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# Purposefully Feminizing Masculinity: Femininity in Male Rock and Metal Stars 1950s - 1980s

By: Maria Myer, *Susquehanna University*

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Traditionally in Western culture, men have had the privilege of promoting rebellion while women have had to be submissive and socially desirable. This expectation applied to all women but especially women in the rock 'n' roll scene. The overwhelming loudness of rock and the typical message of rebellion was connected to the power that men held within society.<sup>1</sup> The combination of loud and fast paced music with the electronic nature of the instruments is what sets rock 'n' roll and metal apart from other genres. The attention that rock 'n' roll music demands, both from the challenging nature of the music's messages and the difficulty in ignoring the volume was not rare in the mid-twentieth century in the Western world. Despite already holding power, some men wanted to gain more popularity or wealth by utilizing traditionally feminine presentations. Some artists who participated in establishing the genres of rock 'n' roll, glam rock, and hair metal blurred the lines between masculinity and femininity for their own personal gain. To identify how male artists in the 1950s - 1980s walked the line between masculine and feminine, this essay will look at traditionally feminine features, such as hairstyle and gender based physical presentation, as well as specific musical aspects, to show how masculine artists employed traditional feminine presentations.

It is not hard for most Americans to conjure up images of rock stars. Rock 'n' roll or rockabilly stars from the 1950s such as Elvis and Little Richard come to mind. Later, towards the 1970s, performers such as David Bowie, T. Rex, and Sir Elton John exploded with glam rock. Even later in the 1980s, metal took a turn towards glam, bringing hair/glam metal and bands such as Twisted Sister, Mötley Crüe, and Kiss into popularity. In their respective genres, these artists were the ones who helped to obfuscate the definition of gender. What comes out of this understanding, though, is

that many of these artists purposefully blurred gender barriers not because that is who they truly were or how they would have naturally acted but for their own commercial gain.

The initial artists who rejected gender barriers were not following the social trends of the time but were creating and influencing society's trends. In the case of Little Richard, as discussed later, feminization was a preservation technique. David Bowie was on the cusp of glam rock and was influenced by the successes of T. Rex, but T. Rex's motivations for performing the way they did is unclear beyond the wants and whims of its singer, and its roots in psychedelic and art rock. All three genres, psychedelic, art, and glam rock, defined and followed the trends of their respective decades. Similarly, the success of Twisted Sister defined and followed the trends of the 1970s and 1980s in the United States while taking inspiration from heavy metal and glam rock.

Elvis Presley may have popularized rock 'n' roll and the feminized rock star, but he did not introduce rock into the music scene. Rock 'n' roll has its origins in various places, but mainly in classic country/hillbilly music, rhythm 'n' blues, and boogie woogie music. Elvis' popularity quickly becomes an issue of race when considering the racial culture in the United States in the 1950s as the Civil Rights Movement was just beginning. His popular covers outshone the fathers of rock 'n' roll whose songs he sang. Artists such as Chuck Berry, Fats Domino, and Robert Johnson were rock 'n' roll stars in their own right, and their overall lack of popularity compared to Elvis' had more to do with the color of their skin than their lack of self-feminization. Many, if not all of the fathers of rock 'n' roll did not feminize themselves at all. Comparing a video performance of Fats Domino performing "Ain't That A Shame" in 1956 to a photo-

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1. Caroline Hartman, "Girly Boys and Boyish Girls: Gender Roles in Rock and Roll Music," *Dialogues @ RU* 9, (2013): 56-57, <https://dialogues.rutgers.edu/journals/152-girly-boys-and-boyish-girls-gender-roles-in-rock-and-roll-music/file#:~:text=There%20are%20many%20reasons%20why,as%20%E2%80%9Cmasculine%E2%80%9D%20terms%2C%20while>.

graph of Little Richard, the differences in appearance are obvious.<sup>2</sup> Compared to Little Richard's flamboyant style, discussed in more detail in later paragraphs, Fats Domino looks the picture of 1950s masculinity, with slicked back hair and a collared shirt and tie. Elvis was the one to popularize a more feminized style.

Elvis certainly led the pack in creating what the world would come to know as rock music, bringing in influences from blues, gospel, hillbilly, and more. The way he presented himself also generated criticism. During the Cold War, Elvis' own label compared him to Marilyn Monroe. Instead of finding his movements to represent male virility, critics took his swinging hips to be like those of a risqué female dancer.<sup>3</sup> Unlike some of the artists that will come up later, Elvis did not purposefully make his actions feminine. Raised in the Pentecostal church, Elvis grew up associating movement with music and expressing his emotions freely.<sup>4</sup> Elvis' success came from a lot of factors, as stated before, but mainly from his covers and ability to sound like his forefathers without sharing their skin tone. Elvis is the king of rock 'n' roll, which means that a lot of people followed in his musical and performative footsteps. Seeing the success of Elvis, other artists decided to purposefully distort the gender barriers of the times. Another one of the forerunners of rock 'n' roll, "Little" Richard Penniman had specific reasons for pushing against his own masculinity as well as the pervasive masculine stereotypes that dominated rock 'n' roll.

Despite starting in the music industry before Elvis, Little Richard did not have much success until Elvis came into the rock 'n' roll scene. To help himself

find popularity and keep it, Little Richard employed various methods of challenging gender barriers for his own gain. The first way he blurred gender barriers was through his appearance, as Little Richard wore his hair in a pompadour for most of his performances, much like his predecessors Esquerita and Billy Wright. Most black men did, and still do, wear their natural hair and do not do much to it beyond protective measures. The fact that Richard's hair was sometimes straight and long feminized him in the eyes of some of the black community since manipulating hair was something that women did. Little Richard also wore heavy make-up that added to the perception of him as feminine. He likely got this from his two previously mentioned predecessors but also from the drag community. Little Richard was a drag performer in his youth during the postwar era, when drag became popular entertainment in black communities.<sup>5</sup> Little Richard's mixing of feminine hair and makeup with masculine suits followed the trend of drag queens who manipulated the traditional gender norms of the time.<sup>6</sup> Little Richard not only utilized the mixed gender presentation because it was something he had seen done before, but because it worked to his advantage in gaining popularity.

The mixed gender presentation worked well for many reasons but the largest was the way it went over with white audiences. Little Richard explained in the 1991 movie *Good Rockin' Tonight* why he wore makeup: "By wearing this make-up I could work and play white clubs and the white people didn't mind the white girls screaming over me. I wasn't a threat when they saw the eyelashes and the make-up. They was willing to accept me too, 'cause they figured I

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2. Antoine Dominique "Fats Domino" Domino Jr., "Ain't That A Shame," 1956 recorded live performance, YouTube video, 2:31, <https://youtu.be/2FDYyf8Kqrs>; David Browne, "Little Richard, Founding Father of Rock Who Broke Musical Barriers, Dead at 87," *Rolling Stone*, May 9, 2020. <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/little-richard-dead-48505/>.

3. Uta Poiger, "Presley, Yes – Ulbricht, No? Rock 'n' Roll and Female Sexuality in the German Cold War," in *Jazz, Rock, and Rebels: Cold War Politics and American Culture in a Divided Germany* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 171-173.

4. Randall J. Stephens, "'Where Else Did They Copy Their Styles but from Church Groups?': Rock 'n' Roll and Pentecostalism in the 1950s South," *Church History* 85, no. 1 (March 2016): 98, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24736161>.

5. Bill C. Malone, *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Volume 12: Music* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 323.

6. Vincent L. Stephens, *Rocking the Closet: How Little Richard, Johnnie Ray, Liberace, and Johnny Mathis Queered Pop Music* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019), 81.

wouldn't be no harm."<sup>7</sup> Little Richard was gaining popularity in the 1950s and 60s. His way of making space for himself included a method of effectively de-sexing himself. If Little Richard acted masculine, then the white people he was playing for would find him to be threatening. But if he dressed and acted more feminine, then white people would associate him with the submissive nature of women and allow him to play in their clubs, where Little Richard found his popularity. However, Little Richard did not only mix genders through his appearance, but through his music too.

In "Tutti Frutti," Little Richard employs a traditional 12-bar blues progression throughout the song. Unlike most traditional blues music, "Tutti Frutti" has a high tempo, which sets it up to be a rock 'n' roll song. The powerful explosion of "Wop-bop-a-loo-mop alop-bom-bom" (0:00-0:03) immediately sets "Tutti Frutti" apart from traditional blues music and into rock 'n' roll. What is important, for this analysis, about Little Richard's "breakthrough hit"<sup>8</sup> is his use of falsetto and vocal flourishes. During the chorus, Little Richard utilizes his falsetto (0:39, 1:10, and 1:40), unexpectedly singing well above the range he had before. He uses falsetto again to transition into the break (1:19). Little Richard mixed rock with falsetto, blurring gender lines more. Rock is a way for someone to prove their masculinity, while falsetto "is a form of drag: a vocal masquerade."<sup>9</sup> Using falsetto allows Little Richard to make himself more effeminate. One of the best arguments for what makes a song sung by a male singer feminine is the use of falsetto.

While Little Richard identified as gay, and later rejected his sexual orientation, his use of gender-bending outfits and musical styles was for his own gain. He once claimed, after he had rejected his sexuality,

that his label had him perform that way so he could play in the white crowds.<sup>10</sup> If his claim is true, that is an example of the recording industry manipulating the consumers to make themselves money. The label beguiled their mostly white audience into accepting performances by a talented black man by having him portray himself in a gender-blurring way. Other artists that followed Penniman made similar spectacles of themselves, so that they could gain fame and fortune.

Decades later, another rock artist who manipulated gender definitions for his own benefit was British artist, David Bowie. Bowie invented Ziggy Stardust – his androgynous alien alter-ego – ten years into his career, after watching Andy Warhol's *Pork* and becoming acquainted with the cast. One cast member, trans frontwoman for the Electric Chairs, Jayne County, helped Bowie develop his character and even his songs. County claims that she sent Bowie some of her songs that Bowie used without crediting her or giving her space to perform them with him.<sup>11</sup> Although County allegedly wrote some parts of his songs, her discography did not do nearly as well as Bowie's did. County's lack of success was because Ziggy Stardust was just a character. Any love for Ziggy Stardust that the audience had was just as a character and not explicitly in support of David Bowie himself displaying gender nonconformity. Bowie was comfortable within his gender as a cis male, and listeners knew that. Putting a transgender woman as the face of glam rock would not have worked out well as a separation between the on and off-stage identities of the artists allowed consumers to enjoy the performances as performances without having to condemn or support any manipulations of gender. Additionally, despite coming out as gay after the birth of Ziggy Stardust, Bowie did eventually have a wife and two children.<sup>12</sup> Acting out heteronorma-

7. Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness and Race Relations* (London: Routledge, 1998), 53.

8. Jeff Wallenfeldt, ed., *The Birth of Rock and Roll: Music in the 1950s Through The 1960s* (Chicago: Rosen Publishing Group, 2012), 123.

9. Hartman, "Girly Boys and Boyish Girls," 59; Edward D. Miller, "The Nonsensical Truth of the Falsetto Voice: Listening to Sigur Rós," *Popular Musicology Online* 2 (2003), <http://popular-musicology-online.com/issues/02/miller.html>.

10. Wallenfeldt, ed., *The Birth of Rock and Roll*, 94-95.

11. Sasha Geffen, *Glitter Up the Dark: How Pop Music Broke the Binary* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2020), 33.

12. Barney Hoskyns, *Glam!: Bowie, Bolan and the Glitter Rock Revolution* (London: Rock's Backpages, 2011), 39.

tive standards, regardless of his actual sexual identity, helped to place Bowie within a cis narrative.<sup>13</sup> Bowie's actions and creation of Ziggy Stardust were purposeful and made to make him popular.

Bowie's contemporaries, T. Rex, created glam rock more organically. The lead singer, Marc Bolan, created glam rock by wearing glitter on his face and some women's clothes. After Bolan's first performance wearing glitter, a sea of glitter-adorned faces met him at his next one.<sup>14</sup> Bowie furthered glam rock with Ziggy Stardust. However, it was Bowie's music that found more popularity. The use of Ziggy Stardust to promote this burgeoning genre, while probably not the sole cause, helped Bowie's *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* stay 168 weeks on Britain's top 100, peaking at number 5.<sup>15</sup> T. Rex's first glam rock album, *Electric Warrior*, peaked at number one but only spent forty-four weeks on the chart.<sup>16</sup> It was the purposeful creation of Ziggy Stardust that brought Bowie fame and fortune, even after he switched from his outrageous act to a more subdued one.

Arguably Bowie's most enduring song off *Ziggy Stardust*, "Starman," follows an AB song form. The first verse starts at 0:20 and is 13 bars long, followed by an eight-bar pre-chorus. At 0:55 the chorus starts and is eleven bars long before the seven-bar instrumental solo. At 1:40 the second verse starts, following the same format as before. The second chorus starts at 2:14 followed immediately by the final chorus at 2:40. The 23-bar outro starts at 3:08. The AB form is different both from the early rock 'n' roll of "Tutti Frutti" (AAB) and the psychedelic music of The Beatles' "I Am The Walrus" (AABA). While the song does have

all the chords of the traditional I-IV-V chord progression, at no point does it follow the trend. Even "I Am The Walrus" has a backwards V-V7-IV-IV7-I chord progression.<sup>17</sup> "Starman" uses various strings in the form of guitars, a bass, and some orchestral strings that may have been produced electronically. There are also drums to back up the strings. Beyond the orchestral strings, "Starman" breaks away from the psychedelic sounds of "I Am The Walrus." The instrumentation on "Starman" is cleaner and more whole whereas sounds are sliding all over the place in "Walrus." This sophistication adds to the glamor of Bowie's presentation.

Glam rock was all about glamor. Bowie's and Bolan's costumes showed the glamor, but so did the music. The music gave listeners, mostly teenagers, an escape from the tripped out psychedelic rock, "the pompous 'progressive' rock of the decade before, and 'the banal bubblegum' from the hippies of the time."<sup>18</sup> Bowie created glam rock out of his own reinvention, which he did for his own personal gain. He also reinvented rock into a new, more glamorous sound. Bands such as Alice Cooper, Van Halen, and Twisted Sister transformed the glamor of glam rock into metal, creating glam/hair metal.

Instead of analyzing one artist within glam metal, this analysis will focus on the glam metal phenomenon and how the bands within the genre blurred the gender lines for their own gain. Unlike glam rock, glam metal artists used their androgyny for pure entertainment rather than the "postmodern irony" of glam rock.<sup>19</sup> Glam metal was more about embodying the American Dream and showing that upward mobility was possible through music.<sup>20</sup> This idea resonated

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13. Geffen, *Glitter Up the Dark*, 33.

14. Hoskyns, *Glam!*, 24.

15. "David Bowie," Official Charts, The Official UK Charts Company. <https://www.officialcharts.com/artist/19138/david-bowie/>.

16. "T. Rex," Official Charts, The Official UK Charts Company, <https://www.officialcharts.com/artist/2746/t-rex/>.

17. Hooktheory, "'I Am The Walrus' by The Beatles: Chords and Melody," <https://www.hooktheory.com/theorytab/view/the-beatles/i-am-the-walrus>; Hooktheory, "'Starman' by David Bowie: Chords and Melody," <https://www.hooktheory.com/theorytab/view/david-bowie/starman>.

18. Hoskyns, *Glam!* 10.

19. Ryan Moore, *Sells Like Teen Spirit: Music, Youth Culture, and Social Crisis* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 105.

20. Moore, *Sells Like Teen Spirit*, 106.

with the middle-class listeners of traditional metal, but the audience of glam metal shifted because of their on-stage costumes. Bands like Twisted Sister and Kiss took it to the extreme, but even Guns N' Roses wore makeup on stage. The teased hair, makeup, and feminine clothing of glam metal bands made them look more like the sex workers on Hollywood's Sunset Strip than metal's middle-class worker audience.<sup>21</sup> They purposefully became objectified as sexual objects much like women had been. Despite taking "symbolic possession of femininity," the men of glam metal relied on women to support them, both to pay for things while the men waited for their big break and as audience members after the break came.<sup>22</sup> Glam metal music also followed a different path than traditional metal music.

Glam metal came out of heavy metal, glam rock, and punk. Metal was louder and faster than rock 'n' roll, making the performers seem even more masculine, and it was all about volume and distortion and came out of blues rock.<sup>23</sup> While some glam metal music is fast, power ballads such as Guns N' Roses's "Sweet Child O' Mine" are slower. This slower tempo allows more virtuosic playing from Slash, the band's lead guitarist, whose playing starts in the first second of the song. Bon Jovi's "Livin' on a Prayer" has a C-D-G chord progression in the chorus which gives it a more optimistic sound than traditional heavy metal's C-D-E progression.<sup>24</sup> The slower, more optimistic songs found success in an audience of women and men who were not afraid to show emotion. Power ballads used third person authenticity as they were mainly love songs.<sup>25</sup> The act of expressing emotion was non-masculine, adding to the bands' performances being feminine.

Rock 'n' roll, glam rock, and glam metal artists took part in blurring gender barriers for their own gain. Elvis and T. Rex's obfuscation of gender barriers was less purposeful but still contributed to changing the definition of masculinity in music. Little Richard feminized himself through his clothes and his music by using falsetto to be able to play in white clubs.

David Bowie purposely reinvented his previous folky image with Ziggy Stardust, promoting androgyny to the extreme, and became the best-known glam rock artist ever. The reinvention of Bowie led to the reinvention of rock music into glam rock, giving the youth of the time something to call their own. Glam metal reinforced metal's gender stereotypes of men singing loudly and fast about rebellion, while directly refuting hyper-masculine gender stereotypes by relying heavily on women. By feminizing themselves, these artists found success in their respective times and created a symbiotic relationship with the culture that surrounded them. These artists had massive influence on the fans who followed them and on the newer generations of musical artists, allowing them to see the success of men performing gender non-conformity.

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21. Moore, 107.

22. Moore, 109.

23. Moore, 78.

24. Moore, 107.

25. Allan Moore, "Authenticity as Authentication," in *Critical Essays in Popular Musicology* (United Kingdom: Ashgate Publishing, 2007), 136-140.

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