

**Songs from the Bell Jar: Autonomy and Resistance in the Music of The Bangles**



Peter Mercer-Taylor

*Popular Music*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (May, 1998), 187-204.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0261-1430%28199805%2917%3A2%3C187%3ASFTBJA%3E2.0.CO%3B2-R>

*Popular Music* is currently published by Cambridge University Press.

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/cup.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

---

JSTOR is an independent not-for-profit organization dedicated to creating and preserving a digital archive of scholarly journals. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

# Songs from the bell jar: autonomy and resistance in the music of The Bangles

PETER MERCER-TAYLOR

The two passages that follow appeared within a few weeks of each other in 1963. At a glance they have little to do with one another:

Between them The Beatles adopt a do-it-yourself approach from the very beginning. They write their own lyrics, design and eventually build their own instrumental backdrops and work out their own vocal arrangements. Their music is wild, pungent, hard-hitting, uninhibited . . . and personal. The do-it-yourself angle ensures complete originality at all stages of the production. (Barrow 1963)

I was supposed to be the envy of thousands of other college girls just like me all over America who wanted nothing more than to be tripping about in those same size-seven patent leather shoes I'd bought in Bloomingdale's one lunch hour with a black patent leather belt and black patent leather pocketbook to match . . .

Look what can happen in this country, they'd say. A girl lives in some out-of-the-way town for nineteen years, so poor she can't afford a magazine, and then she gets a scholarship to college and wins a prize here and a prize there and ends up steering New York like her own private car.

Only I wasn't steering anything, not even myself . . . (Plath 1971, pp. 2–3)

It is Plath's final twist – the paradox that sparks the entire novel – that brings the two passages together; these are testimonies about power, in particular about the sometimes deceptive relationships between the apparent and the actual seats of control. On the one hand, the artistic process described in the first excerpt spear-headed what might be termed a shift in creative paradigms. In the wake of The Beatles' arrival on the scene, the autonomous band of singer/instrumentalist/song-writers as an institution largely supplanted the practice of entrusting composing, arranging, instrumental performance, and singing to separate individuals (a practice which retained significant strongholds, needless to say, at Motown, Stax, and elsewhere). Barrow's focus in this passage is on the exceptional degree of control behind the scenes – where his audience might neither expect nor immediately recognise it – that had been entrusted to the individual (collective) artist, The Beatles. Plath seeks, on the other hand, to reveal the absence of power behind its apparent presence. As the novel unfolds, its central character, Esther Greenwood, confronts the realisation that the dreams offered her by a patriarchal society are unworthy of her, though she is unable to envision escape apart from self-destruction. And where The Beatles' debut album initiated a career of almost unim-

aginable artistic and popular successes, even the limited optimism of *The Bell Jar's* closing chapters seemed to prove illusory; within a few weeks of the book's publication, Plath herself – on whose own early suicide attempt the novel was based – had died at her own hand.

Some twenty years after these two passages appeared, an all-female rock band from Los Angeles, The Bangles, would bring these conflicting images of power into purposeful juxtaposition, pressing the early Beatles and *The Bell Jar* into service as anchoring points for the complex intertextual web through which they sought to document the arc of their own career. In their early days, the four-member band had openly invited comparison with The Beatles, apparently envisioning their own task as achieving, for the female band, the creative liberation represented by The Beatles – a liberation that had hitherto been the virtually exclusive domain of men. Six years later, on The Bangles' last album, a song titled 'Bell Jar' seems to give voice to their profound discouragement with the course their creative lives had actually taken, their ascent to popular success having come only at the expense of their artistic autonomy. The suicide of this song's protagonist indeed seems to prefigure The Bangles' own coming dissolution.

## I

The notion that female artists have attained unprecedented stature in rock music in the last two decades has become an orthodoxy of rock & roll historiography.<sup>1</sup> Though few would claim that anything resembling genuine parity has been achieved – Margot Mifflin (1990), among others, has argued against too optimistic a view – the careers of Debbie Harry, Chrissie Hynde, Pat Benatar, Madonna, Janet Jackson, Courtney Love, and a slew of new arrivals in the mid 1990s, would seem to lay to rest whatever notions might once have existed as to the intrinsic maleness of rock & roll.<sup>2</sup>

But while female singers and even singer/songwriters have assumed a central position in the rock music industry, and female vocal ensembles have continued to be an important force – as they have for some four decades – one of rock's most important, most enduring institutions has remained peculiarly male. The all-female band, a self-contained ensemble of singers, instrumentalists, and songwriters, has still failed to eke out anything more than a peripheral, obscure existence.<sup>3</sup> Goldie and the Gingerbreads seemed little more than a novelty act in the late 1960s. While several female punk bands in the late 1970s – The Slits, The Modettes, and others – did indeed succeed in creating the aggregate impression of a movement, none of these bands made much headway in the charts, and all had disbanded within a few years, if not months, of their appearance.<sup>4</sup> The 1982 ascent of The Go-Go's debut album, *Beauty and the Beat*, to number one might have held out the hope of a new era in this respect. But in the decade that followed only one all-female band, The Bangles, would achieve comparable popular success.

Riding the crest of the tremendous critical acclaim that met their early work, The Bangles' commercial breakthrough with their second album, *Different Light*, would seem the crowning achievement in an unqualified success story. But this album's meteoric rise to the number two spot in 1986 was hardly the victory it might have appeared, for the terms under which the band found popular acceptance suggest a number of unsettling truths about the conditions that continued to underpin the creation and reception of rock music produced by women. The

Bangles' first two releases – the five-song, self-titled EP of 1982 and the 1984 album, *All Over the Place* – had been the work of a tightly self-contained ensemble that wrote, played, and sang nearly all of its own material. Despite critical accolades, neither of these releases achieved more than modestly respectable sales figures. While the follow-up, *Different Light*, vaulted the band to dizzying popularity, its sales were propelled by a mighty trio of top-40 singles which found The Bangles completely made over as a slickly produced vocal ensemble, depending heavily on outside songwriters and musicians (the outlines of this trajectory are traced in Gillian Gaar's (1992, pp. 336–39) thoughtful narration of the band's history). At the same time that the forfeit of autonomy seemed to emerge as a precondition for The Bangles' entry into the centre of the industry mainstream, critics' often patronising responses to this album suggested that the band's early acclaim had done little to establish their viability as an all-female band. With their third and final album, the 1988 *Everything*, The Bangles regained a modicum of creative control – a goal they had set forth in interviews – but the vigour and focus of the first releases proved elusive, while the production of the whole was much more closely akin to *Different Light* than to its predecessors. The band broke up within a few months of this album's appearance.

The Bangles' collective attainment, in their early years, of a degree of artistic self-determination not historically assumed by women allows us to view with particular clarity the mechanisms through which this autonomy could be compromised in the process of creating a publicly palatable product. Moreover, as the work of an all-female band, The Bangles' music offers at least the potential for unique insights into the question of what form a distinctly 'female' rock discourse might take – a line of critical investigation that has, of necessity, focused almost entirely on individual artists.<sup>5</sup> In both its successes and its failures, The Bangles' work sheds important light on the exceptional expressive possibilities afforded by a musical fabric which is, so to speak, female in every dimension, raising issues quite distinct from those of the solo artist. This remains true however persuaded we may be of a soloist's role as corporate head – as Susan McClary (1991, p. 149) has described Madonna – of the 'complex collaborative processes' that go into the production of her art. Lead guitarist Vicki Peterson had no doubt as to the originality of The Bangles' approach, suggesting direct connections between the all-encompassing 'femaleness' of the artistic production and the subject matter of the artistic discourse itself: 'We're writing songs from a female point of view, which hasn't been the case throughout history. Even the Shangri-Las' viewpoint was male. It was a male-dominated scene.' (Goldberg 1984, p. 42).

One of the principal aims of this article is to show how – as Peterson's remarks imply – The Bangles' musical, poetic, even iconic discourse is approached, from the beginning, as a forum for articulating issues relating to their creative experience as women. This process of self-scrutiny may be wholly affirmative, wholly celebratory, as we shall see in the case of the first album. But it becomes most critical to an understanding of The Bangles' work, I think, in the last album, *Everything*, which seems propelled by the dynamic tensions between 'public' songs, which play unproblematically to a 'male gaze', and 'private' songs, whose despair and frustration lend a distinctive element of self-subversion to the entire project. What emerges is an artwork divided against itself, in which the struggles and ambiguities of identity formation are themselves foregrounded (Simon Reynolds and Joy Press (1996, pp. 354–84) have traced this impulse through the work of an array of female

rock artists). Though the inconsistency and occasional artistic anemia of this album – indeed, of much of their career together – hardly make for an unqualified success, the very nature of its failings render it a crucial testimony in the history of female rock music.

## II

In a 1984 *Rolling Stone* interview, drummer Debbi Peterson offered a concise manifesto of The Bangles' early years: 'We want to be the next Beatles.' (Goldberg 1984, p. 42). What quickly becomes apparent in approaching the band's work is that in this remark Peterson is not simply invoking 'The Beatles' as a by-word for staggering commercial and artistic success; she appears to be addressing, on the one hand, an actual musical style, and, perhaps more importantly, a specific mode of production. The configuration of The Bangles' instrumental and vocal forces were identical to those of the early Beatles, with three strong singers, two guitars, bass, and drums (like The Beatles' first releases, The Bangles' debut EP features an occasional, unobtrusive piano track played by the producer). The only additional instruments on the first album, *All Over the Place*, appear in the closing number, 'More Than Meets the Eye', whose arrangement for string quartet and acoustic guitar seems a likely reference to The Beatles' breakthrough with 'Yesterday'. Just as importantly, the band sported a Lennon–McCartneyesque pair of songwriters, guitarists Vicki Peterson and Susanna Hoffs, who wrote four of the album's eleven songs. Five more were by Peterson alone, two were covers.

While a 1960s sensibility in style and production permeates The Bangles' early releases – earning them a prominent position among the acts that formed Los Angeles' so-called 'Paisley Underground' – their particular dedication to The Beatles is apparent at every level. Their very name stands in the same relationship to the word 'bang' as does 'Beatles' to the word 'beat', a congruity that invited numerous word-plays in the press: 'Meet The Bangles', 'Bangles for Sale', etc.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, The Bangles' musical indebtedness to the earlier band comes to border, at times, on quotation: illustrative is the bass groove (see Example 1a) underlying 'I'm in Line', the second song on The Bangles' EP, obviously a close relative of the distinctive bass line of The Beatles' 1966 'Taxman' (see Example 1b). Borrowed, too, are the earlier song's insistent rhythm guitar on the back-beat (not shown in the example) and the harmonic emphasis on the flattened seventh degree that comes, in the Beatles' song, with the arrival of the word 'taxman' in each verse.

The fixation with The Beatles extended to visual packaging, as well. Figure 1 shows the cover of The Bangles' first album, *All Over the Place*. The guitar in Susanna

(a)



Figure 1.

Hoffs' hand is an indispensable prop, of course, a purposeful indication that this is not a vocal ensemble but a band, a group that plays its own instruments. This is not just any guitar, however – it is a Rickenbacker 325V63, a black and white 6-string with three pick-ups and a hole for a vibrato bar, though the bar is not in place. Shortly after its 1963 appearance, this had become John Lennon's signature instrument, as shown in Figure 2.<sup>7</sup> The four-by-four grid of bandmember portraits splayed across the cover of The Bangles' second album, *Different Light*, seems a likely invocation, too, of the five-by-four grid of portraits on the cover of The Beatles' third album, *Hard Day's Night*.

The direct imitation of male models on the part of female rock artists – the artistic cross-dressing Dan Graham terms the *macha* – has fallen out of favour in much contemporary feminist rock criticism. But if The Bangles' fixation on the Beatles could fairly be faulted on these grounds (indeed they struggled against the 'nostalgic' label so often attached to their early work) the wilful appropriation of this identity seems to have implications well beyond matters of vocal delivery, stage presence, or compositional style, lending focus to the whole nature of their artistic project. The explosive emergence of The Beatles in the early 1960s marked the point at which the era of the 'girl group' began its decline, an upheaval that did not turn on the issue of gender – at least not directly – as much as on an almost paradigmatic shift in the process of production. The girl groups were vocal ensembles supported by songwriters, instrumentalists, and, above all, the producers (or producer/arrangers) who brought them together. The mid-1960s witnessed the widespread



Figure 2.

turn, spearheaded by the Beach Boys and the Beatles, towards a conception of the band as a wholly self-contained creative unit.

If the whole institution of the girl group implies gender imbalances – with the roles of producer and songwriter assumed almost exclusively by men – this imbalance was made even more explicit in the institution by which it was largely supplanted. Holly Near, who was in high school during this era, would later reflect on the gendered character of the early rock & roll band:

I really think that had to do with the roles that were put forward of what girls do and what boys do. All the kids started putting together bands. Everybody wanted to be in a band, everybody wanted to play guitar. Well, the ‘everybody’ were boys. And I played the acoustic guitar, probably knew more chords and more about music than any of the guys who were diving in and plugging in their guitars. And it never even occurred to me to plug in. It’s not even that I was told not to, it just didn’t even cross my mind. ‘Louie Louie’ – how many chords does it have, right? But it wasn’t something girls did. So I put the guitar away and became a girl singer. (Gaar 1982, p. 56)

Hardly could a more powerful metaphor be found than the image of Susanna Hoffs, on the cover of The Bangles' debut album, foisting John Lennon's guitar – the very instrument, we might say, whose impermissibility had effectively run women onto the sidelines twenty years before. However conscious the symbolic intent behind this photograph, it powerfully underlines the sense that The Bangles are taking up the torch just where women had formerly dropped it, carrying the female ensemble into artistic terrain from which they had long been forbidden.

From the first moments of *All Over the Place*, it is difficult to separate the creative project The Bangles are undertaking from the lyrical substance of the album itself. At the same time that the band is securing a new artistic independence for women in rock music, the album's poetry is acutely preoccupied with resisting the status quo, severing the bonds of traditional heterosexual relationships. There is not a single love song on this album, not a single pledge of devotion, not a single expression of sexual desire. With the exception of the two songs not concerned with personal relationships in one way or another – 'Live' and the powerhouse, 'Going Down to Liverpool' – this album is dedicated almost completely to tales of women breaking free of frustrating, unfulfilling relationships or advising other women to re-examine their own.<sup>8</sup> The first lines of the single that opens the album, 'Hero Takes a Fall', form a challenge perhaps evocative of Mozart's Donna Anna, leveled against a nameless, arrogant male:

The hero is exposed when his crimes are brought to the light of day,  
I won't be feeling sorry sorry sorry on the judgment day.  
Wasn't it me who said there'll be a price to pay?  
And I won't feel bad at all, when the hero takes a fall.

As Susanna Hoffs would later observe, *All Over the Place* was 'all about "if your man gives you shit then *dump* him, don't let him spoil your life."' (FitzGerald 1986, p. 14).

It is at the point that the album seems most in danger of abandoning this moratorium on love songs, however, that its most celebratory – we might say, most liberated – moment comes. Importantly, the effect is achieved not through lyrics, a long-established domain of the female singer-songwriter, but through an instrumental break. Over the course of its first two verses, 'Dover Beach', the last song on the first side, sounds for all the world like a longing address to a boyfriend, an overly sensitive fellow, perhaps, but a devoted one:

If we had the time, I would run away with you  
To a perfect world, we'd suspend all that is duty or required.  
Late last night you cried, and I couldn't come to you.  
On the other side, you and I inseparable and walking.

There follows a guitar solo, based on a third sounding of the chord changes that served for these two verses (with the two final chords, bVII and V, both considerably elongated).

We might easily hear a resonance here with Matthew Arnold's celebrated poem that shares the song's name. Though Arnold's focus is more on the bleakness of the world itself, the final stanza of the poem, like the lyrics just quoted, proclaims the salvation to be found in the speaker's relationship with his beloved:



verses 1, 2, 3 (solo 1), 4:

I IV I V I IV I V ii <sup>b</sup>VII Vsolo 2: I V<sub>6</sub> V/ii ii V I V<sub>6</sub> V/ii ii V [V]

bar: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 (varies)

*Example 2: 'Dover Beach', chord progression*

Ah, love, let us be true  
 To one another! for the world, which seems  
 To lie before us like a land of dreams,  
 So various, so beautiful, so new,  
 Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,  
 Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain . . .

But when the song's pivotal moment comes, as it does in the next vocal verse, the crucial shift is achieved through an allusion to an altogether different poetic work: 'We could steal away, like jugglers and thieves / We could come and go, oh, and talk of Michelangelo.' This verse ends in a close paraphrase of the famous couplet from T. S. Eliot's 'Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', though the crucial word is precisely the one they left out – in Eliot's poem, it is 'the women' who come and go, talking of Michelangelo. 'Dover Beach' has not been a love song at all, at least, not a love song to a man, but a woman's address to a woman. Our presumptions of heterosexual romantic devotion fall away at once in favor of a separatist fantasy about women, together, breaking free of customary roles, of 'all that is duty or required'.

The real inspiration of the number lies, however, in the musical epiphany called forth by this poetic one, for there follows a second guitar solo. The very presence of a second solo comes as a surprise – one instrumental break is about the most granted by the formal template that governs the bulk of the album. At the same time, the solo presents an entirely new set of chord changes, breaking free, as it were, of the number's internal harmonic status quo, of the progression whose four soundings up to this point had defined the harmonic material of the song (see Example 2). It is not difficult to recognise this disjuncture within the musical discourse as a reflection – or rather a fulfillment – of the escape fantasy that the lyrics have just brought into view. Here, in this wholly self-contained instrumental and vocal ensemble, is a community of women achieving, together, an independence that tradition denies them.

### III

Despite rave reviews, *All Over the Place* was only a modest commercial success. It failed to chart a single, and reached only number 80 on the album charts. Though the follow-up album, *Different Light*, would go platinum within a few months of its release, it is clear from the first moments of its opening number, 'Manic Monday', that this bid for commercial success had come at a cost.

Most importantly, if either of the band's guitarists is playing her instrument on this track, it is all but lost in the mix. The dominant sound in the texture is the

synthesiser, an instrument no member of the band played. Nor did The Bangles compose this song; it is credited to 'Christopher' on the album cover, though word quickly got around that this was the work of the artist still known as Prince. Indeed, Prince's compositional thumbprint is unmistakable: the first musical phrase of 'Manic Monday' is a nearly exact duplication of the opening line of Prince's own career-launching hit, '1999', from the 1982 album of the same name (the phrases' melodic similarity is underlined by their common focus on the subject of dreaming).

'Manic Monday' reached number two, and was followed by two other top 40 singles, 'Walk Like an Egyptian' and 'If She Knew What She Wants'. The Bangles wrote none of these songs. While guitars are more discernible on the other two singles than on 'Manic Monday', the spare, retro jangling of the first album is essentially lost in slick productions dominated by the synthesiser, an instrument which, as Rob Walser (1993, p. 130) has shown, is recognised at least in the heavy metal community as a dangerously emasculated counterpart to the guitar. Whatever we had taken for a Bangles sound on the first album – 'one hell of a guitar clam-bake' as one critic put it (Sutherland 1985, p. 24) – is all but indiscernible here.

Apart from these singles, The Bangles did compose nearly all the remaining material on the album, occasionally sharing credit with producer David Kahne (an arrangement later protested by drummer Debbi Peterson (Orlean 1987, p. 164)). And these songs do offer more than occasional glimpses of the band's original guitar sound. But it was obviously the singles that sold the albums, and the effort to create a commercially viable sound – we might say, a public sound – for the band had had an effect on the creative process whose essentials are absolutely clear. Where much that had been impressive in their earlier work had sprung from The Bangles' close adherence to the creative model of the early Beatles, they found a place in the Top 40 only by reverting to a role much more like that of The Beatles' girl-group predecessors (and contemporaries), precisely the artistic practice from which the band had set out to escape. Indeed, their first number one single, 'Walk Like an Egyptian', seems an evocation of the practice, endemic to rock in the early 1960s, of seeking to create a single catering to, or sparking, a new dance sensation; one might point to 'The Loco-Motion', which put Little Eva on the map at a stroke (or to 'Let's Turkey Trot', which took her off again). Incidentally, this association is bolstered by the video, which features people apparently stopped at random on the street and induced to 'walk like an Egyptian', a visual echo of the standard claim: 'Everybody's doing a brand new dance now'. Unable to claim songwriting credits, their distinctive instrumental style overrun in the quest for a pop-rock lowest common denominator, The Bangles appear in these singles as an excellent, still quite distinctive vocal ensemble, but little more.

If The Bangles were moving towards what was perceived to be a more appropriate role for an ensemble of women, this impulse seems to have been affirmed by the band's reception, for the popular music press proved only too willing to accept – indeed, to embrace – The Bangles' new identity as a vocal group. Characteristic was critic Adam Sweeting's assessment in *Melody Maker* of the third single, 'If She Knew What She Wants', as a 'song of majestic structure . . . made irresistible by gale-force four-part harmonies and a production job (by a certain David Kahne) which will one day grow into a full-scale Wall Of Sound' (Sweeting 1986, p. 33). The final reference is, of course, to the 'wall of sound' that producer Phil Spector pioneered in the 1960s around the girl-groups he created. The division of labour is all but explicit: The Bangles are responsible for the voices, Kahne for everything else.

The relevance of the bandmember's involvement in the work of songwriting also came to be challenged in the wake of this album. Later in the review just cited, Sweeting offers an assessment that would become a commonplace in reviews of The Bangles' work during this time, praising the band's vocal prowess while gently disparaging their competence as composers: 'the group have zeroed in on their greatest collective asset, to wit their armoury of voices . . . The Bangles' massed tonsils allow them to get away with patchy material and make the best of the stronger songs' (ibid). Indeed, dismissals of The Bangles' songwriting were, more often than not, less gentle than those of Sweeting. Mat Smith, for example, relates an episode from one London concert:

'This is another song written by somebody else,' Vicki Peterson whispered before dedicating Alex Chilton's 'September Gurls' to those London boys. Funny how their best songs are all written by someone else, isn't it? (Smith 1986, p. 17)

Still more blunt were Caroline Sullivan's remarks on a later concert on this tour:

A few numbers start off relatively promisingly, as if they're going to be cover versions of other things, but alack, they invariably turn out to be more rockalong identihits.

The singles, which reflect The Bangles' poppier side, are, obviously, more appealing than the LP fillers which comprise the rest of the set. (Sullivan 1986, p. 17)

What is most troubling about such reviews is the sense that these criticisms are based less on sympathetic listening than on *a priori* assumptions about creative dynamics within the band. If The Bangles' own numbers on this album suffer by comparison with the more direct, more lavishly produced singles, it is in much the way that Alfred Hitchcock's *North by Northwest*, would suffer for being on a double bill with a modern blockbuster like *Diehard*. The Bangles' compositions work with smaller brushstrokes, to be sure, and tend towards subtler poetic artistry than the singles. But it is difficult to discern any substantive decline from the compositions on *All Over the Place*, an album that had moved the *Rolling Stone* to characterise The Bangles as 'terrific song-writers, dancing deftly on the fine line between insouciance and eloquence that can make a pop song a transcendent thing' (Puterbaugh 1984, p. 38). Nor were all critics in agreement about the calibre of the songwriting on *Different Light*. Laura Fissinger's review of the album, after an affectionate tip of the hat to *All Over the Place* - 'a pop-rock formalist's wet dream' (Fissinger 1986, p. 47) - sets off with a warning to fans about Kahne's 'airwaves friendly' production. After briefly taking Prince to task for 'Manic Monday' ('it is not, shall we say, one of Prince's more painstaking efforts'), Fissinger goes on to praise The Bangles' own 'timeless, no-lag melodies,' in which she perceives, and commends, a move away from the overt 1960s influences of the previous album.

The impulse to marginalise the band's status as a self-contained creative entity was underlined, if paradoxically, in their stage presentation on this tour. Because the keyboard was virtually indispensable to a number of the band's best known numbers, producer/keyboardist David Kahne toured with the band and performed for a large portion of the show. But his presence on the stage was made almost eerily innocuous: he stood, dimly lit, sufficiently far back on stage left to be invisible to much of the audience behind speaker stacks.<sup>9</sup> What results is nothing short of a parody of the integrity and autonomy that had formed so essential a part of The Bangles' creative process in former times, a reduction of their self-sufficiency to the status of spectacle, of marketing ploy. While The Bangles as an all-female band had largely ceased to exist behind the scenes, this entity took on a new life as a fiction,

as a product for visual consumption, at least partially legitimating one reviewer's patronising characterisation of their 'all girl' status as a 'dodgy gimmick' (Sweeting 1986, p. 33).

This emerges as a most unsettling paradox in view of the album's title song, 'In a Different Light'. The second track, 'In a Different Light' comes out swinging, with a grind of distorted guitars that seems a direct antidote to the previous number, 'Manic Monday', a restoration of, and fresh take on, the guitar textures that so characterised the sound of the band on the first album. Like many of the songs that will follow – excluding the singles already named – this song's lyrics offer a sketchy impression of a relationship on the rocks. Such a subject would appear to place the song in line with *All Over the Place*, though the speaker in this case, as in many of the later songs, is unable to place the blame so squarely on the shoulders of the man. The poetic premise is the speaker's almost explicitly fetishistic wish to reconstitute her former lover in a medium that will make him eternally available to her scrutiny. Its first two verses are characteristic:

I wanna make a movie  
I wanna put you on the silver screen,  
Sit in a darkened room and  
look at you from a distance.  
Wanna write a novel,  
Freeze all your expressions into words.  
Come back later and read about what  
I should have heard.

Though we find the speaker engaged in a stereotypically feminine act of reproaching herself for being unable to hold the relationship together, this is ultimately little more than a pretext for a higher level of discourse. The actual focal point is the issue of control as an effect of the gaze; if she owned the gaze, the speaker insists in fantasy after fantasy, she would somehow nullify the sense of helplessness she is left with in sorting through the dregs of this relationship. The paradox lies in the fact that this song was performed in concert after concert by a band that, as I have suggested, had had their actual agency undermined from within, while their integrity as a foursome was reconstructed on stage as a mere object for the audience's gaze.

The band's discouragement with *Different Light* formed an important focus of a major *Rolling Stone* interview in 1987. Drummer Debbi Peterson, who neither played drums nor sang on their first number one hit, 'Walk Like an Egyptian', observed that this number is 'a nice little novelty song kind of thing, but I don't feel like it's us' (Orlean 1987, p. 164). Her sister, Vicki, expands this sentiment to encompass the entire album, remarking, 'I like the record, but I like it almost like I would like a Whitney Houston album.' Vicki seems only too aware of the price the band has paid for their popular acceptance, and to face up to the matter with honest regret:

I want the new album to be a little more of what The Bangles are onstage – a little more rock & roll, a little more guitar oriented. I feel really strongly about using our own songs. I'm perfectly willing to accept the fact that it may not be a hit. (ibid)

#### IV

The Bangles' third and final album, *Everything*, appeared in 1988, nearly three years after *Different Light*. While the band does seem to have regained a modicum of

control on this album – signalled, perhaps, by the replacement of producer David Kahne by Davitt Sigerson – the precise scope of this reclamation is difficult to gauge. It is, in any event, far from unconditional. Encouraging though it may be, for instance, to find that all the songs on the album are written or co-written by band members, The Bangles share these credits with outside songwriters on all but two of the album's thirteen tracks. Band members professed satisfaction with this arrangement, and appear to have had considerable freedom in their choice of collaborators (Morris 1988), but it is difficult to imagine them having arrived independently at the decision to bolster their own songwriting skills with those of outside professionals. Needless to say, there is little reason to expect The Bangles themselves to discuss candidly the perhaps touchy – not to say embarrassing – details of such a decision. At the same time, where four additional musicians had participated on *Different Light* there are ten named on this album. If the expanded palette occasionally leads, as it obviously had in The Beatles' later recordings, to heightened expressive and experimental possibilities, it amounts just as often to nothing more than a glossy, impersonal sheen, as densely laden as ever with synthesisers. *Everything* does have its share of guitar-oriented numbers, but the whole leaves us with the unsettling sense that the band, as an instrumental ensemble, has failed to arrive at a distinctive sound. Enhanced though their contributions to the instrumental tracks of this album may be, 'The Bangles' as a marketable sonic commodity continue to be defined almost entirely through their voices.

Like each of the two earlier albums, *Everything* begins with a song destined to be released as a single, 'In Your Room'. The synthesisers of 'Manic Monday' have given way to guitars, but they perform a generic dance beat that could have been played by almost anyone. Suzanna Hoffs co-authored the song with B. Steinberg and T. Kelly, the pair who had penned Madonna's 'Like a Virgin'. With the lyrics, Hoffs and her collaborators have parted ways strikingly with The Bangles' previous work; between them, the last two albums had contained only a single straightforward love song, *Different Light*'s 'Walking Down Your Street' (co-authored by Susanna Hoffs, Louis Gutierrez and David Kahne). While that song had contained intimations, if self-conscious ones, of the female humiliated by her immoderate devotion to a man – 'I've got one thing on my mind, yeah, I'd even sacrifice my pride' – 'In Your Room' reduces such notions to mindless pledges of sexual compliance. As we have seen, 'Dover Beach' on *All Over the Place* seemed the crown jewel of an album fraught with fantasies of female escape; it is hard to imagine a more systematic reversal of these sentiments than the second verse of 'In Your Room'. Here the fantasy is not of escape but of confinement, of the symbolic loss of identity itself; it is his dreams we are talking about now. At the same time, the stance of this speaker seems diametrically opposed to that of 'In a Different Light'. She seeks not to control the gaze, but purposefully to construct her own position as its object,<sup>10</sup> both through the overtly exhibitionistic portrayal of her private fantasy life and in the nature of the fantasy itself (the presentation of the female in male attire has long been accepted in film criticism as a fetishising mechanism<sup>11</sup>):

I love it in your room all day,  
 When you're gone I like to try on all your clothes.  
 You won't regret it if you let me stay,  
 I'll teach you everything that a boy should know.  
 In your room,

I come alive when I'm with you,  
Gonna make your dreams come true.  
In your room.

At least in 'Manic Monday' she had a job.

This song closes with what seems a pointed reassertion of the correspondence, so essential to the first album, between sexual and artistic politics. The lyrics close with the lines, 'Feels so good, when we kiss/Nobody ever made me crazy like this.' As The Bangles' voices proceed with repetitions of the phrase, 'in your room', a previously inconspicuous keyboard enters the scene, a little too loudly, and begins a directionless, strangely modal rhapsody that goes on for more than a minute as the song works towards its fade-out. The song's largely female sonic fabric, in other words, surrenders itself to an anonymous man at the keyboard; the synthesiser's odd melodic whims, by egregiously undermining the tonal sense of the song, might even seem to embody the singer's self-diagnosed lapse into insanity, here conflated, of course, with sexual surrender.

The second single released, 'Eternal Flame', shows an even more overt reversion to the creative model of *Different Light's* singles. Apart from the innocuous bass guitar part, all is synthesisers and drum machines. Here is an ardent reassertion of the analogy between the relationship at hand and the circumstances of the musical creation: a particularly unchallenging love song finds the band capitulating to an exceptional degree to expectations regarding the role of female performers in the musical texture.

But if these two singles are unmistakably the utterances of what we have labeled The Bangles' 'public voice', there are other voices here as well, perhaps addressed to different listeners, songs whose poetry, in stark contrast to the feather-weight singles, seems closely in keeping with the hard-hitting *All Over the Place*. It is difficult not to discern in such numbers a 'private' Bangles – 'authentic' hardly seems too strong a word – in the process of coming to terms with the frustrations of their career together, and perhaps facing up to the band's impending dissolution. Characteristic is 'Watching the Sky', a song overtly concerned with making sense of the life of a celebrated, commodified woman. With Vicki Peterson – not the more radio-friendly Suzanna Hoffs – taking lead vocal, the song's middle-8 runs:

Big hotel island in a small town,  
They send me flowers for my room.  
But tonight I'll drink their wine,  
Tonight I'm going to have a good time.

The emphatic repetition of 'tonight' only works to raise the question that goes unanswered, at least in this number: What about tomorrow? If *All Over the Place* had spoken from a position of relative optimism – 'dump the jerk, for goodness sake, and get on with your life' – liberation *per se* is no longer held up as a possibility on *Everything*. Freedom is often achieved only through complete surrender in the form of self-destruction. These are the confessions, I suggest, of a band whose original vision had all but disappeared from view, a band that was quickly running out of reasons to go on.

Most telling in this respect is the album's third number, 'Bell Jar', a song whose suicidal despair is underpinned by the literary resonance of the song's title and central metaphor. (Given that this song holds roughly the same position in the song sequence that 'In a Different Light' – a song similar in temperament and

seriousness – held on the previous album, it is tempting to speculate that ‘Bell Jar’ may have been considered as the title of the album.) Despite immense popularity and outward success, the song’s female central character finds that a sense of personal fulfilment has completely eluded her. The song ends as the need for integrity, for self-knowledge, becomes conflated with the act of suicide:

She feels so at home, she’s never alone,  
But she’s oh so lonely,  
And what is the crime in knowing your mind?  
Set it free.  
Attached to the mirror in her glass-sided prison,  
She writes the note that will excuse her from this world.  
It’s complicated living in a bell jar.  
And she suffocated living in a bell jar.

The reference to Plath’s novel goes beyond the borrowing of an image, or even of the outlines of a dramatic scenario. The novel’s significance in understanding this song, I suggest, lies largely in its status as autobiography: it is not only a revolutionary novel about a woman driven to suicide by her discouragement with every option available to her, but a novel by an author whose own existence was a tangle of conflicting expectations and desires. Plath completed the bulk of the novel, and the finest poetry of her brief career, while raising two young children and trying to hold together a disintegrating marriage, committing suicide only a few months after the novel was completed. The particularly complex relationship between the reception of Plath’s work and of her art is illustrated by the fact that despite her own extremely limited output, Plath’s life has formed the subject of nearly a dozen book-length biographies.

The conclusion of the song may even be taken as a self-conscious appropriation of the autobiographical status implied by its title. After the last lyric, ‘Bell Jar’ winds into a cacophonous, largely instrumental coda whose fabric is punctuated by unrecognisable noises, sounds that might be anything from the squealing of car tyres to picks travelling lengthwise down the strings of a distorted guitar. The Bangles’ four voices enter every eight measures with a two-word motto, ‘bell jar’, sounding eerily placid in these surroundings. The last event of the song is as chilling as it is dramatic: at the moment the voices enter with their final iteration of these two words, the surrounding noise suddenly ceases altogether (the last sound the instruments make is a murky approximation of a subdominant chord); the vocal motto is heard against a field of perfect, unnerving silence. It is not difficult to recognise here a musical metaphor for the bell jar itself, as these (female) voices suddenly find themselves in a state of acute, impenetrable isolation, cut off from the surroundings that we had taken for granted. And what is displayed in this ‘bell jar’ are The Bangles’ voices, that abstraction that was placed on display in the singles that brought them to the centre of the music industry mainstream, but which they had come to regard as limiting, as a truncation of their identity.<sup>12</sup>

The subject of suicide returns for the album’s powerful closing song, ‘Crash and Burn’, one that comes to a conclusion suspiciously similar to ‘Bell Jar’ itself. The taut, guitar-heavy arrangement of ‘Crash and Burn’, animated by carefully wrought back-up vocals, shows The Bangles sounding as much like their old selves as they had in years. In the scenario laid out in the lyrics, set on the road from Los Angeles to Reno, we have changed from the third person to the first. The whole describes a sense of utter despair, a flight from an unnamed ‘they’ – already famil-

iar, perhaps, from 'Watching the Sky' (quoted above) – about whom we know nothing outside the not unimportant fact that they reside in Los Angeles. Each chorus ends with the words, 'I wish I could crash and burn.' A characteristic excerpt (first middle 8, third verse):

Fifty sixty, seventy, eighty, ninety,  
Gotta be a place where they can't find me.  
Watching all those bridges burn behind me.  
And if I can't see what's passing me,  
Nothing can touch me, and I'll fly,  
I wish I could crash and burn.

In the lyrics, the actual moment of self-destruction is not narrated – hardly surprising given the logistical constraints of the first person singular. But the song's conclusion forms a palpable depiction of the act of suicide in musical terms: after the dominant build-up ('I wish I could . . .'), the tonic resolution ('crash and burn') that had closed each previous chorus simply fails to occur. The dominant chord vanishes, unresolved, into silence, the lyrical sentence remains incomplete.

This conclusion obviously succeeds in aligning the song with 'Bell Jar', perhaps inviting us to perceive the two stories as one (even literally so; 'Bell Jar' did not, after all, mention the details of the suicide). At the same time, 'Crash and Burn' appears to build on, and to refine, the intimation of personal confession that I have attempted to isolate in the conclusion of the earlier song. Here, in the last song of their last album, we find The Bangles returning to their point of origin, recalling the sound that had once defined them as a band. But the song remains fragmentary, pointing to a goal that was never attained, as the band is seemingly cut short. This gesture, unapologetically simple as it is, seems to lay bare once and for all the sad truth at the core of their troubled career, with a symbolic intent so palpable we might venture to put it into words: 'Okay, we'll call it quits; but this is not how it was supposed to end.'

The multivalent character of this conclusion may run even deeper than this. For it is tempting to recognise here one last glimpse of the font of inspiration that had defined the band in its earliest years. *Abbey Road* – the last release that can legitimately be called a completed Beatles' album – ends with the 23-second number, 'Her Majesty'. This celebrated fragment comes to an ending much like that of 'Crash and Burn': the last sound heard in this D-major song is a distinct A in the bass range (the lowest A on the guitar), demanding a tonic resolution that never comes. The Bangles' final, self-destructive act of resistance may ultimately be conflated with a return to the touchstone that had been with them from the beginning.

## Endnotes

1. Early testimonies on the subject can be found; for example, in Pam Brandt (1982) and Jim Miller *et al.* (1985). This upheaval is traced in general terms in Gillian Gaar (1992, pp. 271–435).
2. Though an enormous bibliography has accumulated around this subject, two insightful discussions – roughly bookending the period at hand – are offered by Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie (1979) and Simon Reynolds and Joy Press (1996).
3. The relevance of this distinction is driven home in a recent remark of Courtney Love (1995, p. 68) on personal arch-enemy, Kathleen Hanna: 'Funny that they refer to her as being in a band. She's not really in a band. Bikini Kill don't really play and they don't really write songs.' Despite its one male member, Love's



- band, Hole, constitutes an important answer in the 1990s to the female punk bands of fifteen years earlier.
4. A highly informative insider's view of women's impact on the New York punk scene is offered in Georgia Christgau (1978).
  5. See, for example, Lisa Lewis' (1993) handling of the work of Madonna, Pet Benetar, Tina Turner, and Cyndi Lauper, or Susan McClary's (1991, pp. 148–56) of Madonna.
  6. The etymology of the name can actually be traced historically: the band began touring as 'The Bangs', and it was as such that they signed the recording contract that led to the EP released by IRS. Shortly before the release of the EP, they got word of a band on the east coast working under the same name. See the band's own account in Kozak (1983).
  7. One such guitar, used extensively by Lennon through these years, is on display downstairs in the Rock and Roll Museum and Hall of Fame in Cleveland, Ohio.
  8. Keyboardist Margot Mifflin (1990, p. 78) recalls her own roughly contemporary all-female band's attitude towards love songs: 'I remember having heated, gender-specific discussions with my Barefoot & Pregnant bandmates . . . often about love songs, the very thought of which conjured images of so many Top-40 bimbos that we couldn't bring ourselves to write them.' See also Barbara Bradby's (1990) important reconsideration of the sexism generally presumed to pervade the lyrics of the girl groups.
  9. This observation is based on a 1986 concert attended by the author in Northampton, Massachusetts. Sullivan (1986) also observes that 'an augmentary lone male, playing a synthesiser, keeps well to the back of the stage and looks awkward'.
  10. The question of the extent to which the 'gaze' in the recording and concert presentation of rock music can or should be defined as normatively masculine has not been fully explored. The 'maleness' of the gaze has formed a foundational assumption of feminist film theory from its inception, of course, covered in general terms in E. A. Kaplan's (1983) chapter, 'Is the gaze male?', and in Laura Mulvey's (1975) landmark article, 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema'. See also Lisa Lewis' (1993) important discussion of the presumed maleness of MTV's early audience.
  11. In her critique of the 1932, *Blonde Venus*, E. A. Kaplan writes: 'Through fetishizing the female form, man attempts to deny its *difference*; he incorporates it into his own body in addition by dressing the female in male attire. Woman qua *woman* thus disappears, rendered as she now is in likeness to man.' (1983, p. 5).
  12. The subject of suicide may be taken up again in 'Glitter Years' (track 7). A celebration of the disco scene of the early 1970s, this song takes for its central character a figure named Denny who is obviously based on the undisputed king of glitter rock, David Bowie ('dressed like a working girl from outer space', as the song puts it). Morbid undercurrents enter the song innocently enough at first as the end of the second verse finds Denny 'dancing like he wanted to dance his life away'. With the conclusion of the last verse, it is unclear whether or not it is Denny's actual death that is being recounted: 'In December of '74, Denny wrecked his father's car./Driving home that night he was singing./"You'd better hang on to yourself."'
- The last line not only constitutes a melodic and poetic quotation of David Bowie's own 'Hang On To Yourself' (*The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust*, 1972, track 10), but sounds for all the world like an uncredited vocal cameo from Bowie himself. The attention demanded by this line serves to bring into focus once more the final conceptual mingling of integrity and self-destruction.

## References

- Arnold, M. c. 1851. 'Dover Beach', in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, vol. 2, ed. M. H. Abrams (New York, 1968), pp. 1039–40
- Barrow, T. 1963. *Please Please Me* (album by The Beatles, back cover), EMI Electrola, LC1074
- Bradby, B. 1990. 'Do-talk and don't-talk: the division of the subject in girl-group music', in *On Record: Pop, Rock and the Written Word*, eds S. Frith and A. Goodwin (New York), pp. 341–67
- Brandt, P. 1982. 'At last . . . enough women rockers to pick and choose', *Ms.*, September, pp. 110–16
- Christgau, G. 1978. 'The girls can't help it', *The Village Voice*, 30 October; reprinted in *Rock She Wrote: Women Write About Rock, Pop, and Rap*, eds E. McDonnell and A. Powers (New York, 1995), pp. 47–56
- Eliot, T. S. 1917. 'The love song of J. Alfred Prufrock', *T. S. Eliot: The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909–1950* (New York, 1952), pp. 3–7
- Fissinger, L. 1986. 'Bangles Lore: *Different Light*', *Rolling Stone*, 469, 13 March, pp. 47–8

- FitzGerald, H. 1986. 'Take 4 girls', *Melody Maker*, 61, 15 February, p. 14
- Frith, S. and McRobbie, A. 1979. 'Rock and sexuality', *Screen Education*, 29, pp. 3–28; reprinted in *On Record: Pop, Rock and the Written Word*, eds S. Frith and A. Goodwin (New York, 1990), pp. 371–89
- Gaar, G. 1992. *She's a Rebel: The History of Women in Rock & Roll* (Seattle)
- Goldberg, M. 1984. 'Bangles: A female fab four?', *Rolling Stone*, 430, 13 September, p. 42
- Kaplan, E. A. 1983. *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera* (New York)
- Kozak, R. 1983. 'Three new acts offer view from distaff side', *Billboard*, 95, 18 June, p. 46
- Lewis, L. 1993. 'Being discovered: the emergence of female address on MTV', in *Sound and Vision: The Music Video Reader*, eds S. Frith, A. Goodwin, and L. Grossberg (New York), pp. 129–51
- Love, C. 1995. 'Lollapalooza '95: The Hole Truth', *Spin*, 11, December, pp. 62–75
- McClary, S. 1991. *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minnesota)
- Mifflin, M. 1990. 'The fallacy of feminism in rock', *Keyboard*, April; reprinted in *Rock She Wrote: Women Write About Rock, Pop, and Rap*, ed. E. McDonnell and A. Powers (New York, 1995), pp. 76–9
- Miller, J., McGuigan, C., Vehling, M., Huck, J., and McAleve, P. et al. 1985. 'Rock's new women', *Newswave*, 4 March, pp. 48–57
- Morris, C. 1988. 'The Bangles clink with change', *Billboard*, 100, 22 October, pp. 45, 84
- Mulvey, L. 1975. 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema', *Screen*, 16, pp. 6–18
- Orlean, S. 1987. 'California girls', *Rolling Stone*, 496, 26 March, pp. 62–4, 162–4
- Plath, S. 1971. *The Bell Jar*, first American edition (New York)
- Puterbaugh, P. 1984. 'All Over the Place: The Bangles', *Rolling Stone*, 428, 16 August, p. 38
- Reynolds, S. and Press, J. 1996. *The Sex Revolts: Gender, Rebellion, and Rock 'n' Roll* (Cambridge, MA)
- Smith, M. 1986. 'Pretty vacant: The Bangles, Town And Country Club', *Melody Maker*, 61, 15 March, p. 17
- Sullivan, C. 1986. 'The Bangles: Town And Country Club', *Melody Maker*, 61, 12 July, p. 17
- Sutherland, S. 1985. 'Party four: Bangles All Over the Place', *Melody Maker*, 60, 9 March, p. 24
- Sweeting, A. 1986. 'The Bangles: Different Light', *Melody Maker*, 61, 8 March, p. 33
- Walser, R. 1993. *Running With the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (Hanover, NH)

## Selected Discography

- The Bangles, *The Bangles* (EP). IRS, 70506. 1982
- The Bangles, *All Over the Place*. Columbia Records, 39220. 1984
- The Bangles, *Different Light*. Columbia Records, 40039. 1986
- The Bangles, *Everything*. Columbia Records, 44056. 1988

## Copyright Acknowledgments

### 'Different Light'

Words and Music by Vicki Peterson and Susanna Hoffs  
 © 1988 EMI Blackwood Music Inc. and Bangophile Music  
 All rights Controlled and Administered by EMI Blackwood Music Inc.  
 All Rights Reserved International Copyright Secured Used by Permission

### 'Watching the Sky'

Words and Music by Vicki Peterson and Susanna Hoffs  
 © 1988 EMI Blackwood Music Inc. and Bangophile Music  
 All Rights Controlled and Administered by EMI Blackwood Music Inc.  
 All Rights Reserved International Copyright Secured Used by Permission

### 'Bell Jar'

Words and Music by Vicki Peterson and Debbi Peterson  
 © 1985 EMI Blackwood Music Inc. and Bangophile Music.  
 All Rights Reserved International Copyright Secured Used by Permission

'Crash and Burn'

Words and Music by Vicki Peterson and Rachel Sweet

© 1988 EMI Blackwood Music Inc., Bangophile Music and Sweet Rebel Music.

All Rights for Bangophile Music Controlled and Administered by EMI Blackwood Music Inc.

All Rights Reserved International Copyright Secured Used by Permission

'In Your Room'

Words and Music by Billy Steinberg, Tom Kelly and Susanna Hoffs

© 1988 Sony/ATV Tunes LLC and Bangophile Music.

All Rights on behalf of Sony/ATV Tunes LLC administered by Sony/ATV Music Publishing, 8 Music Square West, Nashville, TN 37203

All Rights for Bangophile Music Controlled and Administered by EMI Blackwood Music Inc.

All Rights Reserved International Copyright Secured Used by Permission

'Taxman'

Words and Music by George Harrison

© 1966 Northern Songs Ltd.

Copyright renewed

All Rights Controlled and Administered by EMI Blackwood

Music inc. under licence from Sony/ATV Songs LLC

All Rights Reserved International Copyright Secured Used by Permission

Cover photograph, Bangles, *All Over the Place*

Reprinted courtesy of Columbia Records

Every effort has been made to contact the copyright holders of material quoted in this article. Unacknowledged authors recognising their work should come forward.