouac wrote: 'The only thing that we yearn for in our living days, that makes us sigh and groan and undergo sweet nauseas of all kinds, is the remembrance of some lost bliss that was probably experienced in the womb and can only be reproduced (though we hate to admit it) in death.'

In a standard misogynist sleight of attitude (later typical of hippie rock), Dean Moriarty can profess to worship Woman while actually treating the real women in his life like shit. He digs all the 'gone chicks' — 'oh, I love, love, love women! I think women are wonderful!' — while abandoning his lovers as soon as he gets restless. When he leaves Camille with one kid and another on the way in order to go off on another adventure with Paradise, neither man can understand why she gets so darn upset.

But Kerouac's alter ego (and doubtless Kerouac himself) can't totally escape the reproaches of his conscience. Later in the novel, down-and-out and so hungry he's having visions, Sal hallucinates a woman in the street as his mother and himself as the prodigal son 'returning from gaol to haunt her honest labors in the hashery... "No" that woman seemed to say with that terrified glance, "don't come back and plague your honest, hard-working mother. You are no longer a son to me."' Shortly after this terrifying vision, Paradise has an experience of nirvana: '[I] flew into
the holy void of uncreated emptiness, the potent and inconceivable raddiances shining in bright Mind Essence, innumerable lotus-lands falling open in the magic mothswarm of heaven.' The morning after this encounter with the Eternal Feminine, Paradise is nevertheless back to his usual tricks, sponging $100 off a rich girl he's slept with in order to subsidise another trip.

According to Kerouac biographer Dennis McNally, 'One of the central myths of Jack's life was of Dostoevski's wife and her unflagging support of her husband, of the duty of the untalented to support the creative artist.' And so the one constant woman in his life was his mother, memère, source of unconditional love; eventually, having renounced his beatnik ways, he returned to live out the rest of his days with her.

The beats were trying to re-open the American frontier, the closing of which in the 1890s was so traumatic for American identity. This 'new frontier' of the 1950s was a psychic terrain, but like its geographical antecedent, it was a terrain in which rugged, manly individualism flourished. Women were simply absent, a symbol of the home that was left behind. In his essay 'The White Negro' (1957), Norman Mailer defined hip anti-conformism in traditional American terms: 'One is a frontiersman in the Wild West of American nightlife, or else a Square cell, trapped in the totalitarian tissues of American society, doomed willy-nilly to conform if one is to succeed.' In order to escape and find a truly virile life, one must 'divorce oneself from society'; Mailer's language typically links matrimony with emasculation. Around the same time, Playboy was offering a sort of square counterpart to the beat lifestyle, with its fantasy of the swinger: suave and sophisticated, but, like the beatnik, a confirmed bachelor determined to avoid settling down.

The pursuit of altered states of consciousness in the 1960s was an extension of the beats' new frontier into the realm of inner space. In a familiar pattern, Timothy Leary, prophet of LSD, grew up idolising an absent father, Captain Tote Leary, who had abandoned the family. His father was restless, tempestuous, a drunkard and debtor who was continually in flight from domesticity. 'During the thirteen years we lived together he never stunted me with expectations...' reminisced Leary Jr, fondly. 'Dad remained for me a model of the loner, a disdainer of the conventional way.'

His mother, Abigail, was left holding the baby and the brunt of Tim Leary's contempt. A pious Catholic and a middle-class wanna-be with an inbred suspicion of 'all things joyous, frivolous or newfangled', she was saddled with the responsibility of bringing him up, rather than the glamour of total abdication of responsibility. In return, Leary strove to emulate all the most obnoxious qualities of his father's side of the family. This familiar dialectic between male adventurism and female conformism, male wildness and female domestication, foreshadows Leary's discourse of heroic odyssey into the acid maelstrom. Leary espoused LSD as a way of de-familiarising the world: beneath this project lurked his desire, derived from his dad, to escape the family. The point of the acid trip was to shatter one's sense of being at home in the world, to rip up the map and disorientate the bearings that made life comfortable and habitual. Only after surviving these turbulent white water rapids of consciousness could you make it through to the lagoon of serenity wherein your shattered ego merged with the cosmos. It's Nietzsche again: 'To build a new sanctuary the old sanctuary must be first destroyed.'

Ken Kesey is the bridge that connects Norman Mailer's vision of American suburbia as a concentration camp of mediocrity with Leary's flight into the psychedelic wilderness. In One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest (1962), Kesey drew on his experience as a psychiatric aide in a hospital to present the asylum as a microcosm of '50s America. The
novel's hero, R.P. McMurphy, pretends to have psychopathic tendencies in order to escape the rigours of the prison farm. One of his original crimes was sex with an under-age girl, and he's unrepentant. The exuberant McMurphy galvanises his fellow patients — crushed, castrated men unable to cope with the demands and hypocrisies of suburban patriarchy — to buck against the system.

There are two kinds of women in One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest: whores and matrons (the latter being both repressed and oppressive). McMurphy's hooker gal-friends are dumb, pretty, compliant. The frigid matriarchs include the controlling wives and mothers who don't appear but who, it is hinted, are originally responsible for breaking the inmates' spirits, and upright dominatrixes like Nurse Ratched, who rules the ward with her rigid schedule of activities, pacifying muzak and regular doses of tranquillisers.

Ratched's name sounds phallic, violent and staccato, like the ratchet, a cutting instrument. At one point, McMurphy struggles to convince a fellow inmate that Nurse Ratched is a monstrous tyrant 'peckin' at' every man's 'everlovin' balls... that nurse ain't some kinda monstrous chicken, buddy, what she is is a ball-cutter. I've seen a thousand of 'em... all over the country and in the homes — people who try to make you weak so they can get you to toe the line.' America is ruled by a conspiracy of moms. In fact, Ratched is a friend of the mother of one ward inmate, Billy, a 31-year-old man driven to a breakdown by his mom's possessive prudishness. When McMurphy gets one of his loose girlfriends to help Billy lose his virginity, Ratched discovers them in flagrante and threatens to tell his mother. Billy is unmanned again, and commits suicide; in revenge, McMurphy tries to strangle Ratched, but fails, and ends up a lobotomised zombie.

Kesey went on to form the Merry Pranksters, whose membership included that old rogue Neal Cassady. Roaming the USA in a gaudily painted bus, they introduced people to the psychic wilderness of the acid trip. In his LSD history Storming Heaven, Jay Stevens compares the machismo of Kesey's acid-evangelism (are you man enough to handle the Acid Test?) with Leary's mellow mysticism. One of Kesey's pals, the LSD mass-manufacturer Augustus Owsley III, apparently taunted his friends to 'take two and really cut loose into the cosmos'. Part and parcel of the Pranksters' revivification of rugged, frontier masculinity was their eulogisation of the Hell's Angels. The Angels were admired for their virile non-conformism, but in fact offered a distorted mirror image of straight America's notions of proper gender relations (they were misogynist, jingoistic and anti-Communist). In October 1965, a gang of Angels beat up some anti-war protesters in Berkeley. Shortly after, their leader Sonny Barger sent a communiqué to Lyndon Johnson, in which he offered the Angels' services in Vietnam: 'We feel that a crack group of trained gorillas [sic] would demoralize the Viet Cong and advance the cause of freedom. We are available for training and duty immediately.' Despite this, the bikers became icons of untrammeled freedom for many in the counterculture (the Rolling Stones, Grateful Dead, Steppenwolf).

While the Angels' bloodlust clashed with the hippies' peace-and-love passivity, it struck a strange chord with the mindframe of the more confrontational elements in the late '60s counterculture. Yippie warrior and neo-Marxist Jerry Rubin told the New York Times: 'Young kids want to be heroes. They have an incredible energy and they want to live creative, exciting lives. That's what America tells you to do... The history you learn is hero-oriented: Columbus, George Washington, Paul Revere, the pioneers, the cowboys. America's promise has been "live a heroic life". But then, when it comes time to make good on its promise, it can't. It turns around and says, "oh, you can get good grades, and then get a degree, then get a job in a corporation, and buy a ranch house and be a good consumer." But kids aren't satisfied with that. They want to be heroes. And if America denies them an opportunity for heroism, they're
going to create their own.'

Tom Wolfe saw the Merry Pranksters as a 'true mystic brotherhood – only in poor old Formica polyethylene 1960s America…' The beatniks, the Merry Pranksters, Leary's Politics of Ecstasy, the psychodrama of One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, all fit perfectly with the mythological model created by Robert Bly in his '90s bestseller Iron John. Bly, a poet, co-founder of the Men's Movement, and wilderness-worshipper, believes that Western society's problems stem from the absence of male role models and rites of initiation for adolescent boys, and from a consequent over-mothering of boys, who grow up emasculated, 'soft males'. Bly calls for a reawakening of the Wild Man within. His ideas are really just a myth-laden rewrite of Wylie's mom-ism: he even blames male teenage delinquency, insubordination and misogyny on the mother, since these are symptoms of the boy's attempts to break away from the cocoon of mother-love. Rock music (and particularly its most obstreperously macho and tribalistic genres like rap and metal) provide surrogate forms of ritual initiation for adolescent males: the charismatic singer is the modern equivalent of the mentor or shaman.

Bly's Iron John legend is too complicated to go into here, but at its heart lies a psychological matrix similar to the Oedipus myth. In both cases, an adolescent upstart is separated/separates himself from home and mother, disappears into the wilderness, then returns to displace the King/Father and enjoy union with a Mother-figure, the Queen. (In the Oedipus story, the King and Queen are literally his father and mother.) These myths, blueprints for male rebellion, are psychodramas of incest: an incest that is initially avoided (by fleeing from the smothering bosom) and then returned to, symbolically, in the conquest of the Queen. Incest signifies more than just a longing for the mother. It's an impossible desire for total satisfaction, supreme phallic prestige; a desire that surfaces in rock's most ferocious demands, from Jim Morrison's insatiable cri

de coeur 'we want the world and we want it NOW' to the implacable rage of Johnny Rotten's 'I wanna be anarchy'. The Doors actually had an explicitly Oedipal anthem in 'The End', and there was a latent theme of incest-cum-matricide in the Sex Pistols. Before he met the Pistols, svengali Malcolm McLaren wrote songs for an imaginary rock group who would spearhead a teen revolution. For one song, 'Too Fast To Live, Too Young To Die', McLaren envisioned 'the singer looking like Hitler, those gestures, arms, shapes, etc, and talking about his mum in incestuous phrases'.

**boys keep swinging**

Incest in rock figures as both an ultimate metaphor of transgression AND as a claustrophobic, castrating, de-individuating thrill (the stifling domesticity of mother's love). Brian Jones of the Rolling Stones was a supreme example of this conflict; he flirted between effeminate passivity and vicious brutalisation of women. In 1967, when Jones appealed a harsh sentence for drug offences, the court-appointed psychiatrist described him as oscillating between 'phallic and sadistic sexuality' and 'gross passive dependency needs'. The shrink attributed this to 'Oedipal fixations… Part of his confusion would seem to be the very strong resentment he experiences towards his dominant and controlling mother.' Hence Jones's mix of 'soft male' and obnoxious teen throwing off his mum's shackles.

More than the rest of the band, Brian Jones was the incarnation of the Rolling Stones' mixture of effete dandyism and cruel machismo. He gaily indulged his 'feminine side' through a camp persona and foppish unisex clothing, and occasionally took this identification to the point of female impersonation. According to Anita Pallenberg, during one LSD trip, she and Jones swapped sexual roles (she dressed him up as French chanteuse Françoise Hardy). Yet Jones subjected the real women in his life to violent
tantrums and abandoned them with illegitimate offspring. Mick Jagger’s image also conflated thuggish virility and effeminacy. ‘What really upsets people is that I’m a man and not a woman,’ the singer mused. ‘I don’t do anything more than a lot of girl dancers, but they’re accepted because it’s a man’s world...’ The Stones usurped the female ‘privileges’ of self-adornment and narcissism, while belittling real-life women for just such frivolousness.

At other times, the Stones’ cross-dressing had a more derisive, parodic purpose, as with the drag outfits they wore for the cover of the single ‘Have You Seen Your Mother, Baby, Standing In The Shadow’. Keith Richards dressed as an air stewardess, Jones was a tarty auxiliary in the RAF, Mick Jagger and Bill Wyman were wizened old biddies, and Charlie Watts was a rich old madam in a fur coat. The Stones’ transvestism endured right through to the late ’70s twilight album Some Girls, whose cover featured the band’s faces framed by female wigs. On the back, sardonically, potted biographies – Wyman’s spinster ‘lacks only one attribute to be the perfect wife – she just doesn’t like men’, Jagger’s career girl sacrifices love for her profession, and so on – have each pseudo-woman ending up alone, without a man: clearly, for the Stones, the ultimate indignity.

Back in the ’60s, androgyny was just another weapon in the band’s armoury of threats to society’s norms. What was conventional in real women became subversive when assumed by men. As paragons of the Dionysian tradition in rock’n’roll, it was no coincidence that the Stones were drawn to femininity. In Androgyny, June Singer wrote of the original Greek god, Dionysus: ‘He is treated and educated like a girl and he grows up to be effeminate. Unable to differentiate feminine from masculine functioning in himself, he scarcely knows who he is. Like an eternal youth, he wanders over the world, changing shape, going mad, drinking himself into insensibility, living the abandonment of total nature, and like nature, experiencing the cycles of death and rebirth.’

The Stones’ fusion of swaggering machismo and self-preening androgyny as a kind of all-encompassing narcissism has endured as a staple of rebel rock: from ’60s freakbeat (groups like John’s Children) through Lou Reed, David Bowie, the New York Dolls, to Prince, Hanoi Rocks, the Manic Street Preachers and Suede. Punk was too deeply into uglification to play with androgyny, but its very name had an effeminate connotation. In the sixteenth century, punk meant a female prostitute or strumpet; over the centuries, its meaning had evolved to signify the young male ‘wife’ of a sodomite, in hobo terminology, and, in prison slang, a young, pretty, passive boy who gets fucked by the other convicts. Once again, rebel rock converted the word for an emasculated, contemptible piece of human trash into a positive term of delinquency.

In her essay ‘Baudelaire, or Infinity, Perfume and Punk’, Julia Kristeva argues that dandyism is an identification with the mother’s despised position in the patriarchal order. The dandy’s obsession with the ‘trivial’ business of style is a revolt against the proper model of masculinity that is upheld by the father, and is an attempt to emulate the mother. Kristeva’s mention of punk in this context is suggestive: punk style, being conscious, concerted self-defilement rather than prettification, is an inverted form of dandyism. Both dandyism and punk flaunt their inferiority and marginalisation, turn emasculation into style.

But the Stones’ dandyism wasn’t so much an embrace of the underdog position as an aspiration to overlord status. It was a decadent refusal of the decent, upright, desexualised masculinity promoted in the ’50s, in favour of the aristocratic self-indulgence of the playboy. This slippery but virile image was also shared by Jimi Hendrix, and later by his heir, Prince: potent savages in regal finery. Throughout its history, rock has flitted between effete narcissism and rugged scruffiness. But none of these archetypes – neither the Cavalier nor the Roundhead, mod nor
rocker – has offered much for women. Rock’s great paradox is that it has successively revolted against established notions of manliness while remaining misogynistic.

David Bowie’s anthem ‘Boys Keep Swinging’ (from 1979’s Lodger) was intended as a mockery of male bonding. In the video, Bowie undercuts the lyrics’ raucous camaraderie by cross-dressing as a variety of female personas. The idea was that underneath all the machismo, ‘the lads’ are just latent homosexuals. But the song’s subversive wit was undercut by an even deeper irony: it’s a male privilege to ‘swing’, to experiment with female glamour, and adopt ‘optional female subjectivities’, as Suzanne Moore put it. Female cross-dressing doesn’t come across as mischief or transgression. Boys putting on eyeliner provides a frisson, but girls boycotting the kohl pencil is merely dowdy.

she’s hit:
songs of fear and loathing

‘What you’re is saying is that... there’s the beautiful dreamy type and the vicious bitch type. There are also one or two others, but, yeah, you’re right... there are two kinds of girls [in my songs]... only I never thought about it before. Ah, I see, I’m not integrating them properly.’

Mick Jagger interview, Rolling Stone, 1978

It’s as simple as this: if you don’t like the Rolling Stones, you don’t like rock’n’roll. The Stones are the quintessence of rock – and they’re also one of the most misogynistic groups ever. Their very name, taken from urban blues pioneer Muddy Waters’s song ‘Rollin’ Stone’, contains the notion of flight – from domesticity, emotional commitment, intimacy, ties. The image of the Stones as marauding sexual nomads was assiduously cultivated by their original manager Andrew Loog Oldham, who fed the press copy like: ‘They look like boys any self-respecting mum would lock in the bathroom. But the Rolling Stones – five tough young London-based music makers with door-step mouths, pallid cheeks, and unkempt hair – are not worried what mums think.’ Another slogan Oldham gave Melody Maker became the famous headline, ‘Would You Let Your Daughter Go With A Rolling Stone?’. The Stones’ anti-charisma was inextricably bound up with the notion of an uncouth underclass preying on the most precious property of the respectable classes: their daughters’ bodies.

Where the Beatles’ appeal was that they were ‘nice boys’, the Stones’ ruffian image seduced (some) girls with the prospect that they would be treated roughly, without
respect. The Beatles/Stones dichotomy solidified the split between pop and rock: between groomed stars and scruffy outsiders, romance and raw sexuality, courtship and brutish ravishment. Of course, the Beatles were always held in rock critical esteem, and the Stones had great pop success with teenyboppers, but they helped enshrine the idea that pop panders to 'girlly' sensibilities (pretty boy image, harmony'n'melody, sentimental lyrics) while rock is made by and for tough boys.

The threat and appeal of the Rolling Stones was that they were untamed. In 'Under My Thumb' (from 1966's Aftermath), Jagger rejects the domestication of monogamy, while boasting of having domesticated a once proud, independent girl. He measures his own wildness against the inverted mirror image of her docility; he's turned her into all that he despises and rejects. 'Out Of Time' and 'Yesterday's Papers' portray girls as disposable, obsolete goods. It's not enough for the swaggering Jagger to rub his discarded girlfriend's nose in the fact that he doesn't want her any more; he wants her to know that nobody else will either.

'Have You Seen Your Mother, Baby, Standing In The Shadow' (1966) is one of the Stones' most hateful songs. It's also one of the most perplexing and apocalyptic records of the '60s – especially in combination with Peter Whitehead's promo film, which juxtaposed images of riots during the band's live performances with scenes of the Stones preparing for the photo shoot for the single's cover, in which the Stones appeared in drag as various grotesque caricatures of female stereotypes.

Only that most unabashedly phallocratic of rock critics, Nick Tosches, has come close to pinning down the malign magic of 'Have You Seen Your Mother, Baby'. Reminiscing about his teenage love of the band, he writes that he and his gang were struck by 'the surlly notion of throwing at the face of the neurotic, castaway girlfriend the image of her mother, and sneering, in afterbreath, at the girl's preg-
nancy.... swathed and speeding, we prowled with the windows shut against the black coldness, looking for feminine throats in the shadows, where there were none, listening to that, smiling terribly, and feeling, with something like orgasm, our existences contract beatifically into that terrible smiling.'

Domination and contempt are not the only emotions in the Stones' songs, of course: elsewhere there's the pallid devotion of 'Lady Jane' or the mawkish idealisation of 'Ruby Tuesday', a tribute to a free-spirited groupie. In a 1978 Rolling Stone interview, Jonathan Cott suggested to Jagger that there was a split in his songs. Girls are either denigrated for being dominating, malicious or treacherous ('Tumbling Dice', 'Sitting On A Fence', 'Let It Loose'); used up and discarded ('Out Of Time', 'Please Go Home', 'All Sold Out', 'Congratulations'); or else they're idealised as elusive, mystical sprites ('Ruby Tuesday', 'Child Of The Moon') – to which Jagger concurred, reluctantly. Cott continues: 'The song “Some Girls” seems to be about what happens when hundreds of idealized Twenties girls try to eat you up, destroy you – taking your money and your clothes and giving you babies you don’t want.' Jagger replies: 'I had a dream like that last night, incidentally, but there were dogs as well as girls in it.'

**mammish boys and stupid girls**

The Stones, along with mid-'60s contemporaries like the Pretty Things and the Animals, took the masculine self-aggrandisement of the blues and exaggerated it. The paradigmatic source was Bo Diddley's 'I'm a Man'. For the black American, this assertion had a racial dimension: it was an affirmation of full manhood in the face of a white supremacist society that called him 'boy'. This dimension was necessarily lost when the music was taken over by white British adolescents. Pride became arrogance; the music of under-
dogs became the soundtrack of would-be overlords raising themselves up by stomping down women. The British blues persona was the 'Mannish Boy' (the title of Muddy Waters's own version of 'I'm a Man', and later the band name of David Bowie's early blues group, the Manish Boys); that's to say, a sexually precocious teenage boy eager to prove himself by adopting an almost parodic machismo.

The mannish boy's self-assertion became – with the amphetamine-wired mod groups and their freakbeat descendents – a kind of megalomaniac/paranoiac delirium. A good example is the John's Children song 'Just What You Want, Just What You'll Get' (1966), with its combination of fey petulance and brutal military beat, its psychotic lyrics and terror of intimacy. His girl knows how to please him, but she suspects that she's luring him into a tender trap. The chorus trembles with virulence: 'Don't think I don't know just what you want / EVERYTHING!!' / Don't think I don't know just what you'll get / NOTHING!!' It's because the girl is so seductive that's she's so terrifying: violent repudiation becomes a matter of survival for this fragile man-child on the brink of being engulfed in a sexual maelstrom.

In the US, the Stones, the Kinks and the Yardbirds inspired a more straightforwardly masculine horde of imitators with the garage punk bands, who amplified the sexual aggression of the blues with simultaneously exhilarating and comical results. The most famous garage groups – the Count Five, the Seeds, the Standells, The Mysterians, the Castaways – hit the charts. But often the most extreme groups (in terms of musical primitivism and misogynist vitriol) were the obscure, unsuccessful punks, whose songs were subsequently gathered up on '80s compilations like the Pebbles, Mindrocker and Back from the Grave series.

As with many rock subgenres, a dynamic set in where, in order to up the formal stakes and beat the competition, the extremity of expression rapidly escalates until self-parody ensues. The Tree's 'No Good Woman', for instance, is a preposterous torrent of abuse aimed at an unfaithful, ungrateful girl. The protagonist bought her a Cadillac, yet she's been mistreating him 'for 69 years.' You have to wonder why he bothers, as the accusations and put-downs mount: 'you're ugly and you're fat and you've got no teeth'. Another standard scenario is the put-down of the frigid, stuck-up 'Miss High and Mighty' who won't give the singer satisfaction, as in the Letter's 'Action Woman'. On both sides of the Atlantic, 'rich bitch' songs combined class antagonism with sexual resentment. The Stones' '19th Nervous Breakdown' (1966) taunts a neurotic debutante with the image of her neglectful mother and industrial baron father, while John's Children's 'Desdemona' beseeches a repressed upper-class girl to drop her drawers and get hip to the revolution: 'lift up your skirt and fly'. In British mod and US garage punk, the eternal double standard of 'if you don't you're a drag, if you do you're a slut' meant that girls were either two-faced whores or frigid bores. The male protagonists of these songs are untamed, feral delinquents, dormant volcanoes of pent-up testosterone, and/or victims of feminine wiles. Obviously mod and garage were intimately bound up with the virginity blues of frustrated male youth.

American garage punk and British R&B evolved into heavy rock, and then heavy metal. At each stage, the blues form was progressively more bastardised, its machismo exaggerated. The blues' cocksure strut turned to phallocratic overkill; Muddy Waters’s 'You Need Love' (1963) becomes, as Charles Shaar Murray put it, the 'thermonuclear gang rape' of Led Zeppelin's 'Whole Lotta Love' (1969). But garage punk and British mod were also the origins of punk rock. Punk, in fact, was a sort of asexual relative of metal: cock-rock, with the cock replaced by a sort of generalised castration-paranoia (society's to blame). Musically, punk suppressed the remnants of R&B's syncopation that endured in heavy metal, and turned rock into a
martial beat for those at war with the status quo. But the vicious vehemence of punk was ultimately derived from the hyper-macho, misogynist white blues of the '60s. The Sex Pistols learned their first lessons in defiance and contempt by playing crude versions of mod put-down songs like 'Stepping Stone' and 'Don't Give Me No Lip Child'. They learned how to express their rejection of society from songs about rejecting women. Occasionally the Pistols returned to source, as on the brilliant B-side 'Satellite', a caustic diatribe against a female hanger-on and scenester who looks like a 'fat pink baked bean'.

death woman

John’s Children’s ‘Smashed Blocked’ (1966) anticipates one of heavy metal’s standard themes: woman as bewitching, spell-binding, a spinner of illusions. The singer’s lovesick whisper is engulfed in a nauseous whirlpool of psychedelic sound, his mind reels on a carousel of confusion: ‘Where is the love I thought I’d found?’ Love is disorientation, debility and paralysis. Led Zeppelin’s ‘Dazed and Confused’ (from the 1969 debut LP) is the definitive take on this scenario. Doomladen glissandos of blues guitar and a scabrous, burdened bassline conjure a sepulchre of sound for Robert Plant’s languishing moans and tortured shrieks. Plant is prostrated on ‘the killing floor’, a standard blues metaphor that originally referred to an abattoir. His mind is poisoned and befogged by the noxious fumes of her feminine miasma. He’s at death’s door, flaccid and enfeebled, until he and the music rally for one last attempt to claw their way out of this aural slough of despond. But to no avail: the riff-mania subsides again into a dank decay, with Plant emitting his final death-rattle moans and whimpers.

The devil-in-disguise motif recurs in ‘Black Dog’ (from Led Zeppelin’s untitled fourth LP, 1971). Plant is wracked with desire, shivering and shuddering like he's going through cold turkey; the turgid, gruelling riff incarnates sex as agony and toil. Once again, Plant is laid low, financially and emotionally (‘Black Dog’ is a classic metaphor for nameless Evil or depression), and he can only pray that she and her soulless kind will stay away.

Fleetwood Mac wrote a number of classic songs about a phantasmic femme fatale, most notably ‘Black Magic Woman’ (as famously covered by Santana) and ‘Gold Dust Woman’ (from 1977's *Rumours*). The latter’s misogyny is barely mitigated by the fact that a woman, Stevie Nicks, sings the lyrics. Nicks is a passive narrator, observing the man’s torment, at once gloating and solicitous. The deadly ‘Gold Dust Woman’ is precious but elusive, slipping through the man’s fingers. A forever-receding mirage, she shatters the poor sap’s life and ‘illusions of love’. Musically, the song is a stealthy, ominous blues, with an astonishing slow fade, in which cadaverous wails and shrieks from a high-pitched male voice seem to disappear into a quagmire of sound. Haunted by this woman-spectre, the man has become a ghost of his former self.

model of perfection

Roxy Music were even more bedevilled by the gap between ideal and reality. An artschool band influenced by Warhol and Pop Art, Roxy used the language of commerce and advertising to rewrite the madonna/whore complex in post-modern terms. Their first three albums are set in a fantasised jet-set high life, a surface-deep world where authentic love is impossible. Femininity here has nothing to do with an essential psychological or biological reality, and everything to do with accoutrements and cosmetics. Roxy women are the sum of the products they use, and are treated like commodities. In ‘Ladytron’ (from the 1972 eponymous debut album), Ferry’s ‘lounge lizard’ persona is involved in a futile quest for an impossible ideal woman, whose intimi-