

# I Wanna Be Your Man: Suzi Quatro's musical androgyny

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## Abstract

*As a woman who performs rock music in an unabashedly 'masculine' fashion, Suzi Quatro is often criticised for trying to be 'one of the boys'. Through close examinations of Quatro's performance strategies, including her repertoire, physical performance and vocal presence, I hope to show that Quatro's performances of gender and sexual identity on sound recordings and video belie such an uncomplicated characterisation. Focusing particularly on Quatro's ability to construct multiple subject positions that are ambiguous or mutually contradictory with respect to gender and sexuality, I shall argue that the role of female cock-rocker, as she performs it, is a paradoxical one that destabilises the gender codings from which it is constructed and celebrates the polymorphousness and performativity of identity.*

I'm a girl and it's wonderful  
It fills my heart with joy  
But sometimes, yes sometimes  
I wish I were a boy.  
(Leslie Gore, 'I Wish I Were a Boy', 1964)

## Suzi Quatro, c. 1973

Dressed in a black leather jumpsuit accessorised with black leather bracelets and a studded leather dog collar, surrounded by three large, hirsute male musicians in black pants and black muscle shirts, Suzi Quatro crouches at the vocal mike. Her fingers thump out notes on her bass guitar as she sneeringly shouts the seemingly nonsensical and virtually unintelligible lyrics to her first number one hit, 'Can the Can'. The bass guitar is suspended low against her hips; she stomps her feet to the rhythm and thrusts her pelvis forward, against the bass, and back in a humping motion. With each cry of the lead guitar on the bridge, she thrusts herself toward the microphone with growing urgency as her vocals rise in pitch to climax finally at the chorus.

## Suzi Quatro, c. 1978

Suzi Quatro has her back to the audience; she is facing her band as they play the opening bars of Tom Petty's 'Breakdown'. Her legs spread wide apart, she shifts her weight from hip to hip to the beat. Turning to the audience, she walks to the vocal mike: 'It's all right if you love me/It's all right if you don't . . .' She emphasises the downbeats by pumping the air with her right fist and gripping the fret board of her bass guitar hard with her left hand. As she screams the chorus – 'Break down/Go ahead and give it to me' – she pulls her right fist down through the air and pushes her

hips against the bass. On the bridge, she moves across the stage in a crouch, faces the audience, lifts her bass and brings it down between her legs so that it points straight out at the crowd. She jerks it up on each downbeat, then holds it up in a pose of erotic ecstasy with her head thrown back. When the chorus comes around again, she runs back to the vocal mike, stamping and kicking her left leg out as she shouts 'Bay-beh!'<sup>1</sup>

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To paraphrase the Ramones, Suzi is a cock-rocker. When Simon Frith (1981, p. 227) describes the cock-rocker, perhaps the quintessential image of the male rock musician, he could be describing Suzi Quatro:

cock-rock performance means an explicit, crude, 'masterful' expression of sexuality . . . Cock-rock performers are aggressive, boastful, constantly drawing audience attention to their prowess and control. Their bodies are on display . . . mikes and guitars are phallic symbols (or else caressed like female bodies), the music is loud, rhythmically insistent, built around techniques of arousal and release. Lyrics are assertive and arrogant, but the exact words are less significant than the vocal styles involved, the shrill shouting and screaming.

In the early 1970s, Suzi Quatro was unique. Although there were many women in rock by the late 1960s, most performed only as singers, a traditionally feminine position in popular music. At the time of Quatro's emergence in 1973, no other prominent female musician worked in rock simultaneously as a singer, instrumentalist, songwriter and bandleader. Quatro, who is from a musical family in Detroit, began her career in an 'all-girl' garage band, Suzi Soul and the Pleasure Seekers, formed with two of her three sisters in 1964. Beginning in the mid-1960s, a plethora of such groups appeared across the United States, some of whom rocked as aggressively as their male peers.<sup>2</sup> A notable example was a group called She, from Sacramento, California, whose leader, Nancy Ross, set out, also in 1964, to create a female version of the Rolling Stones. Ross, a guitarist and singer, wrote the group's songs, scathing social critiques reflecting the attitude of a highly intelligent and disaffected adolescent woman, which She presented very assertively in live performances. She was active for about eight years, but the group's career was limited largely to playing high schools, air force bases and college fraternity houses. Although She recorded fairly extensively, only one single was ever released, with no commercial success.<sup>3</sup> The story of She is typical of the all-girl garage bands of the period. Although these groups provided young women with opportunities to participate in rock and some experienced regional success, not one of them achieved success on a larger scale as recording artists or live performers. Perhaps as a result, the all-girl garage band phenomenon did not provide viable templates for women's on-going participation in rock, leaving women like Quatro to seek elsewhere for them.

While playing with a later version of the Pleasure Seekers, now renamed Cradle, Quatro was seen in 1971 by the British record producer Mickie Most, who was in Detroit recording British guitarist Jeff Beck. He offered to help establish Quatro as a solo artist if she were willing to move to the UK, which she did at the end of 1971. After a false start, she began working with Nickie Chinn and Mike Chapman, known collectively as Chinnichap, a highly successful songwriting and record producing team, who helped Quatro put together a working band, made up of male musicians, with whom she both recorded and performed live.<sup>4</sup> Quatro's first single release under Chinnichap's guidance, 'Can the Can', made it to number one on the British charts in the spring of 1973. Over the next ten years, she charted in the UK with sixteen songs,

including two number ones and five in the top ten. She has never enjoyed the same level of success in the United States, where her only top-forty record was 'Stumblin' In', a 1978 duet with Chris Norman, the lead singer of another Chinnichap group, Smokie, that reached number five on the US charts early in 1979. In a parallel career as an actress, however, Quatro achieved some popularity in the US by playing Leather Tuscadero, a character based on her rock persona, on the *Happy Days* television show. After more than thirty-five years of performing as a rock musician, Quatro remains active, touring, performing and recording. Although the senior citizen status of some male musicians of the first generation of rockers has been noted of late, chiefly by stand-up comics, Quatro is now one of the very few female musicians even to be faced with the question of whether one is ever too old to rock 'n' roll.<sup>5</sup>

Quatro, who characterises herself as always having been 'a blue jean leather jacket tomboy', aspired from the first to be 'a rocker from the Elvis, Little Richard school' (personal communication 2000, 2001). Although Quatro came of age musically at a time when there were a few prominent women rock musicians, she took male performers as her models, finding even Grace Slick (of the Jefferson Airplane), who is not always considered a paragon of traditional femininity, 'too female and swooshy . . .' (personal communication 2001). Fully recognising that rock was dominated by men, she saw herself as 'kicking down the male door in rock and roll and proving that a female MUSICIAN . . . and this is a point I am extremely concerned about . . . could play as well if not better than the boys' (personal communication 2000). Given Quatro's desire to show that women can be effective cock-rockers, her emphasis on her status as an instrumentalist, not just a singer, is well placed. As Ruth Padel (2000, p. 322) puts it, 'You don't change gender stereotypes [in rock] – threatening misogynist defences *en route* – by singing but by playing' (see also Clawson 1999, p. 195). Even as commanding a performer as Janis Joplin ultimately cannot be seen as a powerful figure in the context of the rock culture of her time because she did not play guitar on stage.<sup>6</sup> Padel continues: 'Performing on guitar, the core act of rock, is whipping out your cock' (2000, p. 323).

Quatro plays bass guitar, not guitar. Mary Ann Clawson (1999) suggests that in the indie rock of the 1980s and 1990s, the bass guitar became feminised as more women became rock bass players. Many of those women explained their choice of instrument by arguing that the musical role of the bass guitarist is congruent with women's 'supportive nature' and their intrinsic willingness to subordinate their individual needs to those of the group (Clawson 1999, pp. 204–5; needless to say, Clawson critiques the essentialism of these claims). Quatro, the forerunner of these female indie rock bassists, does not interpret the role of bass player as feminised and supportive; rather, she plays bass with the all showy, phallic panache of a lead guitarist (see Figure 1).<sup>7</sup> For one thing, she wears the bass far down on her hips in the fashion of a cock-rock guitarist; a position Mavis Bayton (1997, pp. 43–5) identifies as typically masculine in her essay, 'Women and the electric guitar' (see Figure 2). For another, Quatro presents herself quite clearly as her band's leader and front person. In the performance of 'Breakdown' I described earlier, Quatro is the only musician in motion during the guitar solo. She thus appears to be the author of that solo – by miming the lead guitarist's solo, she temporarily usurps his position in the band. She has appeared on occasion just as a bass player, not a singer, and demonstrates her instrumental prowess with an extended bass guitar solo during her own concerts. By foregrounding her status as a rock player, not just a singer, Quatro declares ownership of the symbolic rock cock.



*Figure 1. Suzi Quatro in live performance 2000. Photo credit: David Alcott, president of the Suzi Quatro fanclub in Australia.*

From the perspective of the on-going cultural critique of gender in rock, Quatro is a troubling figure who is usually ignored, maligned or marginalised in historical accounts. In this critique, rock is characterised as a fundamentally male enterprise: the music was (and largely still is) created by men, reflects masculine concerns and sexuality, and tends toward misogyny. As the history of all-girl garage bands suggests, women have made inroads at the margins of this enterprise; for the most part, however, the history of rock has been a history of the active exclusion of women as significant artistic voices. 'As a result', writes rock critic Dave Marsh (1985, p. 160), 'rock's sexual dialogue became stunted. In soul, Otis Redding had to answer to Carla



Figure 2. Suzi Quatro in live performance 2000. Photo credit: David Alcott, president of the Suzi Quatro fanclub in Australia.

Thomas; in country, Conway Twitty's roving eye was matched by Loretta Lynn's sass and suss. But in rock . . . sexual expression is characterised by a startling, matter-of-fact adolescent chauvinism'.<sup>8</sup> For a woman to participate in such an overtly masculinist subculture is often seen as embarrassing from a gender-political standpoint.

Many contributors to the gender critique of rock warily navigate the shoals of essentialism, taking care to avoid making claims that either the music itself or the ways it is performed are intrinsically male. But many such arguments, while technically avoiding essentialism, ultimately inscribe heterosexual masculinity in rock so firmly as to leave little room for other formulations. For instance, Padel begins her

engaging book *I'm a Man: Sex, Gods, and Rock 'N' Roll* by arguing that music is not a 'natural' expression of anything, but is culturally defined and produced. In a subsequent chapter, she skilfully teases out how first the acoustic guitar, then the electric guitar came to be culturally constructed as male instruments in the discourses of blues, country music and rock 'n' roll, all musical genres that contributed to the development of rock. But the final step of Padel's argument is to suggest that when the electric guitar was taken up as the central instrument of rock, it was put into the service of a music that 'was the sound of the male teenage body, and the symbolism of its music – swollen volume plus "dexterity" – is deeply male' (2000, p. 81). Because this conclusion seems to root musical expression in physical properties attributed to a specific kind of body and sexuality, it becomes necessary to remind oneself that Padel has implicitly posited this musical gendering as a historical and cultural process, not a biological one. As a consequence of such arguments, the assertion that 'rock is a male form' (Frith and McRobbie 1990 [1978], p. 373) has become so powerful a critical dictum that it functions as an essence even when the argument supporting the assertion manages to skirt essentialism.

The perspective from which I wish to approach these issues is informed by an understanding of gender and sexual identity as *performative*. This approach, as articulated in sociology by Erving Goffman (1979) and Candace West (1987) and in theory by Judith Butler (1988), refuses essentialism by insisting that social and aesthetic performances of gender and sexuality do not reflect foundational identities; rather, those identities are constituted through such performances and have no existence prior to them. As Goffman (1979, p. 27) puts it:

What the human nature of males and females really consists of, then, is a capacity to learn to provide and read depictions of masculinity and femininity and a willingness to adhere to a schedule for presenting these pictures . . . One might just as well say there is no gender identity. There is only a schedule for the portrayal of gender.<sup>9</sup>

Regarding popular music, I am interested not in what musicians and their music *are* in terms of gender and sexuality, but in how musicians *portray* gender identities and sexualities through coded uses of their voices, bodies, and song repertoires. Popular music performances are always double-coded with respect to gender identity and sexuality since they refer both to general social codes and to genre-specific codes that signify within particular musical and cultural categories. While I am somewhat sceptical as to the degree to which counter-normative performances of gender or sexuality can actually help to undermine deep-seated social norms, I do believe that popular music is a realm in which performers can at least challenge those norms by using familiar codes to construct – and thus make visible – unconventional representations of gender and sexuality.

In taking a performative view of gender and sexuality, I do not at all discount the importance of showing how powerfully and completely rock and rock culture have been 'sexed' as male and how difficult that has made it for women to participate meaningfully in rock.<sup>10</sup> But the gender critique of rock severely forecloses the critical options for thinking about a performer such as Suzi Quatro as anything other than a gender traitor. As Frith (1981, p. 239) sees it, the basic problem for the female rock performer was 'not whether rock stars are sexist, but whether women could enter their discourse, appropriate their music, without having to become "one of the boys"'. Simon Reynolds and Joy Press (1995, p. 233) identify being 'one of the boys', which they call 'female machisma', as one of four strategies women musicians may

adopt to enter rock discourse, describing it as a 'tradition [that] runs from Suzi Quatro through Joan Jett to L7: hard-rock, punky attitude, women impersonating the toughness, independence, and irreverence of the male rebel posture'.<sup>11</sup> Joanne Gottlieb and Gayle Wald (1994, p. 260), responding to Frith, have criticised this approach, saying that it 'reifies the roles available to women, closes off the resistive possibilities of rock for women, and ultimately begs the question of rock's masculine hegemony'.

Women rockers, especially those of the first generation, are forced by this critique into a position between rock and a hard place. The assumption is that rock is so fundamentally sexist and misogynist that for a woman to base her performance of rock on the most readily available models – those provided by male performers – cannot be considered a respectable option. For their part, Reynolds and Press (1995, p. 233) provide assessments of each of the four strategies they identify, noting the value and limitations of each one. Their treatment is even handed, except when it comes to female machisma, which they dismiss out of hand as 'unsatisfactory [because] it simply emulates male rebellion, including its significant component of misogyny ...' Taken as a whole, the gender critique of rock holds female rockers hostage to a historical imperative underwritten by a master narrative of progress: it is not enough for women to make rock music; they must also change rock by transcending its masculinist origins and making it somehow specifically female. Although Gottlieb and Wald (1994) point out the flaws of such a narrow position, their own analysis imposes other limitations. In assessing the riot grrrls phenomenon of the early 1990s, Gottlieb and Wald suggest that it is acceptable for women to be loud, aggressive, hard-rockers as long as their performance constitutes an overtly critical inversion of cock-rock performance style clearly intended to expose rock's male dominance and make political points.

In a book on heavy metal rock, a musical genre regarded with great suspicion by proponents of the gender critique I have been discussing here, Robert Walser (1993, p. 136) puts forth an alternative to that critique's demand for a music that is both identifiably rock and certifiably non-masculinist, suggesting that

we can spot many extant examples of rock music that use the powerful codings of gender available in order to engage with, challenge, disrupt, or transform ... rock's representations of gender ... The point of criticism should not be to decide whether rock music is oppositional or co-optive with respect to gender, class, or any other social category, but rather to analyze how it arbitrates tensions between opposition and co-optation at particular historical moments.

In this spirit, I propose to take a close look at Suzi Quatro's performance practices. I hope to show that Quatro does not simply embody 'female machisma', that her performances of gender and sexual identity are strategically ambiguous and undecidable in ways that contest such an uncomplicated characterisation. The role of female cock-rocker, as she performs it, is not merely a recapitulation of a retrograde masculinist stance but a paradoxical position that destabilises the gender codings from which it is constructed.

The specific subcultural context in which Quatro achieved her professional success is significant. 1972 and 1973, the years when Quatro was emerging as a recording artist, were also the banner years of glam rock in the UK. Her producers, Chinnichap, were known for having promoted some of the most commercially successful British Glam groups, especially the Sweet, and Quatro was perceived as the sole female glam rock artist. Glam, exemplified in its most sophisticated form by performers like David Bowie and Marc Bolan of T. Rex, presented male musicians in

androgynous personae. For Todd Haynes (1998, p. x), director of the film *Velvet Goldmine*, glam was 'the result of a unique blending of underground American rock with a distinctly English brand of camp theatricality and gender-bending. And for a brief time, pop culture would proclaim that identities and sexualities were not stable things but quivery and costumed . . .'<sup>12</sup> Quatro's membership in the Chinnichap stable of artists, her status as an habituée of the London glam rock scene, and her masculine image made identification as a glam rocker almost inevitable in the early 1970s. As Arthur Davis (2000, p. 2) describes it, her performance persona could readily be understood as a female response to glam's androgynous male images: 'Since many male glam rockers wore mascara and dressed as women (e.g. the original LP sleeve of David Bowie's *The Man Who Sold the World* [1971] where Bowie was wearing a dress), Suzi would wear very little make-up and – from a distance – looked somewhat like a man in her leather catsuit'. Although Quatro understandably resists having her entire artistic production assimilated to the category of glam rock, she embraces glam's androgynous agenda: 'I am able to be a chameleon quite easily switching genders in every sense . . . I still haven't perfected peeing in a urinal yet but give me time . . .' (personal communication 2000).

Quatro's engagement with gender-play is apparent in all her performance strategies, from her on-stage masculine image and cock-rocker gestures to the songs she chooses and the ways she performs them.<sup>13</sup> Some of the songs she has recorded are clever gender-reversals of earlier songs identified with male artists. Chinnichap's 'Daytona Demon' (1973), for instance, is clearly a revision of 'Tallahassee Lassie', recorded in 1959 by Freddy Cannon, in that both songs are paeans to love objects that equate the lover (female for Cannon, male for Quatro) with a fast car by reference to a city in Florida.<sup>14</sup> Aside from songs Chinnichap or Quatro herself have written, however, much of Quatro's repertoire is taken from the work of well-known male singers and songwriters, including such iconic male rockers as Chuck Berry, Elvis Presley, Little Richard, the Beatles and Bruce Springsteen. She performs such classic rock songs as 'All Shook Up', 'Keep A-Knockin' and 'Born to Run'. Performing this material is part of Quatro's bid to be seen as a legitimate rocker by demonstrating her mastery of the genre's canonical literature and performance idioms.

Quatro's recordings of other people's songs belong in the category of cover songs, a well-established trope in rock music. As Deena Weinstein (1998, p. 138) points out, cover songs are unique to rock as a popular music genre in that they iterate 'a prior recorded performance of a song by a particular artist, rather than simply the song itself as an entity separate from any performer or performance'. Covers are therefore intrinsically intertextual and invoke the previous recording's historical presence. They may serve various ideological purposes – historical precedent may be recreated or rejected, revered or reviled, but functions in all cases as the cover's point of reference. One ideological use rock musicians make of covers is to 'validate their own authenticity as musicians' (Weinstein 1998, p. 141) by referring to artists, songs and recordings considered as authentic within a particular rock subgenre. (Weinstein's example is of British Invasion groups of the early 1960s who recorded American blues and rhythm and blues songs to establish their own musical and cultural credentials.)

By performing songs closely associated with archetypal male rockers, Quatro does much the same ideological work, though the line she is crossing is different, having to do with establishing credibility as a female rocker rather than a non-American one. (The fact that Quatro is an American who works primarily in the UK



and Europe makes it somewhat ironic that her desire to transgress gender boundaries in rock caused her to recapitulate the authenticating process undertaken by British rockers seeking the cachet of Americanness.) Thus, when Quatro recorded the song 'Trouble', originally performed by Elvis in the film *King Creole* (1958), she not only played out the exaggerated, masculine braggadocio of the lyric ('I'm evil/Trouble is my middle name') but also aligned herself with a performance tradition of male swagger that includes Elvis but reaches deep into the history of rock 'n' roll and rhythm and blues. 'Trouble', written by Jerry Lieber and Mike Stoller, is one member of a song family that includes at least three other songs that are musically almost identical, but have different lyrics. These include the hard-bitten prison saga 'Riot in Cell Block #9', also by Lieber and Stoller, recorded by The Robbins in 1954, and one of the Ur-texts of blues machismo, 'Hoochie Coochie Man', written by Willie Dixon and recorded famously by Muddy Waters, also in 1954.<sup>15</sup> Another member of this song family is the well-known Lieber/Stoller composition 'I'm a Woman', recorded by Peggy Lee in 1962. Although this latter song is assertive in its own way, it requires the female singer to present herself as a male fantasy of womanhood, simultaneously breathtakingly seductive and completely domestic. The American folk-blues singer Maria Muldaur covered 'I'm a Woman' in 1974, close in time to when Quatro's version of 'Trouble' was released. One need only imagine hearing Quatro's and Muldaur's respective recordings one after the other on the radio to understand how each artist aligns herself with a different strand of gender representation in popular music by choosing one musically similar Lieber and Stoller song rather than the other.

Quatro's performances of songs strongly identified with male artists raise questions other than those concerned with establishing her authenticity as a rocker, however. A fundamental question is: What does it mean for a woman to perform 'masculine' music as a way of participating in rock discourse, not of critiquing it or ironising it? To suggest that a performer like Quatro disappears behind her material to become only a replication of a male image and attitude is to seriously misjudge the effect of her performance. Quatro herself summarises her position by saying: 'I was enjoying the delights of beating the men at their own game *and still being a woman*' (personal communication 2001; my emphasis). These last few words are critically important – watching Quatro perform or listening to her recordings, we do not somehow forget that she is a woman. She no more becomes a man (or some very near equivalent to a man) by wearing leather and rocking out than David Bowie became a woman by wearing a dress and mincing around the stage. In Quatro's performances, her body and voice, socially encoded as feminine, convey songs and gestures culturally encoded as masculine. Neither signification absorbs or negates the other – rather, they form an unstable compound whose own internal tensions open up other possibilities for signification.

Quatro is not, of course, the first artist in the history of rock to perform songs written for a singer of the opposite sex, actually a fairly common practice. But one aspect of Quatro's approach is unusual – when she performs songs associated with male artists and masculine subjectivity, she does not change the lyrics. Thus, when Quatro recorded the John Lennon/Paul McCartney composition 'I Wanna Be Your Man' (recorded first by the Rolling Stones, then the Beatles) on her first album, she left the lyrics intact and sang 'I wanna be your man' not 'I wanna be your girl', which would have been the conventional way of altering the song for a female singer. Before discussing Quatro's particular performances further, I would like to consider this strategy in general terms.

When The Paris Sisters, a girl-group, recorded Bobby Darrin's song 'Dream Lover' in 1964, they followed the conventional practice of giving the lyrics a sex-change operation, substituting, for instance, 'I want a boy to call my own' for Darrin's 'I want a girl to call my own'. Such a change can be read as underlining differences between male and female desire. Men and women want different things; therefore, the words to the song have to be altered to reflect those differences. I will argue that such alterations actually imply the opposite: that male and female desire is not fundamentally different but analogous. The intertextuality of cover songs means that The Paris Sisters' rendition refers to Bobby Darrin's; the fact that the song was first recorded by a masculine voice is thus contained within the new rendition. The implication of this intertextual reference is that the song worked as an expression of male desire and, with some cosmetic surgery, works equally well as an expression of female desire. The song is thus posited as a non-gender-specific expression of romantic longing that can alternate unproblematically between expressing male and female subjectivity.

The ease with which pop and rock songs can be resexed is a function of the normative gender identities and heterosexual imperative deeply ingrained in the cultural context of popular music. In that context, male and female desire are interchangeable because they are symmetrical: each desires the other and only the other. Bobby Darrin's desire for a girl to call his own is structurally identical to the Paris Sisters' need for a boy to call their own. If the lyrics were not altered, if the Paris Sisters were to sing of wanting a girl, the heterosexual matrix of popular music would be called into question as the song would seem to be expressing a kind of desire for which there are no coordinates in that matrix. This is why, as Frith (1996, p. 195) points out, 'gay and lesbian singers can subvert pop standards by *not* changing the words' (original emphasis). Although Frith makes an important observation, I think his claim that the song is subverted by this strategy is open to question. One of his examples is Ian Matthews' 1971 recording of 'Da Doo Ron Ron', a song celebrating a new lover that was written for female voices and recorded originally by a girl-group, the Crystals, in 1963. It is perfectly possible to hear Matthews' performance not as subverting the song but as validating it by showing its expansiveness, demonstrating that it can be used to celebrate homosexual love as well as heterosexual love. Matthews' version operates within the logic of the rock cover song; his version refers to (and thus reifies) the original recording and gains much of its impact precisely from the listener's knowledge that a well-known song is being employed in an unanticipated way. In this reading, Matthews' performance does not subvert the song but, rather, the ideology of popular music that makes heterosexuality normative within its discourses. Frith's statement also borders unnecessarily on essentialism. The singer does not have to be gay or lesbian for a performance to have the impact I just described. All that is necessary is that the singer's voice be heard as belonging to the gender other than the one implied by the lyrics. The Paris Sisters' hypothetical recording of 'Dream Lover' with unmodified lyrics would imply non-heterosexual desire regardless of their actual sexual preference – not even because they are women, but simply because their voices are coded as feminine.

I have characterised Quatro's cock-rocker performance as one based in a productive tension: when a masculinely coded performance style is juxtaposed with a femininely coded body, both sets of significations are present – neither cancels the other out. Something similar happens when Quatro performs songs identified with

male performers. Because she is using those songs to establish her own legitimacy as a rocker, she leaves them intact and performs them unironically – straight, so to speak. But the mere fact that her voice is coded as feminine inevitably puts an unconventional spin on her chosen material. When Quatro performs Elvis Presley's 'All Shook Up' on her first album, *Suzi Quatro* (1973), and we hear her sing: 'She touches my hand/What a thrill I've got/Her lips are like a volcano that's hot', it's very easy to hear the lyric as describing same-sex eros. Indeed, almost every line in the song is opened to possible new meanings when sung by a female voice, including 'My friends say I'm acting queer as a bug'. 'All Shook Up' starts to sound like a coming-out song – the female protagonist declares her love for another woman while acknowledging that the whole prospect of falling in love in this (perhaps unexpected) way makes her a bit nervous.

The point I wish to emphasise here is that this queer reading of Quatro's performance does not supplant the straight reading she is giving of the song but complements it. Rock singers are actors, after all – they portray the persona represented as speaking through the song lyrics and different personae through different songs. It is therefore equally possible that in 'All Shook Up', Quatro is singing from the point of view of a man exulting in new love as it is that she's playing a woman who has discovered a kind of eros that is new to her. The recording supports both interpretations equally; neither is more legitimate than the other. This dual signification is underlined by the use of backing vocals on the recording. In the second part of the song, Quatro provides her own backing vocals through multitracking; in the last part, there are male backing vocals. Both choices position Quatro as a 'male' singer. In rock, it is conventional for a male lead singer to be backed by female voices (see Frith 1996, p. 187); Quatro's serving as her own back-up group reflects this convention. Elvis, however, used a male back-up group, the Jordanaires, on his early recordings. The male back-up vocals in the latter portion of Quatro's recording refer to Elvis's version and, thus, implicitly equate Quatro with Presley. But the establishment of that equation also undermines it. The presence of masculinely coded voices both positions Quatro as a male lead singer and reasserts, by contrast and because they sing a repeated refrain of 'She's all shook up', the feminine coding of Quatro's own voice. The representation of gender and sexuality in Quatro's performance is thus polyvalent and undecidable.

This undecidability is particularly evident in Quatro's rendition of 'I Wanna Be Your Man', also on her first album. As Quatro sings 'I wanna be your lover, baby/I wanna be your man', it is uncertain whom she is representing through those words, and to whom that character is addressing them. Within the convention of the song's narrative, she could be playing a man declaring love to a woman. If the character is a woman, however, as the timbre of Quatro's voice itself would suggest, to whom is she speaking? The song, as written, is presumably addressed to a woman. What might it mean for Quatro, as a woman, to say 'I Wanna Be Your Man' to another woman? For that matter, what would it mean for her to say 'I Wanna Be Your Man' to a male love object? When Quatro repeats the opening line of the song, she pauses significantly before the word 'man' – 'I wanna be your . . . man' – and moans that word erotically. This pause has the effect of bracketing the word 'man', of making it stand apart from the flow of the lyrics. This bracketing can be heard as implying that, for Quatro, the word 'man' signifies a pose, an erotic identity she can assume temporarily in order to have a particular relationship with her partner, whether male or female.<sup>16</sup> The song's subsequent lyrics seem to ask the object of Quatro's erotic attention to embrace

these polymorphous possibilities: 'Tell me that you love me, baby/Tell me that you understand'.

Male backing vocals work much the same way on this recording as on 'All Shook Up'. Rather than indexing the Jordanaires, the male vocals on 'I Wanna Be Your Man' refer to the way the Beatles, like the members of most male rock groups, often serve as each other's back-up singers. This reference again positions Quatro as a male lead singer. But the voices themselves contrast masculine coding with the feminine coding of Quatro's voice, marking her simultaneously as a woman. This effect is all the more pronounced when, in the second half of the song, the male vocalists sing the line 'I wanna be your man' in unison with Quatro, directly juxtaposing a conventional, masculine rendition of the lyric with Quatro's own voice. This doubling provides Quatro with a dual gender identity: insofar as she sings a 'male' song from a masculine point of view and occupies a masculine position in her group, she embodies masculine subjectivity. Insofar as the presence of masculinely coded voices contrast her femininely coded voice, she occupies a feminine subjectivity. This duality is unresolved, as is the question of the singer's sexual identity, since Quatro's dual gender position makes it impossible to determine to whom the song is addressed and what kind of love relationship is implied.

It is noteworthy that in the one instance in which Quatro did change the lyrics to a well-known song, the change she made pushes the song in the direction of greater gender ambiguity. The song, 'Glad All Over', first recorded by The Dave Clark Five, a British Invasion group, in 1964, expresses the joy attendant on the forging of a new love relationship ('I'm feeling glad all over/Now that you're mine'). In the song's bridge, the singer expresses his loyalty by saying: 'Other girls may try to take me away/But you know it's by your side I will stay'. When performing 'Glad All Over', Quatro alters that lyric to 'Other boys may try to take you away'. This revised lyric is syntactically ambiguous: boys other than whom – the singer or the addressee of the song?<sup>17</sup> The exact distribution of gender and sexual identities implied by this lyric cannot be fully specified.

Quatro further explores the possibility of performing different gender identities simultaneously in her recording of the Little Richard song 'Keep A-Knockin' (1957), from her second album, *Quatro* (1974). Quatro imposes her own narrative on the song, turning it into a cautionary coming-of-age tale for 'all you sixteen year-old girls out there'. Quatro makes the song into a lesson in female coquetry, advising teen-age girls to tell their male suitors, on the one hand, 'You keep a-knockin' but you can't come in' and, on the other, 'Come back tomorrow night/And try it again'. Quatro thus turns Little Richard's lyric into an explicitly heterosexual drama of female virtue under siege.<sup>18</sup>

In the latter part of the recording, Quatro again addresses her audience (the recording is not a live recording but simulates liveness with crowd sounds), this time to ask that they sing along with her. She divides the audience into boys and girls, asking that the boys sing the line 'Keep a-knockin' and that the girls respond with 'But you can't come in'. Quatro sings along with the boys, assigning herself to the masculine position even though her overall posture is that of an older confidante dispensing sexual advice to younger women. A close listening reveals, however, that the voices of the 'girls' who demurely sing 'But you can't come in' in response to the boys' overture all belong to Quatro, her voice multitracked to sound like a group. Through her use of recording technology, Quatro plays several roles of different genders, alternately identifying herself with the male assault on female virtue and a

flirtatious feminine defence of that virtue.<sup>19</sup> Unlike Quatro's renditions of the other songs I've discussed here, her take on 'Keep A-Knockin' does not disturb the heterosexual matrix of rock. Quatro, however, simultaneously performs different and mutually exclusive roles within the song's heterosexual drama.

In addition to occupying different gender positions in the space of a single song, Quatro can assume differently gendered roles over the course of an album. The US edition of her album, *If You Knew Suzi . . .* (1979) contains her one major American hit, 'Stumblin' In'. On this Chinnichap romantic duet about the start of a relationship, Chris Norman and Suzi Quatro adopt normative pop music gender roles by seemingly emulating Sonny and Cher. Norman's gravelly voice, though more conventionally musical than Sonny Bono's, has a similar informality. Quatro, for her part, sings in her lower register and uses a vibrato reminiscent of Cher's characteristic vocal style. The lyric places the female character in a position subordinate to the male by suggesting that she's somewhat younger than he and that he is her guide in things romantic. (It is interesting that the album ends with 'Wiser than You', a song in which the embittered female protagonist explicitly repudiates the older man/younger woman romantic scenario of 'Stumblin' In'.)<sup>20</sup> But even this very conventional musical performance takes on other meanings when presented through Quatro's preferred performance image. Quatro appeared with Norman in a television performance of 'Stumblin' In' wearing a decidedly masculine vested suit. Because both she and Norman had very similar shoulder-length shag haircuts and the whole scene was shot in soft focus and as if lit by candles, the two singers look very similar – they could be mistaken for two men, one somewhat more boyish than the other. In the context of a homosexual romance, the status of one lover as older than the other and lyrics like 'Baby, you've shown me so many things that I never knew' take on very different meanings than those most likely to be apprehended from just listening to the record. In this case, Quatro's video performance destabilises the gendered sexual implications of her own recorded song in much the same way that Quatro's performances of rock songs associated with male performers create spaces for gender and sexual ambiguity within them.

'Stumblin' In' and the first song on *If You Knew Suzi . . .*, 'If You Can't Give Me Love' both present Quatro in roles that are entirely conventional for a female pop singer. If the former joins her in heterosexual bliss with a male singer, the latter presents Quatro as a woman telling a potential suitor that she's interested only in true love, not just sex. By contrast, Quatro shows up elsewhere on the album in her cock-rocker demeanour, aggressively performing such masculinist songs as Tom Petty's 'Breakdown' and Rick Derringer's 'Rock and Roll Hoochie Koo'. Frith (1996, p. 199) notes that 'a pop star is like a film star, taking on many parts but retaining an essential "personality" that is common to all of them and the basis of their popular appeal'. Quatro indeed plays multiple roles on her recordings and in her performances. To the extent that these roles imply malleable and indefinable gender and sexual identities, however, she does not exhibit an 'essential "personality"'. Instead, she enacts the polymorphousness, undecideability and performativity of identity.

## Acknowledgements

The author is grateful to David Alcott for permission to reproduce the photographs of Suzi Quatro.

## Endnotes

1. These descriptions are based on videotapes of performances by Quatro. They appear as part of a bootleg anthology of about nine hours' worth of Quatro's collected television and live concert appearances. Because the tapes are not annotated, exact dates and sources of these performances and the others I discuss here are unknown.
2. 'The garage bands of the late 1960s, so called as exponents made the music in the garage or basement, were especially prominent in the United States, where they responded to the British Invasion of the American market ... Garage rock's musical characteristics were "a premium on sheer outrageousness, over the top vocal screams and sneers, loud guitars that almost always had a fuzztone"'. The genre was the province largely of white, teenage suburbanites. It first emerged around 1965, predominantly on tiny, local record labels, linked to strong regional scenes (especially Texas and California), each with a distinctive style. The genre declined in 1967–8 with the impact of the Vietnam War draft and college attendance on band members, and the performers' general lack of commercial success' (Shuker 1998, pp. 140–1).
3. This account of She's history derives from the CD, *She Wants a Piece of You*, and the liner notes by Alec Palao and Joey D.
4. For a detailed discussion of Chinnichap, see Hoskyns (1998, pp. 40–8).
5. For a fuller career biography of Quatro, see Oglesbee (1999). I am grateful to Dr. Oglesbee for consulting with me about Quatro. I have also drawn on Gaar (1992, pp. 218–21), Stambler (1989, pp. 546–7) and Unterberger (1997, p. 745).
6. Paradoxically, the artists identified by Frith and McRobbie (1990[1978], p. 374) as archetypal male cock-rockers perform only as singers: Mick Jagger of the Rolling Stones, Roger Daltrey of the Who, and Robert Plant of Led Zeppelin (Jim Morrison of the Doors also belongs on this list). Arguably, such performers had to compensate for occupying that feminine position by engaging in lewd and lascivious conduct onstage and off, using the microphone as a substitute for the guitar, and – in the case of Morrison – allegedly exposing himself on stage.
7. Quatro's performance as a bass player who fronts a band and has the presence of a lead guitarist is unusual, as the typical rock bassist's performance is that of a taciturn background figure. Kim Gordon, the female bass player for Sonic Youth, interprets the usual recessiveness of bassists in terms of a heterosexual female imaginary related to, yet quite different from, Quatro's: 'Before picking up a bass I was just another girl with a fantasy. What would it be like to be right under the pinnacle of energy, beneath two guys crossing their guitars ... ? For my purposes, being obsessed with boys playing guitars, being as ordinary as possible, being a girl bass player is ideal, because the swirl of Sonic Youth music makes me forget about being a girl. I like being in a weak position and making it strong' (quoted in Reynolds and Press 1995, p. 246).
8. Frith and McRobbie (1990[1978], p. 384) make much the same point but present the situation in somewhat more complex terms: 'In general, it seems that soul and country musics, blatantly sexist in their organization and presentation, in the themes and concerns of their lyrics, allow their female performers an autonomous musical power that is rarely achieved by women in rock'.
9. Although it is currently fashionable to cite Judith Butler as the sole authority on the performative approach to gender and sexuality, I would like to put in a plug for the earlier sociological literature (represented here by Goffman and West) that arrived at much the same set of positions by a different route. For a brief sketch of the similarities between Goffman's analysis and Butler's, see Auslander (2003, p. 19).
10. I am thinking here of Keith Negus's useful statement that 'rock is a genre that has been sexed in a very particular way, and as such its generic codes and conventions can present a formidable barrier to musicians who want to challenge and change them' (1996, pp. 127–8).
11. The other three strategies are: 'the affirmation of "feminine" qualities' in rock, the postmodernist celebration of 'female imagery and iconography' as 'a wardrobe of masks and poses to be assumed', and 'an aesthetic that concerns itself ... with the trauma of identity formation' (Reynolds and Press 1995, pp. 233–4). In their chapter on female machisma, Reynolds and Press offer a genealogy of hard-rocking women, citing Quatro as 'the archetypal male impersonator' (1995, p. 244) and including Patti Smith, Chrissie Hynde (of the Pretenders), Kate Bush, P.J. Harvey, Joan Jett, Ann and Nancy Wilson (of Heart), Lita Ford, Kim Gordon (of Sonic Youth) and L7.
12. For a full discussion of glam rock and its particular brand of male androgyny, see Auslander (forthcoming).
13. It is noteworthy that Quatro has twice performed onstage in the roles of historical women famous for exemplifying 'gender trouble'. Quatro played Annie Oakley in the 1986 London production of Irving Berlin's 1946 musical, *Annie Get Your Gun*. Oakley, a sharpshooter in Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, was, much like Quatro herself, a female entertainer performing a masculine role in a male-dominated cultural arena. Quatro emphasised these parallels in print and television interviews. In 1991, Quatro portrayed American actress Tallulah

Bankhead – famous for her deep, masculine voice, preference for male attire, and bisexuality – in *Tallulah Who?*, a musical theatre treatment of Bankhead's life written by Quatro herself with Shirlie Roden.

14. I am also convinced that Quatro's first big UK hit of Chinnichap authorship, 'Can the Can' (1973), is a response to fellow glam rocker Marc Bolan's 'One Inch Rock', a song he recorded several times (as a demo in 1967, with Tyrannosaurus Rex in 1968, and with T. Rex in 1970). Bolan's fanciful lyric describes his being reduced magically to a height of one inch by a sorceress who then places him in a can. (Bolan does not represent this situation as altogether unpleasant, especially since he's immediately joined in the can by a woman of equivalent stature.) Inasmuch as the chorus of 'Can the Can' includes the lines, 'Put your man in the can, honey/Get him while you can', the song seems to examine the situation of Bolan's protagonist from the point of view of the female warden rather than the male prisoner.
15. For a discussion of the concept of song families, see Shuker (1998, p.75). It is tempting to assert that Quatro aligns herself not just with masculinity through her choice of repertoire, but also with Blackness (African-American masculinity, to be precise). To the extent that the rhythm and blues tradition she invokes is primarily associated with African-American performers, that is true. But the issue is made immeasurably more complex by the fact that many 'Black' rhythm and blues songs were written by such White (and frequently Jewish) songwriters as Lieber and Stoller themselves. In certain respects, the gender line in rock is historically a much simpler phenomenon than the colour line.
16. Quatro's own comment to me concerning her version of 'I Wanna Be Your Man' is: 'Men were thought to be strong . . . therefore, I was strong and didn't need to change the gender . . . I was saying, I WANT TO BE YOUR MAN, in other words, I am the strength . . . the giver of life, the provider, everything men are supposed to be' (personal communication 2001). What Quatro suggests is a bit more mystical than what I am proposing here, but it shows that she thinks of masculinity, however one understands it, as a role that can be performed by either men or women, not as a biological essence.
17. This syntactic ambiguity parallels that in one of the best-known cases of textual gender ambiguity in rock, the Kinks' song 'Lola' (1970). When this song became a hit, much discussion surrounded the question of whether the lyric 'I'm glad I'm a man/And so is Lola' means that Lola is also glad the singer is a man or that 'she's' also a man. It is perhaps not surprising, then, to find that Quatro covered one of the Kinks' best-known songs (see note 20).
18. Little Richard's lyric apparently derives from an African-American 'folk song from a prostitute's point of view; she is with a john in her stall, so cannot let the knocker in, but she urges him to try again tomorrow night' (Lhamon 2002, p. 87).
19. As Patricia Juliana Smith (1999, p. 108) points out, Dusty Springfield had used the same strategy much earlier. On her 1964 recording of 'Mocking Bird', a song that, like 'Keep A Knockin', was originally recorded by African-American artists (Charles and Inez Foxx), Springfield sings both the male and female parts. Reading this recording through Springfield's lesbian identity, Smith concludes that her singing the male part is Springfield's way of implying that she 'can do without' men. Whereas Smith treats Springfield's lesbianism as a stable identity that was allowed only coded expression in her music, I am interested in performance practices that render gender and sexuality identity uncertain and undecidable.
20. The narrative of a failed relationship threads through the songs on the US edition of *If You Knew Suzi . . .* The first song, 'If You Can't Give Me Love', describes a couple's meeting in a discotheque; the woman declares that she is interested in love, not just a one-night stand. By the next song, 'Stumblin' In', the couple are in love. The fourth song on the first side of the album, a cover of the Kinks' 'Tired of Waiting for You', indicates that already there is trouble in paradise, as the song has to do with one lover's waiting for the other to make a commitment. The last song on that side, entitled 'The Race is On', describes a scenario very much like Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*: the couple, still together but embittered, are described as subjecting their friends to their own psychological warfare. The second side begins with 'Don't Change My Luck', in which the woman and man meet in a restaurant (in contrast to the disco in which the album begins) so that she can tell him she's found someone else. And the album ends with 'Wiser Than You', in which the woman looks back on the whole relationship, judges that she's well out of it, and assesses the wisdom she's gained from the experience.

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