

Scratching the Surface

Marit Larsen and Marion Ravn:
Popular Music and Gender
in a Transcultural Context

Jon Mikkel Broch Ålvik

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of PhD

Department of Musicology
Faculty of Humanities
University of Oslo

2014

Table of Contents

| | |
|--|------------|
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS | 5 |
| CHAPTER 1 | 9 |
| INTRODUCTION: SCRATCHING THE SURFACE..... | 9 |
| BACKGROUND: CRITICAL AND POPULAR MUSICOLOGY | 12 |
| ON SINGING (AND WRITING) IN ENGLISH: GLOBAL LANGUAGE AND THE PARADOX OF AUTHENTICITY..... | 14 |
| AN INTERSECTION OF DISCIPLINES: INTERTEXTUALITY, PHENOMENOLOGY, PERSONA..... | 32 |
| OUTLINE OF THESIS..... | 35 |
| CHAPTER 2 | 37 |
| GROWING UP IN PUBLIC: SOCIAL BACKGROUND AND THE EMERGENCE OF SUBJECTIVITIES IN M2M..... | 37 |
| CONTEXTUALISING BACKGROUND | 38 |
| A SHOWCASING OF TALENTS: <i>MARIT & MARION SYNGER KJENTE BARNESANGER</i> | 40 |
| THE THINKING PERSON'S TEEN POP: <i>SHADES OF PURPLE</i> (2000)..... | 45 |
| "Don't Say You Love Me" | 47 |
| "Give A Little Love" | 55 |
| M2M IN THE MEDIA..... | 60 |
| "DANCE TO THE PRETTY NORWEGIANS": M2M ON <i>DAWSON'S CREEK</i> | 62 |
| UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL: <i>THE BIG ROOM</i> (2002)..... | 66 |
| "Don't"..... | 68 |
| DIFFERENCES: STEREOTYPING LARSEN AND RAVN..... | 71 |
| CHAPTER 3 | 75 |
| TOUCHING FROM A DISTANCE: FAKE NAIVETY, FEMALE STEREOTYPES AND BANALITY IN MARIT LARSEN'S MUSIC AND PERSONA | 75 |
| MASKING AMBITION: IMAGE, PRODUCTION, VOICE | 79 |
| THE PRODUCER | 83 |
| <i>Vocal costume</i> | 88 |
| FAKE NAIVETY | 91 |
| "HAVE YOU SEEN MY CHILDHOOD?": THE GIRL-CHILD..... | 94 |
| ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE QUIRKY MIND: THE GIRL NEXT DOOR..... | 106 |
| "SWEETNESS, BEAUTY, AND POISE": THE HOUSEWIFE..... | 114 |
| "WILL YOU TAKE ME AS WHO I SAY I AM?": THE SINGER-SONGWRITER..... | 127 |
| DREAMS OF AMERICA (1): MARIT LARSEN AND ELWOOD CAINE | 136 |
| DREAMS OF AMERICA (2): MARIT LARSEN IN NEW YORK CITY..... | 144 |
| (UN)SETTLING THE POP SCORE: OF OTHER READINGS..... | 150 |
| THE LURE OF BANALITY: "UNDER THE SURFACE" | 154 |
| CHAPTER 4 | 165 |
| "WHO DOES THAT GIRL THINK SHE IS?": MARION RAV(E)N AND SUBJECTIVITY THROUGH EXCESS..... | 165 |
| INTRODUCTION | 165 |
| A REVERSE SUCCESS STORY: <i>HVER GANG VI MØTES</i> | 167 |
| DISENTANGLING THE DICHOTOMY: RAVN AND LARSEN AS FIXED COUNTERPARTS..... | 173 |

| | |
|--|------------|
| “WHO FRAMED MARION RAVN?”: CONSTRUCTING EXCESS..... | 177 |
| THE EXCESS OF PERSONALITY: <i>HERE I AM</i> (2005) | 179 |
| MELODRAMA AND/AS SPECTACLE: “FOR YOU I’LL DIE” AND “LET ME INTRODUCE MYSELF” | 184 |
| EXCESS AND SPECTACLE: “HEADS WILL ROLL” | 187 |
| EXCESS AND SOLIDARITY: “HEADS WILL ROLL” – THE VIDEO | 192 |
| PLEASURE IN EXCESS: “IT’S ALL COMING BACK TO ME NOW” | 198 |
| EXCESS DISCIPLINED: “CASANOVA” | 204 |
| CHAPTER 5 | 207 |
| CONCLUSIONS | 207 |
| M2M | 207 |
| MARIT LARSEN..... | 208 |
| MARION RAVN..... | 209 |
| WORKS CITED..... | 213 |
| DISCOGRAPHY | 223 |

Acknowledgements

This study was made possible by a three-year PhD grant from the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Oslo. I am grateful to the Faculty for this opportunity, and to the Department of Musicology for providing a stimulating and hospitable work environment.

During this time I have benefited from being included in the research project *Popular Music and Gender in a Transcultural Context*, also at the University of Oslo, and led by Professor Stan Hawkins. I express my gratitude to my colleagues on the project, PhD student Birgitte Sandve, postdoctoral fellow Mats Johansson, and research assistant Mari Paus, for an inspiring and adventurous time together on the project.

My research was considerably enhanced by a research visit to Canada in the autumn semester of 2012. I am especially grateful to Professor Susan Fast at McMaster University and Associate Professor Jacqueline Warwick at Dalhousie University for offering feedback to my research, and for allowing me the opportunity to present portions of my work-in-progress to their students in designated seminars. Thanks also go to Professor David Brackett at McGill University for feedback and fruitful discussions. My warmest thanks to Craig Jennex and Alyssa Watt for housing in Hamilton (and an extra cheers to Craig and crew, notably Simon, Matt and Jordan, for memorable evenings), and to Steven Baur, Sophie, and Adam for their hospitality in Halifax. Christina Baade, Lesley Brechin, Mariana Costa, Ryan McNutt and crew, and Laura Wiebe also contributed to making my stay in Canada so enjoyable; thank you all for your generosity.

I have also had the opportunity to present my work in seminars and symposiums in Paris, Turku, Berlin, Kristiansand, and aboard the Color Line. I wish to thank Susanne Binas-Preisendörfer, Barbara Bradby, Terence Cave, Tor Dybo, Nina Eidsheim, Steven Feld, Erling E. Guldbrandsen, Karin Gundersen, Thomas Hilder,

Jakob Lothe, Susan McClary, Michael Rauhut, John Richardson, Derek B. Scott, Odd Skårberg, Erik Steinskog, Will Straw, Robert Walser, and Peter Wicke for providing feedback and advice in various stages of the project.

Thanks go to my fellow PhD students in Oslo, Ragnhild Brøvig-Hanssen, Kjetil Klette Bøhler, Bjørn Morten Christophersen, Mari Romarheim Haugen, Erlend Hegdal, Anita Høyvik, and Thomas Erma Møller, and postdoctoral fellows Peter Edwards and Yngvar Kjus, for inspirational discussions. On that note, I wish to express special thanks to Eirik Askerøi, Marita Buanes Djupvik, Lars K. Norberg, and Eystein Sandvik for valuable conversations and advice.

Thanks also go to my colleagues at large at the Department for their kindness and support, notably Professor Arnfinn Bø-Rygg for his inspirational courses, Professor Rolf Inge Godøy for offering insights into phenomenology, Professor Even Ruud for advice on identity studies, research assistant Ragnhild T. Solberg for helping out with the project, and Professor Ståle Wikshåland for sharing his knowledge on music journalism.

Outside the academy, thanks are due to Thomas Brun and Marius Graff for generously giving of their time to answer questions, and to everyone from the world of publishing who has provided material for my research: Hanne Danielsen (Elle), Espen Holttestaul (No Comprendo Press), Kjersti Kvam (Kamille), Heidi Sinding-Larsen (Woman), and Maria Kvalheim Steen (Henne).

Merci encore à Monique et François for their hospitality in Antibes. Thanks also go to Arve T. Thorsen and Lokomotiv ZEB for quiz nights, and Morgenbladet for providing a platform for my research in the form of record reviews.

Several individuals have contributed in various ways to my project at one time or another, and I wish to extend my gratitude to the following people: Nina Ring Aamundsen, Njål Hole Albrechtsen, Pål Angelskår, Per Holger Broch, Terje Engen, Synnøve Engevik and the staff at Rockheim, Andy Evans, Flamme Forlag (Nils-Øivind Haagenen and Bendik Wold), Ole Martin Halck, Happily Ever After

(Tommy, Janne, and Marius), Stig Rune Haugen (and the wonderful Smekingarna), Hildebrand (Thomas, Gjermund, and Gaute), Mette Karlsvik, Ingrid Lamark, Kyrre Tromm Lindvig, Einar Lukerstuen, and Nina Odegard and Øyvind Risberg and their very musical family.

Special thanks to my closest friends for keeping me on track: Ola Alnæs, Karim Bennis, Mari Blekastad, Ola Hansen, Christine Hoel, and Karstein Volle; and to the masters and mistresses of IDL for their significant contribution.

Thanks to my close family, Nina Broch, Siri Dennis, and Trond Ålvik, for being there even when I keep them at arm's length for the sake of research; and my family-in-law, especially Inger Anne, Yaya, Jan, Andreas, and Eva, for their support.

Finally, two people deserve special mention, as the completion of this project would not have been possible without them. My supervisor, Professor Stan Hawkins at the Department of Musicology, University of Oslo, has provided sharp readings of my material, ample advice and encouragement, and retained his faith in my ideas from the start; my deepest appreciation goes to you for your generosity, your support, and your unwavering confidence in me.

Mari Barwin remains my best conversation partner, my staunchest critic, and my greatest supporter, and has provided every possible means for inspiring and encouraging me throughout the period – a husband could not wish for more, nor can he imagine being able to complete this thesis without your efforts. With all my love and gratitude: This one's for you.

Oslo, 27 February 2014
Jon Mikkel Broch Ålvik

Chapter 1

Introduction: Scratching the Surface

In the late summer of 2002, Norwegian newspapers broadly documented the break-up of the duo M2M. The members, 18-year-old Marion Ravn (listed as Marion Raven on the duo's record covers) and 19-year-old Marit Larsen, had been the subjects of extensive press coverage in Norway during their four years as a band, starting in 1998 with the much-published news that they had been offered a recording contract with the Atlantic Recording Corporation in the USA. In the space of the next two years, M2M rose to worldwide fame thanks to the inclusion of their first single, "Don't Say You Love Me", on the international soundtrack to *Pokémon: The First Movie*, and the release of their first album, *Shades of Purple*, in 2000. After the release of their follow-up album *The Big Room* two years later, the media peddled stories of dwindling sales and unfulfilled expectations, but also interviews with the two artists, who insisted that nobody told them what to do, and that they were doing what they wanted as a band, regardless of what their employer decreed. Then, in late July, came the news that the duo had been taken off their summer tour of the USA as support act for singer-songwriter and label mate, Jewel. In at least one interview, they stressed the fact that this was a decision taken by the company, and that they had no control of the situation.¹

Shortly afterwards, the newspapers wrote that the duo had disbanded. Almost immediately, the news broke that Atlantic had offered Ravn a solo contract. The press jumped at the chance, and Ravn became the subject of equally intense press coverage for the next couple of years. In 2005, she released her first album, *Here I Am*, which received favourable reviews overall, but journalists also remarked the lack of global success that they expected such a release to generate.

¹ Grimsæth, Andreas & Hansen, Espen A.: "M2M-turneen avbrutt", *Verdens Gang* 22 July 2002, p. 42.

The same year, the discourse on the two artists took a radical turn when Larsen started playing solo concerts and giving interviews. The general impression was that, while Ravn had stayed in the limelight and ultimately failed to deliver on the promise of music, Larsen had shaken the underdog yoke and come forward as a singer-songwriter who was also an endearing person.

This thesis takes up the careers of Larsen and Ravn as global pop stars in a Norwegian context. My initial questions that inform the thesis are as follows:

How did Marit Larsen go about in order to create music, and a persona to go with it, that had such broad appeal?

How has the reception of Larsen as a solo artist affected the domestic audience's perception of Marion Ravn?

These questions, in turn, ground and inform a number of other pertinent questions: How do Norwegian pop artists shape and perform out their personae in a transcultural context of popular music? How do Norwegian artists who sing in English employ ideas of gender and gendered behaviour through their music and personae? How do music and personae inform each other? What ideas of gender and gendered behaviour inform the audience's perception of the artists?

It appears that Larsen has herself contributed to the impression that she has come into her own and found her voice in the aftermath of M2M, in part by keeping her distance to the past and concentrating on writing her own, ostensibly "honest" songs. However, I perceive it as Larsen's re-invention of herself as an artist, rather than any discovery of a more truthful or honest version of herself. The result of this re-invention is that, when she re-launched herself as a solo artist in 2005, Larsen's persona appeared so fully formed, and entirely credible, because she had the opportunity to re-shape all aspects of her persona. She also had the opportunity to do this away from the limelight, and

evidently without having to worry about wherewithal thanks to the money she had earned as a member of M2M.

In an analysis of the workings of M2M, we need to be aware that Larsen and Ravn are trained and skilled professionals in the field of the pop star. As performers since their childhood days, both have cultivated their skills as choral singers, ballet dancers, and actors in stage musicals, as documented in a range of interviews with the artists. From this, we may surmise that their skills also include fashioning a persona. Taken this way, we may well see the singers' development as a series of re-inventions: first as child stars with the duo Marit & Marion and the release of their first album, *Marit & Marion synger kjente barnesanger* (1996), then as members of M2M during their teens, and once again as solo artists releasing their debut albums in the mid-2000s. In all three instances, the artists arguably shape their respective personae as both complementary of and contrasting the other.

What makes Marit Larsen and Marion Ravn so apt for an investigation into how Norwegian artists and bands relate to questions of style in popular music is that, as white suburban Norwegian artists who make pop music in an Anglo-American paradigm and with English-language lyrics, they are perfect examples of how national identity is negotiated along more, and more complex, lines than both fans and researchers may be aware of.

Furthermore, the two female artists can function as examples of how Norwegian performers, in terms of coming from a peripheral place in a transcultural context of Anglophone popular music, construct and act out their personae along lines that expose how "lineages of styles and genres transport with them sets of assumptions" (Hawkins, 2002) (2) and that influence and shape how these artists perceive gender.

On the contrary, what sets these two artists *apart* from the herd of music groups and solo performers in Norway is their comprehensive, complex background as performing artists, both having been child actors, choral singers and musical

stage artists from an early age. They are also exceptional in that, having recorded an album of children's songs before any of them had entered their teens, they were offered a recording contract with a global company and broke through to a large international audience – a feat unmatched by any Norwegian artist with the exception of 1980s pop pioneers a-ha.

Specifically, I wish to investigate into how these two artists function both vis-à-vis a local audience, including the music press and media in general, and how they negotiate gender through popular music in a transcultural context.

Background: Critical and popular musicology

I have made an effort to situate my work in the intersecting fields of critical musicology and popular musicology. Offering sets of strategies within the broader field of musicology, both strands have in common a concern with how music is informed by and also informs its context. This is formulated in a number of relevant ways in both disciplines. On critical musicology, Derek Scott states that “popular culture functions as a site for the contested meanings of social experience” (Scott, 2008) (9), while Richard Middleton emphasises that “*culture matters*, and ... therefore any attempts to study music without situating it culturally are illegitimate [...]” (Middleton, 2003) (3). Richard Leppert suggests that the visual experience of the production of music “is crucial to both musicians and audience alike for locating and communicating the place of music and musical sound within society and culture” (Leppert, 1993) (xx-xxi). These quotes also suggest that, rather than a one-way street of cultural influence on music, this is a process that goes both ways. Consequently, critical musicology is also part of “the establishment of new approaches that probed the social and cultural relevance of music within a media-saturated political context” (Hawkins, 2012) (2). This relevance of music is also aptly formulated by Lawrence Kramer in that “music, as a cultural activity, must be acknowledged to help produce the discourses and representations of which it is also a product” (Kramer, 1990) (17). As a basic tenet of critical musicology, we may say that music produces culture as much as the other way around.

Kramer goes on to elaborate on the agency of music as producer of culture in his observation that “the works, practices, and activities – for us, the music – that we address as interpreters are not only the products but also the *agencies* of culture, not only members of the habitus but also the makers of it” (Ibid.). This is in line with Susan McClary’s observation that “music does not just passively reflect society; it also serves as a public forum within which various models of gender organization (along with many other aspects of social life) are asserted, adopted, contested, and negotiated” (McClary, 2002 [1991]) (8). On the question of gender, McClary also states that, “the entry of gender issues into musicology has allowed for an extremely wide range of new areas for research” (Ibid. xviii). On the one hand, this points forward to Kramer’s later assertion that “[the] status of work and Text is finally determined not by what is written but by how it is read” (Kramer, 2006) (xiii), where the notion of how the work becomes “fluid” and open to interpretation is crucial to any understanding of the appeal of popular music. On the other hand, it recalls Anahid Kassabian’s observation of how popular music soundtracks in film “highlight the deaf spots of both feminist film theories and popular music studies because popular musics depend on a web of memory, emotion, and identification – that is, on the mutual predication of desire and agency” (Kassabian, 2001) (70). This suggests that the study of popular music and gender is not only relevant, but also that it may illuminate relevant discourses on agency and desire – traits that are also found in musical texts by groups such as M2M.

Kassabian’s statement on popular music soundtracks also provides an inroad into popular musicology. According to Derek Scott, the two disciplines “share much common ground, and this overlap occurs because, by challenging the concepts of high and low art, critical musicology raises the status of popular music research” (Scott, 2009) (2). In his investigation into the music of Kate Bush, Ron Moy stresses the importance of approaching music as “a socially mediated text that allows for a multitude of critical and aesthetical entry points to manifest themselves through individual interpretive strategies” (Moy, 2007) (5), an observation that recalls Stan Hawkins’ point on what pop music *is*:

“Always shaped by social, political and cultural conditions, pop is about patterns in consumption and production” (Hawkins, 2002) (2), which implies that the reception of the musical *text* and its intertextual *context* is of vital importance when we set out to grapple with musicological investigations into popular music.

In the introduction to his collection of essays on the topic, Allan F. Moore stresses that the most prominent legacy of critical musicology so far has been “the legitimation of the study of popular music within the scope of musicology” (Moore, 2007) (ix). As a discipline that has useful common features with critical musicology, then, popular musicology is a vital field that also has its pitfalls. One of the most obvious and simultaneously most invisible of these is the prioritisation of Anglophone writing on Anglophone music. Moore suggests that the wider perspective “tends to be more apparent in non-Anglophone writing, partly at least (I suspect) because of the geographical origins of rock” (Ibid. xi). He adds that, “[it] is surely the case that we (English speakers) either desperately need to become fluent in other languages, or that we need to expend resources on the translation of key articles from other languages” (Ibid. xii). With this statement, Moore puts his finger on one of the most comprehensive problematics of popular music research, namely, the dimension of language. It is this I turn to in the following section.

On singing (and writing) in English: Global language and the paradox of authenticity

Language is not just a means of communication, but also a symbol of social identity or group identity. As an instrument of communication as well as a symbol of social identity, language carries with it attitudes and values for those who employ it.²

(Endresen, Simonsen, & Sveen, 2000) (355)

In *Performing Rites*, Simon Frith devotes a chapter to a discussion of songs as texts, exploring the function of words and rhetoric in popular music. In an inspiring methodological move, he suggests that in listening to the lyrics of pop songs, we hear both words and rhetoric at once, and he proceeds to examine the

² This and all subsequent translations from the Norwegian in this thesis are by the author.

two terms as functioning as poems and speech acts, respectively. This allows him to analyse pop songs as being about “formulas of love” (S. Frith, 1996) (161) and to suggest that lyrics, as a form of rhetoric or oratory, have to be treated “in terms of the persuasive relationship set up between singer and listener” (Ibid. 166). These assertions touch upon ideas of banality and subjectivity; consequently, they also inform my project in this thesis, making Frith’s theories all the more helpful.

Then he does something odd. Starting from the assertion that “how words work in song depends not just on what is said [...] but also on how it is said – on *the type of language used* and its rhetorical significance” (Ibid. 163–164, emphasis added), he goes on to note, with reference to rap music: “The song is an *argument*, drawing on rap’s conventional use as a form of conversation ... And this is the context in which power is being defined as *a way with words*” (op.cit. 169, emphasis in original). He goes on to note, “as a final twist to the discussion of how words are made fit for music” (Ibid. 175):

There are clearly ways in which rock musical conventions, in terms of melodic form, use of verse/chorus, mode of vocal attack, and so on, reflect – or at least gesture at – patterns of Anglo-American and Afro-American speech [...]. *These musical conventions may not be appropriate for other languages.* (Ibid., emphasis added)

What exactly is going on in this statement? To any reader, Anglophone or not, Frith’s assertion may at first sight appear to state the obvious: rock music, as a musical style/form/genre that originated in the US and developed via an extensive cultural exchange with another Anglophone nation, the UK, is self-evidently English-speaking. What is more, this is one of the mechanisms that make rock music universally available, and its language intelligible to all and sundry. I find it problematic for at least three reasons. The first is that Frith appears to essentialise difference on the grounds of language (English is the only language that is appropriate for rock and any other form of popular music that originates in the Anglo-American field). The second is that he essentialises the English language by apparently erasing the internal differences among native English speakers (any difference between, say, the English spoken in Britain,

Canada, Trinidad and Tobago, South Africa, and New Zealand becomes immaterial). The third is that the comparatively large group of artists from outside the English-speaking territories who choose to sing in English becomes insignificant. The latter objection, as I will take up below, is crucial to my argument in this thesis.

My chief question is what rock music would sound like when sung in English by a person who does not have English as his or her native language. With reference to languages such as Finnish and Italian, Frith embellishes his point by stating that the phonetics of other languages are likely to work against the rhythmic device of rhyme in rock, with Italian being one of “those languages [...] which don’t finish sentences with ‘hard’, blunt-edged consonants” (Ibid.), and Finnish as plain “ugly”: “the ‘ugliness’ and incoherence of the punk sound meant that Finnish words sounded good sung too!” (Ibid. 176). Notwithstanding the obvious humour at the expense of Finnish in the latter statement, I am left with the impression that Frith believes these problems have to do with people’s native language. If there are indeed intrinsic qualities to a language that make it appropriate for a certain type of music, this would entail that e.g. an Italian person can never sing English convincingly, as that person has a native language that is bound to distinguish the speaker’s utilisation of the foreign language. In this respect, the logical consequence of Frith’s theory would be that people who are not born Anglophone should not be allowed to sing rock music.

Two issues arise from this. One is that, either way, Frith appears to end up essentialising the English language as *the* language for rock music – regardless, apparently, of where the Anglophone person comes from. The other issue is that Frith, despite his evident knowledge of non-Anglophone popular culture that is displayed throughout his book, seems to be oblivious to how other languages than English actually function in rock music. This is a trap that it seems all too easy to fall into if one is Anglophone, and consequently used to being able to speak one’s native tongue no matter where one goes. I hasten to add that I cannot possibly assert that all Anglophone people do this. Nevertheless, Frith

comes dangerously close to this dead angle in his assessment of the universal and unproblematic suitability of “English” as the language of rock.

This pertains not least to music research, where everything that has to do with languages other than English is in danger of slipping beneath the radar. I propose as part of my argument here that this has to do with the invisibility of everything that cannot be made intelligible as part of Anglophone culture. Another example is provided by Nicola Dibben, who in her book-length study of Björk briefly mentions the artist’s use of English as her primary language in lyrics, stating that “Björk’s explicit reasoning for singing in English was that she wanted to communicate to a mass audience who would not understand song lyrics sung in Icelandic” (Dibben, 2009) (41). This is a trustworthy explanation, and a common argument for bands and artists from outside the Anglophone field; however, Dibben does not appear to see how Björk’s ability to employ a foreign language arises in part out of “the historical dominance of the pop scene in Iceland by Anglophone pop” (Ibid. 34), and the artist’s consequent familiarity with English as the language of popular music. In non-Anglophone territories, historical, social and cultural contexts determine and regulate the function of English as an instrument of communication as well as a symbol of social identity, or as both a foreign language (i.e., not the native tongue) and the globalised, cosmopolitan language that everyone should learn (i.e., to be able to communicate with others across the globe); the simultaneous existence of these two dimensions make the function of English infinitely more complex than just what Frith, *qua* Anglophone researcher, terms the “appropriate” language for rock – or any other variant of popular music.

My primary reason for taking up this discussion is the fact that the artists I have chosen as case studies in this thesis are Norwegians who write and sing lyrics in English. A central keyword for understanding what is going on when Norwegian artists write in English is *banality*. One particularly rich source of displays of banality, in Norwegian popular music in general and for the purposes of this thesis in particular, is Norwegian popular music artists’ use of English in their lyrics, as the variants of English in question will invariably be intertextually

contingent upon a range of globalised Anglophone elements, such as Hollywood films, television series and Anglo-American popular music.³ As I will be discussing throughout, this pertains to both Marit Larsen and Marion Ravn, with the former a particularly fruitful case.

The train of thought starts with a pertinent question:

What exactly is going on when a Norwegian artist sings her own songs in English to a Norwegian audience, and the audience interprets the lyrics as “honest” and “true” and finds the singer to be “forthright” and “authentic” and “exposing” her “inner feelings” in her songs?⁴

In order to begin to answer this question, we need to take a closer look at the complex function of English in contemporary Norwegian society.

As an intellectual experiment, I ask any Anglophone reader of this thesis to imagine the following situation: You live in a country where a substantial portion of the domestic popular music is sung in a foreign language, meaning a language that is not your native tongue, a language that you have not spoken from birth (and that, predominantly, is not the native tongue of any of your parents either). This language is the most prevalent in the non-domestic television series and films on offer, and it is the language sung in the music that most people seem to prefer – music that is also used in any and all imaginable contexts, from background music in shopping malls to television commercials to radio programmes to televised singing contests. Even if you are not particularly interested in music, you still encounter this language in a myriad of ways every day, from the user’s manuals that come with your kitchen appliances to roughly

³ I have found this area to be surprisingly under-researched, both within musicology and elsewhere. One reason for this may be the inter-subjective position of such research, which more or less renders it “invisible”: This particular problematic – how Norwegians use the English language, and the implications of this – could just as easily become a study in linguistics, cultural studies, Nordic studies, English studies, or psychology, as well as musicology. In any case, the absence of research on the topic is a primary reason for my discussion here.

⁴ Phrases such as these would consistently crop up in reviews and interviews at the time of the release of Marit Larsen’s first solo album, *Under the Surface*. As I take up in Chapter 3, the idea of Larsen’s “voicing her inner feelings” in the album’s title track has contributed significantly to the common understanding of her as a particularly “honest” and “revealing” singer-songwriter.

every other advertisement poster in the city centre, from the names of shops and cafés in your neighbourhood to the interface on your home computer. Due to its ubiquitous presence in all fields of everyday life, this language also supplies everyone around you – regardless of age, class, or gender – with hip catchphrases and sentences that they use incessantly, from the workplace to the nightclub, from family conversations at home to the Prime Minister’s official televised speeches. In addition to the large amount of phrases in this language that crops up in all sorts of everyday situations, the language in question serves as a marker of distinction for many, as they quote films, TV series and songs to project their tastes. Finally, if you are an academic, you are expected to produce written work in this language on an international level – this would be the only way for you to be eligible for international (a.k.a., Level 2) publication.

The overall function of this language is simultaneously a balance of power. A native English speaker can go anywhere in Norway (not to say the world), speak their native tongue, and expect to be understood; whereas Norwegians need to learn English properly in order to be able to go anywhere outside Scandinavia and expect the same level of understanding. These are both basic and necessary conditions for comprehending the status of Anglophone popular music in Norway. It is also the self-evident situation in which a minor country (e.g., Norway) finds itself in a globalised world where we have a *lingua franca* (English) that enables non-native English speakers to do everything from booking hotel rooms in the Far East to publishing articles on popular music in international refereed journals. What is more, it enables Norwegian bands and artists to try their hand at making music that both reflects their sources of inspiration and gives them a chance of achieving international success. In any case, there is always a potential power difference between native English speakers and the “others”, who have to prove themselves in a speaking situation; this illustrates Frith’s theory that power is being defined as *a way with words* (read: language). Especially for this last reason, it seems evident that English as a globalised language is never neutral or transparent, but that it transports with it values and assumptions. This concerns how to use the language correctly in any given context (writing “good” lyrics to a song is a different situation to

presenting one's research to British or American scholars, for example), but also how mastery of the language differs according to context.

Seen in this way, mastery of English as a foreign language relies upon notions of difference. This pertains both to general assumptions of the high level of mastery of English among Norwegians in general and the belief that, in a country where we both learn English in school from an early age and live in a country that is infused with the language on innumerable levels, Norwegians are "generally good at speaking English". I would argue that, precisely because of the prevalence of English in everyday Norwegian life, Norwegians run the risk of tricking themselves into believing that their mastery of the language is better than it actually is. Toril Moi has made the point that English is a fickle language: "When we learn German, we are immediately confronted with cases, conjugated forms, prepositions in the dative case ... Students of English, on the contrary, encounter no such clearly defined wall. Therefore, it is easier to convince oneself that one's English is good than that one's German is good."⁵ Moi makes the valid point that writing good English demands both linguistic considerations and an understanding of cultural differences. If we are not sufficiently aware of this, we run the risk of remaining at a banal level.

Two important issues arise from this. On the one hand, this is highly relevant for me: In writing this thesis, I face the daunting task of *presenting valid research in a language other than my native tongue*, and thus encounter a double challenge: a situation where I have to master both the tools of the discipline and the language that will give non-Norwegian-speaking readers the opportunity to read and evaluate it. Neither is to be taken for granted. On the other hand, the threat of banality that Moi points to is relevant in my discussion of Norwegians singing in English precisely because Norwegian artists' (lack of) mastery of English as the language of popular music may all too often lead them into the lure of banality: In a context where even a phrase such as "I love you" (in English) may seem both more cosmopolitan and as providing a safe distance from the awkward situation

⁵ Moi, Toril: "Didn't you have pigs in your decks?" *Dagens Næringsliv* 21 February 2009, pp. 110–111.

of having to utter these words in Norwegian, pop lyrics may turn out as no more than a set of banalities, which are taken for great lyricism by an audience whose command of English is no better than the artist's.

This is not to say that banality is a disadvantage. On the contrary, it might be precisely the banal statements that give a pop song its appeal. As Stan Hawkins suggests in his discussion of the Pet Shop Boys: "As an integral feature of much pop, banality is contingent on our grasp of it amongst a range of intersecting social, political and sexual discourses" (Hawkins, 1997) (129). Familiarity with such discourses is of crucial importance to both performer and listeners. Put differently, banality is not to be underestimated as a factor in the appeal of popular music, whether we talk about the appeal of the music or the performer. As I will be discussing in Chapter 3, what makes a song banal may be precisely what makes it appealing to an audience.

The lure of banality, however, is complex. In a transcultural context of popular music, it warrants mention that Norwegian music journalists frequently admonish domestic pop artists for resorting to banal phrases in their lyrics. In 2004, British-born teacher and pop-quiz host Rob Philips was invited by the daily newspaper *Dagsavisen* to evaluate ten records by Norwegian artists. Philips gave nine out of ten songs less-than-favourable grades, stating that Norwegian artists often attempt to convey their messages in vain: "[They] know many words, [they] write them correctly, but [they] do not grasp the linguistic value of the words. Norwegian artists try, but no not quite make it." The one exception for Philips is female solo artist Bertine Zetlitz, whose song "For Fun" passed the test: "I probably would not have singled her out as 'non-English' if I had heard this song on the radio."⁶ Despite the bias of the situation, Philips highlights a central trait of Norwegians' understanding of popular music: In order for Norwegian popular music artists to sound credible, they need to erase any trace of "Norwegianness" in both lyrics and performance.

⁶ Johnsen, Lars West: "Engelsklæreren gir norske artister dommen", *Dagsavisen* 19 March 2004, p. 2.

On that note, professor Annjo Greenall at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology in Trondheim has asserted that Norwegian artists' use of English accounts for their lack of success abroad: "Many Norwegian pop artists are very good at speaking English. They 'fool' a lot of [Norwegian] people, but they don't fool native English speakers. I think artists too often underestimate the need for perfecting one's English if they wish to make it abroad."⁷ In the same interview, music journalist Sven Ove Bakke suggested that while faulty English is not necessarily a negative trait in popular music ("[listeners may perceive it] as exotic and cute"), the effect is unintentionally comical whenever Norwegian artists display bad English in genres that connote "American authenticity", such as country or roots rock. Bakke goes on to assert that, "artists who sing in Norwegian attain a significantly higher degree of originality and authenticity", and makes reference to singer-songwriter Stein Torleif Bjella, who sings in Norwegian: "He would be good, but more of an ordinary artist, if he were to sing in English."⁸

Despite the obvious essentialism that Bakke purports here, making a seemingly unambiguous connection between mother tongue and authenticity, his statement also alerts us to how language transports with it assumptions of authenticity and originality. This is especially relevant in popular music, where lineages and traits of style always come to us through the screen of popular culture, and where the use of English conditions song-writing as well as how artists shape and perform out their persona.

I wish to make it clear that I do not subscribe to the idea that English is "taking over" for or displacing Norwegian in any unambiguously negative way.⁹ Nor do I

⁷ Grønneberg, Anders and Fotland, Maiken Grønning: "Gir artistene stryk i engelsk", *Dagbladet* 19 April 2012, p. 41.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ In their 2005 report on the effects of globalised English on the Norwegian language, The Language Council of Norway (Språkrådet) suggested the term "domain loss" (*domenetap*) to designate the situation where "English (or another foreign language) replaces Norwegian in a certain domain, e.g. higher education" (Språkrådet, 2005) (15). This is not to be confused with any fantasies of imperialistic "takeover", nor with any unfounded notions of "Americanization": As the report states, "Even a large-scale importation of words from another language, e.g. English, cannot in itself destroy a language ... The language will simply change accordingly, meaning that even a large occurrence of imported words does not in itself lead to domain loss" (Ibid. 14). This

intend to refer to the present situation as linguistic “imperialism” or, to use an even more slippery term, “Americanization”. This latter term has recently been taken up by popular music researchers in discussions of globalisation. Derek Scott, in his otherwise thoughtful examination of popular musicology, states that the so-called “cultural imperialism” model that “focused on the corruption or degradation of existing local cultures has faded in the present century” and suggests that, in its place, “there has been a move to examine the issues of the local and global employing the model of transculturation”; this model, which allows one to examine artists of global standing for their appeal across cultures, “avoids implying that millions of people have been manipulated and duped by American cultural imperialism” (Scott, 2009) (13). In the same volume, Andreas Gebesmair argues that, “globalization does not necessarily mean Americanization” (Gebesmair, 2009) (480). He stresses that there are “almost as many global acts from the UK as from the USA” (Ibid.) and that there are indeed regions “which resist global pop better than others”, and asserts that, “a high share of domestic repertoire does not necessarily mean diversity” (Ibid. 481). Tarja Rautiainen-Keskustalo, in her examination of the global economy of Pop Idol, suggests along the same lines that, “While the old American TV shows were ‘local’, being aimed at American viewers in the first place [...], *Pop Idol* is, above all, global” (Rautiainen-Keskustalo, 2009) (487).

In the larger canon of popular music studies, the idea of American cultural imperialism may be traced at least as far back as Theodor Adorno’s 1941 essay on popular music. Discussing the conditions for popular music composition of the day, Adorno postulates that the strategy of imitation of successful songs in order to produce more hits culminated in a “crystallization of standards”, which in turn begat an industry standard that was “socially enforced upon the agencies themselves”. The new product, popular music, must simultaneously meet two

is a point also taken up by linguists Guro Fløgstad and Anders Vaa: While, in a “global world”, companies need to be able to communicate with international partners, the fact that some domains (such as academia) are multilingual, does not in itself threaten the position of the Norwegian language (Fløgstad & Vaa, 2009) (137). Even so, the fact that the English language has partly or entirely replaced Norwegian in certain areas is indisputable, “especially within business life and advertising, popular culture, communication technology and research” (Språkrådet, 2005: 22).

demands: for “stimuli that provoke the listener’s attention” and “the sum total of all the conventions and material formulas in music to which [the listener] is accustomed and which he regards as the inherent, simple language of music itself, no matter how late the development might be which produced this natural language” (Adorno, 1990 [1941]) (306, 307). Adorno goes on to explain this natural language as it pertains to “the American listener”: nursery rhymes and Sunday school hymns, and how these are “vastly more important in the formation of musical language than his ability to distinguish the beginning of Brahms’s third Symphony from that of his Second” (Ibid. 307).

Here, the American listener becomes for Adorno the epitome of the consumer of “popular music”, the inferior Other to Adorno’s own concept of “serious music”, as exemplified in this case by Brahms. Adorno’s disillusioned view of popular music prompts him to equate the New World with the new, standardized music, in a formulation that may well be read as an early critique of Americanization. Adorno’s critique may be perceived as a precursor to the critical glance cast on the US music business by Lawrence Grossberg (Grossberg, 1994) and to Dave Laing’s suggestion of the US as part of an Anglophone “platinum triangle” of popular music (Laing, 1997) (123). Even so, the idea that anyone should subscribe to a straightforward idea of “American cultural imperialism” in popular music at the time of writing this, seems rather quaint.¹⁰ At worst, it is in danger of blocking the way for more unbiased theorisations of the hegemony of English in the globalised world of popular music.

Scott, Gebesmair, and Rautiainen-Keskustalo all stop short of discussing the everyday function of the English language in their works. One reason for this may be that the use of English in popular music from outside the Anglophone field often falls between two stools in popular music research: as a rule, what interests researchers is the performers’ use of their own language. For example, in genres such as rap and hip-hop, after the first wave of this music outside the

¹⁰ Scott (2009) does not cite any scholars who have used this particular term in any discussion of popular music. In this regard, the idea of scholars seriously taking up “American cultural imperialism” *qua* prevalence of English is probably a straw man. Even so, I take into consideration that he may be referring to an older discourse of which I am not aware.

US, artists opted to perform in their native language, “rather than aping American styles”, thus negotiating a stronger sense of authenticity (Pennay, 2001) (121), or using their own languages as “resistance vernaculars” that “re-territorialize not only major Anglophone rules of intelligibility but also those of other ‘standard’ languages such as French and Italian” (T. Mitchell, 2004)(108).

Three important issues arise from this. First, when we enter into a discussion about popular music as it is made and performed locally outside the monolithic Anglophone field, we need to acknowledge that English permeates the multifarious practices of popular music from song writing to popular musicology, and that this has consequences for how musicians, fans and researchers relate to their objects. In short, we need to take into consideration that, no matter how “good people are at speaking English”, there is still a gap between those from outside the Anglophone world, and those who have English as their first language – a gap that puts non-Anglophones in a position where they have to show a “double mastery”, for example a mastery of both musicological skills and the English language.

Second, I hasten to add, this is not necessarily or even primarily a negative trait; nor can it simply be reduced to redundant phrases such as “imperialism” or “Americanization”, both of which, at the end of the day, only serve to muddy the discourse.¹¹ Rather, we need to conceive of it as a particularly complex situation, where the English language signifies mastery (of song writing as well as musicology), knowledge (of the world around us as well as the music we listen to), difference (e.g. those who master the myriad of cultural codes that come with mastery of the language, from Monty Python quotations to the ability to read international musicological literature), and power (pertaining to, among other things, Norwegians’ ability to write English lyrics that are perceived as meaningful by listeners). If we do not take this aspect of music into

¹¹ Toril Moi equates “the so-called internationalisation of academia” to “an imperialistic insertion of Anglo-American norms” (2009: 111). I do not necessarily agree, as I see the field of popular music in general, and the function of Larsen and Ravn in particular, as far too complex a field of meaning as to simply be reduced to a product of one-way imperialism, especially with regard to identity politics.

consideration, we run the risk of overlooking one of the most important sites of meaning production for artists and musicians as well as their audiences.

Third, we need to be aware that the English language is not a transparent tool for communication and the dissemination of knowledge. On the contrary, precisely because of its status as a global *lingua franca*, English as a foreign language¹² is always opaque: influencing and influenced by a range of cultural factors such as films, TV, and music, the language transports with it assumptions – not only about cultural artefacts such as music and literature, but also about identity categories such as gender, race, sexuality, class, and national identity – that impact on, and shape, people’s subjectivity in a transcultural context.

It is my impression that popular music research¹³ as a whole tends to afford primacy to the various musical practices of the English-speaking world. This is an obvious consequence of the majority of the literature in the field being written in English. Given a context where not only the musical objects but also the system of concepts – in short, not only the music but also the research – are in English, it is perhaps to be expected that the majority of researchers choose to write about *either* Anglophone popular music *or* the indigenous music(s) on the margins of or from outside the Anglophone world, where the vast majority of artists use their native language. In this respect, popular music research appears to rest on an unspoken assumption of authenticity, where the music that is deemed worthy of interest is either universally available (global) and sung in English or entirely local and sung in the local tongue. One aspect that tends to be missing in such a conception is the one where local (read: non-English-speaking) bands and artists sing in English. In a country such as Norway, this practice is so

¹² I use the phrase “English as a foreign language” deliberately with reference to the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), a mandatory standardised test of proficiency in the English language for international non-native speakers who wish to study in the US, the test’s country of origin.

¹³ I use the term “popular music research” here to refer to popular musicology and popular music studies as a whole, namely the broader field of the study of popular music. Otherwise, I follow Derek Scott in distinguishing popular musicology from popular music studies in that the former is concerned “with criticism and analysis of the music itself, although it does not ignore social and cultural context” (2009: 2).

common as to be on a par with “indigenous” popular music sung in Norwegian.¹⁴ On this point, it also needs mentioning that it has long been the belief of many Norwegian performers that if you want to “make it” on an international level, singing in English is quite simply mandatory.¹⁵

With this discussion, I have made an effort to provide the backdrop for my view of the English language in this thesis. In a transcultural context of popular music, English as the hegemonic language is never transparent or neutral, but always transports with it globally accessible turns of phrase that signify mastery of language and culture for non-Anglophone performers and fans as well as sets of assumptions about the significance of such phrases.¹⁶ Mediated via the complex web of globalised Anglophone popular culture, “globalised” Anglophone phrases signify experience in the ways of the world; what is more, they are open for use in contexts that disclose their banality, for example in pop lyrics. This openness

¹⁴ Singing in English has been central to Norwegian popular music since the “arrival” of rock ‘n’ roll in the 1950s. Willy B. (Bakken, 1983) refers to the screening of films such as *Blackboard Jungle* and *Rock Around the Clock* as crucial points in Norwegian popular music history. Odd Skårberg points out that for the “class of ‘55”, meaning the boys and girls who entered their teens in the mid-1950s, rock ‘n’ roll became an obsession and a cultural guideline (Skårberg, 2003) (9), and that British and American teen idols such as Elvis Presley, Cliff Richard, and Tommy Steele were primary sources of inspiration for the first generation of Norwegian rock performers, who consequently sang in English, for the most part because they were playing cover versions of Anglo-American songs, but also because these artists and their songs offered a platform for a new set of identity politics in line with the glamour of Britain and the US. First-generation rock ‘n’ roll singer Roald Stensby claims that he learned English by singing along to records by the likes of Elvis Presley and Jerry Lee Lewis, “despite the fact that I did not learn English in school” (Bakken, 1983) (13); this supplemented his rudimentary understanding of the language after years of going to the cinema to watch Western films, which provided Norwegian audiences with an understanding of “the cowboy drawl” (Ibid.).

¹⁵ Willy B. quotes Kjell “Kjaperud” Asperud, erstwhile singer of expatriate Norwegian 1970s band Titanic: “If you want to sell records in other countries, you have to have a singer with perfect English, with an English accent. If there is but a trace of Norwegian, or whatever, you won’t sell a single record” (Ibid. 66, 69). This attitude frequently comes across as orthodoxy among Norwegian musicians, even after Norwegian-language bands such as Gåte and Kaizers Orchestra achieved continental success in the early 2000s. It is also arguably one reason, albeit not the sole reason, for Norwegian bands and artists to sing in English.

¹⁶ Nowhere is the hegemonic transcultural position of the English language in a Norwegian context displayed more powerfully than in situations where Anglophone people in Norway are spoken to in Norwegian, but answer in English. A case in point is the Oslo-based band Casa Murilo, which consists of two expatriate Brits and four Norwegians. In an interview with the Internet magazine of the music festival Øyafestivalen ahead of their performance at the festival in 2012, the band’s British members were asked questions in Norwegian, but answered in English. This should not be interpreted as just a vulgar display of power: the fact that the festival’s journalist chose to render their answers in English, rather than translating them into Norwegian, is significant in that it is indicative of Norwegian readers’ command of the English language, and in that it invests the interview with an intelligible authenticity. URL: <http://oyafestivalen.no/2012/08/04/oya-prat-16-casa-murilo/> (accessed 16 November 2013)

renders the language opaque, because phrases, meanings and maxims are made available to non-Anglophone artists and fans in ways that leave them open to interpretation and local use, while simultaneously transporting with them assumptions of identity politics, for example with regard to gender and gendered behaviour; this last point is of particular importance to this thesis.

One particularly important reason for my interest in the various uses of English is what I call the theatrical aspect. The artist and author Jenny Hval, who is also a recording artist under the pseudonym Rockettothesky, is generally regarded as one of the most adept Norwegian artists today when it comes to writing and singing in English. This is partly down to the fact that she lived and studied in Australia for several years, an experience that would further validate her use of English for a Norwegian audience. As an author, she has published two books, both written in Norwegian; this parallel career in her native language indubitably adds to the complexity of her persona. In terms both poetical and naive, Hval has described the difference in working in the two languages by framing English as more “mythological”, but she also states that she is aware of this: “When I started writing in Norwegian, I simply had to think more. I perceived English as more magical, and Norwegian as more precise. I know very well that this is not the case. But my relationship with English sticks like childhood knowledge.” This purported magic has played a part in Hval’s identity politics, and was crucial in her decision to move abroad: “I thought Norway was a lousy country, and saw all nice and magical things as English.” This exoticism is part and parcel of Norwegians’ understanding of English as the language not only of the world, but also of specific and enchanted dimensions of popular culture and identity politics: a refuge from dreary everyday life, a sanctuary of escape. As Hval says of her use of English in lyrics, “English erases the borders between subject and reality. The entire house in *Perlebryggeriet* [Hval’s 2008 novel] is a sanctuary, like the fictional [literary] voice.”¹⁷

¹⁷ Quotations by Jenny Hval are from Karlsvik, Mette: “Pike med perledødninghode”, *Morgenbladet* 14–20 August 2009, pp. 34–35. While Hval’s insights can in no way be generalized so as to be valid for “all Norwegians” or even for everyone within a specific group, they can nevertheless play an important part in preparing the ground for a broader understanding of the complex function of English in Norwegian popular music and identity politics.

Here, Hval pinpoints a function of English that is vital for any understanding of Norwegian fans' love as well as artists' use of English lyrics. Offering respite from the everyday grind, the English language carries with it promises of a world where everything is "magical". Mastery of English thus feeds into the construction of a dream world where "the borders between subject and reality" are weakened or even removed, allowing the Norwegian a broader palette for negotiating both identity and subjectivity.

In a way, Hval's idealised image of English resembles Fløgstad and Vaa's anecdote about the man from the Solomon Islands who "hated his own language" (*Äiwoo*), preferring to speak the local variant of pidgin English, which he found to be "better and more beautiful" (Fløgstad & Vaa, 2009) (143). The authors interpret this in the light of ideas of whiteness: In a nation "without money and with few opportunities to make any", money signifies power and possibilities, and English becomes symbolic of a global culture of opportunities, whereas *Äiwoo* is seen to constrain and limit people (Ibid.). In a globalised context of popular music, English could easily take on a similar role of signifying everything "better and more beautiful", in Hval's words; its transcultural appeal would reside in its role as currency (accepted worldwide), means of communication, and cultural capital. Then again, such a reading would all too easily open up for the slippery logic of imperialism and Americanization. Such opaque terms rob the speakers themselves of their agency, and the pleasures of commanding another language inevitably get lost in the confusion. As Endresen et al. put it:

The identity we (maybe unconsciously) wish to be connected with in the eyes of others in a given situation, can be conveyed through our use of language. We may for example, through our choice of words in conversation, play a role of authority or appear as ignorant. *The role we play is subject to change depending on our intentions and knowledge, and is marked by language.*

(Endresen et al., 2000) (361, emphasis added)

Two vital issues arise from this. On the one hand, the idea of "the role we play" is relevant to any discussion of the pop star's persona and how this differs from the person behind the mask. This is in line with Chris Rojek's theory that "[the]

public presentation of self is always a staged activity, in which the human actor presents a 'front' or 'face' to others while keeping a significant portion of the self in reserve" (Rojek, 2001) (11), and with Philip Auslander's view of the person/persona division as a mask for "the real person"; consequently, "[the] real person is the dimension of performance to which the audience has the least direct access, since the audience generally infers what performers are like as real people from their performance personae and the characters they portray" (Auslander, 2006) (5). On the other hand, it highlights local agency in a way that transcends narrow definitions of imperialism or Americanization. Speaking English may well symbolize an ideal dream world to many Norwegians; but, as is the case in popular music, the language may just as well be used as a means of theatricality as an end in itself. This makes the case for an investigation that goes beyond "Americanization" and other notions of one-way processes where agency is overlooked.

In a transcultural context, Hval's statements pertain just as much to identity politics on a local level, how the "universal" feeds into people's subjectivities, and how people put the pleasures to use, e.g. in popular music. In principle, this goes beyond notions of Americanization because, at the end of the day, meanings arise as much out of local use as out of adherence to perceived universal truths. As Frith puts it, "[if] pop songs are narratives of love, and we do indeed fall in love, then songs are in this respect narratives of our lives, of the ways in which we engage in – and *realize* – fantasies" (S. Frith, 1996) (165, emphasis in original). The idea that we engage in fantasies, rather than just having them bestowed upon us, is indicative of the agency of the artist as well as the listeners. These fantasies, in turn, feed on the fact that "perceiving words in music is linked to what we gain from the sung voice in recorded form" (Hawkins, 2009) (173); as I will take up in the following chapters, the inextricable bond between words and voice is paramount in any understanding of use of English lyrics by Norwegian artists.

The point I am arriving at here is as follows: Even though an artist such as Hval has an audience outside Scandinavia, her choice of writing in English certainly

has as much to do with her subjectivity as a Norwegian artist (who, incidentally, has lived in an Anglophone country) as with any idea of singing in English *primarily* in order to reach an international audience.¹⁸ This point also implies that the use of English by Norwegian artists and songwriters is much more complex than just the idea that Norwegian artists choose to sing in English because the language is somehow mandatory if you want to “make it abroad”. No matter how strong the urge for “making it” on an international level might be for some, the use of English as the language of lyrics by Norwegian popular music artists arguably functions and makes sense first and foremost on a local level.

This, in turn, leads to what I call *the paradox of authenticity*: If Frith is right in his assertion that English is indeed the appropriate language for rock and consequently for Anglo-American popular music, it would entail that “authenticity” is contingent upon the use of this particular language. Consequently, any non-Anglophone performer who sings in this language would necessarily appear as inauthentic, as they have to resort to a language other than their own to convey statutory authenticity. Similarly, any perception on the part of the audience of meaning in the music would fall short of the authenticity mark that Frith sets up with his assertion that the musical conventions “may not be appropriate” for any other language, making authenticity contingent upon the language that is being used.

In the light of this, I propose that the English language provides Norwegian-speakers with a possibility of *distance*. Endresen et al.’s suggestion that “the role we play is subject to change depending on our intentions and knowledge” places emphasis on both role-play and the active choice of language, underpinning the theatricality of everyday use of English in Norway. In the case of Marit Larsen and Marion Ravn, both together as M2M and as solo artists, language is one of the factors that allow them to create a gap between their real selves and their

¹⁸ The same point can be made with regard to Marit Larsen, who has cited her own experience touring the world with M2M and working with Anglo-American songwriters such as Matt Rowe, Peter Dinklage, and Carole Bayer Sager as an important reason for her choice of writing and singing in English: “if it sounds easy, it is surely because expressing myself in English comes naturally to me, I have a very close relationship with the language” (Frankplads, 2008). Nevertheless, she started “at home”, building a fan base in Norway with English-language songs.

public personae while simultaneously maintaining an illusion of proximity through the highly theatricalised and theatricalising language of English. The fictional voice, as Hval aptly terms it, can thus be perceived as a tool in the rhetoric of fiction, which is based on telling (creating the persona) rather than showing (exposing the real person).

Returning to the starting point for my train of thought, then, I aim to explore the question – *what is going on when a Norwegian artist sings her own songs in English to a Norwegian audience?* – using a theoretical apparatus that includes the idea that listeners engage in, and realize, fantasies; the idea of artists’ theatrical employment of English in order to create and maintain distance to their persona; and the connection between voice and lyrics in popular music. Taken together, these bases of theory will hopefully provide tools for showing how banality and naivety can contribute to conveying musical meaning as well as spectres of authenticity and prevalent understandings of gendered behaviour.

An intersection of disciplines: Intertextuality, phenomenology, persona

My approach in this thesis draws on musical hermeneutics and phenomenology in an (inter)disciplinary situation of critical and popular musicology. Doing my best to make sense of the material at hand, I employ an intertextual method: readings of musical texts (songs), visual texts (album artwork, interviews, reviews), and audiovisual texts (music videos). In the case of interviews and newspaper items, I find these particularly useful in my investigation into M2M and the artists’ solo careers because of the lack of research on these phenomena. Some reference books exist, but like the articles found on Internet sites such as Wikipedia, these tend to be uneven and biased, and devoid of critical readings. One of the richest and most complete sources to the story of Larsen and Ravn, then, is the wealth of newspaper clippings and women’s magazine interviews. In addition, this material takes on extra relevance because it provides a hermeneutic window into the reception of the artists and their music.¹⁹

¹⁹ In her research into how and why women read women’s magazines, Brita Ytre-Arne conceptualises this activity as “media experience” rather than media consumption or reception. She places particular emphasis on the phenomenological dimension of this approach: “Media

The intertextual approach is particularly important because my research draws on a number of different sources from different fields. Derek Scott takes up the vital importance of this in his assessment that “[critical] musicology has revealed what it means to regard musicology as an *intertextual field* and why this, rather than the notion of a *discipline*, offers a more epistemological framework for research” (Scott, 2003) (4, emphasis in original). Kevin Korsyn provides further insight into this, suggesting that even though “at first glance, one might be tempted to dismiss the term ‘intertextuality’ as mere jargon”, it is a vital strategy, signaling “the movement that Barthes calls ‘from work to text’ – from thinking in terms of entities to recognizing mobile fields of relations” (Korsyn, 2003) (37). David Brackett takes up the notion of the text as always already intertextual: “While musical texts may retain a ‘relative autonomy’ – music is a medium with specific properties, practices, limitations and possibilities – they gain their meaning by circulating with other texts from other media which may include mass media publications, videos, film, industry publications, and ‘historical’ documents” (Brackett, 2000 [1995]) (18), which is especially relevant to my work with media texts as sources of information on the personae. To this end, as Richardson and Hawkins state on the matter, intertextuality can favourably be comprehended as “the state by which it becomes possible for a text to become a text through a network of relations that define it as text”; consequently, an intertextual approach can help us see “to what extent the text is interpreted as part of a larger structure” (Richardson & Hawkins, 2007) (17). An intertextual approach to musical texts and the structure(s) the text is part of, then, enables us to investigate into how music produces culture.

On the question of phenomenology, another important point needs to be made. If anything, this thesis is a phenomenological study – a study of the phenomena of the pop stars. I do not at any point pretend to make claims about the “real” people behind the personae. To the degree that the originators are separable from their personae, I am concerned with how the personae are made intelligible

experiences can be physical, cognitive, emotional, social, individual, communicative, ephemeral or formative; they are rooted in everyday life as well as in society and culture, and can be closely intertwined with other aspects of human experiences and identities” (Ytre-Arne, 2012) (3–4).

and available to listeners, fans, and audiences. In that respect, my arguments rest on readings of personae as well as music.

I see the road to making inferences about the actual people behind the personae as blocked by two grounding principles that I use in this thesis. These principles may help us avoid essentialism and help us to confront ideologically contingent ideals of authenticity:

1. *We cannot infer from the biological to the social.* In taking this precaution against biological determinism, I turn to Toril Moi's theorisation against the sex/gender divide of poststructuralism:

[The] best defence against biological determinism is to deny that biology grounds or justifies social norms. If we consistently deny this, we do not have to assume that the idea that there are only two sexes must be steeped in sexism and heterosexism. This is not to deny that invocations of nature usually come wrapped up in sexist or heterosexist ideology. To show that ideology is at work in such contexts remains a necessary feminist task. (Moi, 1999) (113)

2. *We cannot infer from the persona to the real person.* In interpreting and employing this principle, I draw on the theories of Simon Frith and Philip Auslander. In his theorisation of performance, Frith suggests that pop singers are involved in "a process of *double enactment*; they enact both a star personality (their image) and a song personality, the role that each lyric requires, and the pop star's art is to keep both acts in play at once" (S. Frith, 1996) (212, emphasis in original). Auslander has elaborated on this with his trisection of the artist as person, persona, and character, where the persona corresponds to Frith's star personality and the character to the song personality (Auslander, 2009) (305), which I refer to in this thesis as the protagonist of the song.

Auslander has also made the valid point that, "The real person is the dimension of performance to which the audience has the least direct access, since the audience generally infers what performers are like as real people from their performance personae and the characters they portray"; consequently, "[public] appearances offstage do not give reliable access to the performer as a real person since it is quite likely that interviews and even casual public appearances

are manifestations of the performer's persona rather than the real person" (Auslander, 2006) (5–6). Taking this as the most important tenet for my arguments, I propose that this works both ways; we cannot infer from the real person to the persona, as we have no way of knowing what the person adds or subtracts in order to create the persona.

The two above points are indispensable tools for any investigation into gender and popular music, not least because both models work both ways; in this, they also demonstrate the fluidity of identities. Taken together, they also remind us that, while we can in no way deny the corporeality of the body, neither can we deduce from biological body to social norms or vice versa. On another note, I may at times appear to speculate on what would lie behind the artists' actions; precisely for that reason, I see the need to point out that I cannot under any circumstances infer anything about the "real" people, as their personae are not reliable sources of knowledge about the persons behind the personae. This prepares the ground for analyses of the cases I have chosen for this thesis, including critical readings of both music and personae.

Outline of thesis

The thesis is structured as three long chapters, one each on M2M, Marit Larsen, and Marion Ravn. In each case, I have endeavoured to make the chapter in question as comprehensive as possible for discussing the artist(s) in question, before ending the thesis with a brief summary and suggestion for further research.



Figure 2.1. Promotional photographs of M2M around the release of *Shades of Purple* (top) and *The Big Room* (bottom).

Chapter 2

Growing up in public: Social Background and the Emergence of Subjectivities in M2M

In this chapter, I set out to investigate the phenomenon of M2M. Consisting of Marit Larsen and Marion Ravn, the duo achieved worldwide success with their two albums and several singles during their time together, from 1999, when the band name was launched, to 2002, when the duo disbanded. This band warrants attention because of several factors, notably how the band provided the two singers with music business experience.

Starting with the collaboration that led to their first album together, *Marit & Marion synger kjente barnesanger* (1996), I then go on to a reading of their work as M2M, their rise to international stardom, and how the artists go about producing subjectivities as pop artists. What especially interests me in this chapter, then, is how Larsen and Ravn negotiate agency and subjectivity in the words and music of M2M, and how both the similarity *and* the difference in background of the two singers may be seen to influence their personae and modes of operation as a duo.

M2M achieved worldwide fame through participation on the *Pókemon* soundtrack and subsequent M2M albums. In a local context, the first album stands as a defining moment in Norwegian popular music: a worldwide success, featuring two teenage girls not just as singers but also as instrumentalists and composers. Endeavouring to understand M2M is therefore a salient starting point for contextualising late 1990s popular music in Norway, and how this functioned in a transcultural context. The exceptional state of M2M has to do both with their situation as a globalised band (and thus arguably “constructed” according to the demands of a global audience) from the outset and with the considerable talent and musical performance of both artists.

What, then, made this band exceptional, and how could the singers be perceived as “normal” Norwegian artists? I choose these terms because they can tell us something about the tension between having a life that conforms to the social norms of childhood and adolescence, i.e. with school as the structuring point, and leading the kind of pop life that Larsen and Ravn experienced as M2M, travelling the world and receiving home schooling away from their native country.

“Normal” in this sense also refers to M2M as a transcultural Norwegian project that can be located within a continuum of notions of style and the use of the pleasures of popular music, in a context where “Norwegian artists sing in English for a Norwegian audience” – platforms that, in principle, are available to anyone who is inclined to pick up an instrument. “Exceptional”, on the other hand, designates how the two singers were launched internationally and succeeded in gaining global popularity – a platform that can easily be understood as significant of the dreams of stardom of aspiring pop musicians.

The career of M2M, roughly spanning four years, has frequently been referred to by journalists as the union of two talented girls who were both best friends and very different characters. How is this difference articulated? In order to answer this, I will start by scrutinising their respective backgrounds.

Contextualising background

Exemplary of a globalised 1990s culture, M2M emerged in the late 1990s as a continuation of the duo Marit & Marion, which consisted of Marit Elisabeth Larsen (b. 1983) and Marion Elise Ravn (b. 1984). Larsen and Ravn are both born and raised in Lørenskog, a suburban area north-east of Oslo with a comprehensive offer of music education for children. This, combined with the relative proximity to the capital, has arguably contributed to making it a popular place to live for new occupants from other parts of the country, including both Larsen’s and Ravn’s parents. It is documented in interviews that the girls had ample access to the variety of music and culture schools since early childhood, with both Larsen and Ravn singing in a local choir, taking ballet lessons, and

playing various parts in local productions of well-known musicals, such as *Les Misérables*, *Bugsy Malone*, *The Wizard of Oz*, and *Annie*.²⁰

The similarities in opportunities and choice of place have to be measured against the two girls' different personal backgrounds. Marit Larsen comes from what can arguably be called an exceptionally musical family. Her father is a former (now retired) cellist with the world-renowned Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra and also teaches cello in his capacity as assistant professor at the Norwegian Academy of Music,²¹ and her mother is a professional piano teacher.²² In comparison, Marion Ravn's parents, who both have their origins in the North of Norway, have more regular jobs. Her father was a teacher before he resigned from his job in order to travel with M2M as the legal guardian for his underage daughter,²³ and her mother is a social worker²⁴ who in practice doubled her workload to support the family during the M2M years.²⁵

Even though there is ostensibly no class difference between the two families, there is certainly a distinction there when it comes to musical resources and, consequently, cultural capital. However, variable backgrounds have not come in the way of the musical education on offer. Both Larsen and Ravn received formal musical training from childhood, taking part in the rich educational facilities in their native Lørenskog, taking singing and dancing lessons, singing in a choir, and starring in stage productions of well-known musicals.

Since the release of their first record in 1996, journalists have repeated the story of the two girls' long friendship, for example that they have "known each other since age five" and "been best friends since age eight".²⁶ Because of this

²⁰ See e.g. Moslet, Håkon: "Fjortiser med stjernedrøm: Marion og Marit fra barnesanger til pophits", *Dagbladet* 22 March 1998, p. 32; Mürer, Annette: "To kjempesmå syngedamer", *Dagbladet* 19 June 1996, p. 56.

²¹ Lien, Øyvind Fiva (2013): "I takt med folkeskikken", *Oppland Arbeiderblad* 12 January 2013, pp. 28–29.

²² See e.g. Hoffengh 2009, Fotland 2011, Falkenberg-Arell 2012.

²³ Kristiansen 2013.

²⁴ Spets 2013.

²⁵ Kristiansen, *ibid.*

²⁶ This particular variant is found in Moslet: "Fjortiser med stjernedrøm", *Dagbladet* 22 March 1998, p. 32.

reiteration of familiar details, there is some confusion as to just how they met; most journalists agree that they either met “in the small grove between their respective houses”²⁷, or in ballet classes.²⁸ However, it is a confirmed fact that the two formed a duo early on, performing together locally in kindergartens while also cultivating their interests in various musical activities.²⁹

Some time later, Ravn received a grant from a shopping centre in Lørenskog to record a demo tape,³⁰ and via a local musician, Finn Evensen from the a cappella group Bjelleklang, they got the opportunity to work with a group of producers operating in the Oslo-based Waterfall Studio. This in turn led to a recording contract with the Norwegian branch of EMI Records, and the recording of an album of children’s songs, *Marit & Marion synger kjente barnesanger* (“Marit & Marion sing familiar children’s songs”). From this it becomes clear that as a band/entity, Marit & Marion was indeed constructed with the help of the Waterfall Studio staff; the success of the children’s record, in turn, enabled the studio to sell their product to the Atlantic Recording Corporation in the USA.³¹ This might be read as M2M’s de facto existence because of Atlantic, and the reason why the record company could in effect dissolve the band by freeing them of their contract.

A showcasing of talents: *Marit & Marion synger kjente barnesanger*

The release that led to the creation of M2M and their recording contract with Atlantic plays a central part in the artists’ biography. As the *de facto* début album of Larsen and Ravn, the album *Marit & Marion synger kjente barnesanger* includes a dozen children’s songs sung by Larsen and Ravn, accompanied by performers ranging from a rock band to a string quartet.

²⁷ Spets, op.cit.

²⁸ Moslet, op.cit.

²⁹ Oksnes, Bernt Jakob: “Ravnen flyr høyt”, *Dagbladet* 27 September 2002, p. 10; see also Hansen 2013.

³⁰ “Ei helt vanlig jente fra Lørenskog”, *Romerikes Blad* 25 September 2002 (n.p.).

³¹ Waterfall had already established a working relationship with the Atlantic Recording Corporation at this point, having been instrumental in securing a recording contract for the Norwegian band Babel Fish the previous year (Eggum et al. 2005: 37, Olsen et al. 2009: 298; see also Opsahl, Alf Marius: “Hunting high and low”, *Dagbladet* 6 May 2005, p. 8).

Released by the Norwegian branch of EMI Records in the summer of 1996, the album is characterised by a high level of musicianship, with dexterous and catchy arrangements. The personnel includes several prominent musicians from the Norwegian jazz circuit, including pianists Bugge Wesseltoft and Rune Klakegg, saxophonist Morten Halle, and guitarists Knut Værnes and Staffan William-Olsson. The bassist and arranger Gaute Storaas is credited with the Mozartesque string arrangements (featuring musical quotes from *Die Zauberflöte* in the rendition of “Alle fugler”, a popular Norwegian translation of the German song “Alle Vögel sind schon da”), and the string players are hired hands from Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra, which is arguably the country’s most internationally renowned symphony orchestra. Notably, the arrangements keep the musicians on a tight rein throughout, clearly informing the reviewers’ impression at the time that this is a record that is both innovative in the field of children’s music,³² and, moreover, that it is classy and characterised by a high level of originality.³³

Adding to the high-end character of the album is the appearance of four string players from the Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra, including Marit Larsen’s father Geir Tore Larsen and her stepmother Alyson Read. Another notable presence on the album is the virtuoso multi-instrumentalist Geir Sundstøl, who has been an omnipresent fixture on the larger Norwegian music scene since the early 1990s, and has since become part of Marit Larsen’s revolving coterie of musicians, appearing on all her solo albums. Musically, then, the album can be interpreted as highlighting the efforts of Marit Larsen’s side more than that of Marion Ravn.

As well as reportedly selling 8000 copies in the domestic market,³⁴ the album was also nominated for the domestic music prize *Spellemannprisen* for 1996, in the section for children’s music. The coverage that the record received was indicative not only of the high production values and the girls’ singing abilities, but also of the efforts of the people behind the project. As a slick and professional

³² Ulstein, Hege, Melnæs, Håvard and Bakkemoen, Kurt: “Sjarmerende”, *VG* 17 July 1996, p. 48.

³³ Kjus, Trine: “Jazza barneklassikere”, *Aftenposten* 24 June 1996, p. 12.

³⁴ Moslet, Håkon: “Fjortiser med stjernedrøm: Marion og Marit fra barnesanger til pophits”, *Dagbladet* 22 March 1998, p. 32.

record that drew on a range of styles and highlighted the singers, it certainly also functioned as a calling card for the marketing of the duo vis-à-vis international record companies as well as for the production company, Waterfall.

Two basic premises underpinning my discussion in this chapter need to be articulated before we proceed. The first is that we cannot see M2M as in any way disconnected from the corporate music business that shaped and maintained them during their existence. While the members' individual talents as singers and actors were indisputable, M2M was in every way a product of music business know-how. Despite their status in their home country and elsewhere as pop stars in their own right, and aided by the media's portrayal of Larsen and Ravn as a rare case of headstrong individuals in a ruthless and disciplining music industry,³⁵ the duo and their music were nevertheless the product of the efforts of several individuals and instances such as producers, managers, and musicians, and entirely contingent on the business machinery of Atlantic Records. This would also involve the commercial impact of the first *Pokémon* movie, which played an all-important part in M2M's global success with "Don't Say You Love Me" and the equally successful marketing of the duo as creative individuals with mass appeal.

Dwelling on this point, I want to emphasise that this enmeshing of M2M in the corporate music industry did not begin with the deal with Atlantic Records. As both a creative endeavour and a commercial operation, Larsen and Ravn were arguably deeply ingrained in the music industry even before the producers of *Marit & Marion synger kjente barnesanger* began their efforts at selling the product to Atlantic Records.³⁶ In the latter case, there is evidence from the

³⁵ This type of myth making also provides a relevant example of fake naivety, in this instance with artists telling a story of their own purported authenticity, a story that the media reproduce as if it were the truth about the situation. I will take up the concept of fake naivety in detail in Chapter 3.

³⁶ The myth of Larsen and Ravn as creative and gifted individuals who somehow managed to make great music independently of the corporate machinery behind M2M was conveyed by a large number of Norwegian journalists in the months preceding the release of *Shades of Purple*. Quotes such as Larsen's "nobody tells us what to do or what to wear" (Risnes, Per A.: "Ingen har lagd oss!", *Bergens Tidende* 13 January 2000, p. 46) and statements about how they had become best friends with their producers, who were "such nice guys" (Aarvig, Sigurd: "Pur ung pop", *Adresseavisen* 13 January 2000, p. 9), contributed to maintaining this illusion; arguably, they also

extensive press coverage of the band that Atlantic Records in reality created M2M, that the company both turned the duo into a marketable popular music unit and had the opportunity to terminate the relationship. Inevitably, this entailed terminating the duo as well. As soon as Atlantic Records decided to release M2M from their contract, the band, as a product moulded and marketed by the record company, ceased to exist.³⁷ As a consequence, any suggestions of Larsen and Ravn's autonomy within this corporate structure must be understood as contingent on the record company's invention of M2M, a situation where the artists themselves were not in charge.

By stating this premise I do not intend to devalue Larsen and Ravn's efforts as singers, songwriters, or performing artists. Nor do I seek to make any disparaging remarks about the musical output of M2M or suggest that anyone involved was not doing their job properly. The point I wish to make is that, in order to avoid falling into the trap of fixing the artists in a binary opposition, with the artist as the supposedly benevolent counterpart to the corporate structure of the recording industry – what Keith Negus has aptly pointed out in his observation that “the music industry frequently appears as a villain: a ruthless corporate ‘machine’ that continually attempts to control creativity, compromises aesthetic practices and offers audience little real choice” (Negus, 1996) (36) – we need to acknowledge M2M chiefly as a product of this “corporate machine” and not as the brainchild of the members themselves.

point forward to Larsen's assertion of her independence as part of her solo artist persona. The journalist Espen A. Hansen provides a rare instance to the contrary: Even though he reiterates the tale of how M2M won over the head of Atlantic Records, Ahmet Ertegun, by showing up in his office and “sitting on his desk” playing their songs, Hansen also points out that M2M paid roughly half of the producers' fees for *Shades of Purple* out of their own advance payment from Atlantic Records, thus alerting the reader to the fact that the producers were professionals who were actually hired to work with the band (Hansen, Espen A.: “Fra Lørenskog with love”, *VG* 27 November 1999, pp. 34–36).

³⁷ One notable example of the role of Atlantic Records in the invention of M2M is the development of the band name. When Larsen and Ravn were offered a recording contract by the company in the late summer of 1998, they were referred to by the media as M & M (e.g. Moslet, Håkon: “Marit og Marion signerer million-kontrakt”, *Dagbladet* 15 August 1998, p. 34), a name that journalists used persistently until spring 1999, when the press coverage stopped for the time being. In the summer of 1999, the duo was launched under the moniker of M2M, which journalists duly used (Thurmann-Nielsen, Anne: “Skyskraperengler fra Lørenskog – Marit og Marion = M2M”, *Dagbladet* 4 July 1999, p. 42).

As to my second premise: Rather than acting in any capacity as creative singers whose motivation comes from “just wanting to make music”, both Larsen and Ravn must be understood as ambitious artists who have worked purposefully towards stardom since an early age. While the story of M2M has often emphasised Marion Ravn’s drive and ambition, in particular her basking in the limelight and “wanting to be an artist”, as evidence to this fact, Larsen’s efforts have, as a rule, been played down. This should not be misconstrued as rooted in any natural demureness or lack of ambition on Larsen’s part; rather, following Stan Hawkins’s discourse on performer strategies, I suggest that Larsen is a brilliant example of the pop artist through her “shaping of a fantasy around her own construction”, thus providing us with a highly relevant case of “how the self is relentlessly produced and ‘mannered’” by the pop artist herself (Hawkins, 2009) (12). During the course of the following chapters, I will argue that the masking of Larsen’s own ambitions is an all-important factor in the success of her persona, and that this masking has its discernible roots in the structure – and structuring – of M2M.

These above-mentioned premises need to be situated in any discussion of M2M as a creative popular music unit. In both cases, we may interpret the artists’ employment of negations as a strategy of distance that potentially deflects all critical looks. The finished product, by which I mean their music, bears testimony to the efforts of all involved. This entails the artists always operating at a distance, thus creating the illusion of proximity and honesty, a vital part of their *metier*. This should not be overlooked whenever we hear talk about an artist’s authenticity, realness, or honesty.

These points require stressing since they often seem to dissolve in discussions of M2M in general and Marit Larsen in particular. Equally important, the articulation of these points can open for a critical evaluation of any statements by Larsen or Ravn about the supposed autonomy of M2M in the corporate machinery of the music business. Also, with the assistance of these two overarching premises, we may begin to see the negotiation and staging of subjectivity and female agency in M2M’s music and image as independent of

stereotypical ideas of authenticity and honesty, and instead focus on how the artists relay such notions in the music.

The thinking person's teen pop: *Shades of Purple* (2000)

Following the name change to M2M and the success of their first single, “Don’t Say You Love Me”, there was enough of a buzz around the duo that Atlantic Records could release their first album the following year.³⁸ Given a worldwide release in March 2000, the album, named *Shades of Purple*, represented a giant step ahead for the duo from their de facto first album, *Marit & Marion synger kjente barnesanger*, both through their emergence as singers and songwriters and through the articulation of the M2M concept as a platform for identity politics.

Larsen and Ravn’s debut album under the name M2M comes across as a thoroughly cosmopolitan record. I will explain. Harnessed by a range of producers, the songs were recorded in metropolitan studios on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, in New York City, Vancouver, and London, as well as Stockholm and Oslo. With regard to music history, the album credits also list such important names as songwriter Carole Bayer Sager (who co-wrote the song “Why” with Larsen and Ravn), mixing engineer Tom Lord-Alge (who mixed several of the tracks) and ABBA’s Benny Andersson (who played accordion on “Pretty Boy”). Several members of the staff behind *Marit & Marion synger kjente barnesanger* were also involved in the production of the album, notably the arranger Gaute Storaas and members of the Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra on “Everything You Do”.

Significantly, the album is also a step ahead for the two artists when it comes to their own set of identity politics. Marion Ravn, who appears as “Marion Raven”

³⁸ According to the liner notes for *Shades of Purple*, the album was licensed from Waterfall Studio to the Atlantic Recording Corporation for release in the USA and WEA International for the rest of the world. This would entail that, while Larsen and Ravn were under solo contracts with Atlantic, the Norwegian production company still owned the rights to their actual recordings. This is indicative both of the importance of the artists’ intermediaries and of the anchoring of M2M in their home country, a fact that would also defuse any unfounded ideas of the “Americanization” of M2M. It is also probable that this has facilitated securing of the artists’ income.

for the first time, is credited as the sole composer of “Girl in your Dreams”, as well as playing keyboards on the song, while Marit Larsen is credited with playing acoustic guitar on “Smiling Face”. While such details contribute to a distinction between the artists, the images certainly bespeak their emphasis on unity. On the front and back cover (figure 2.2), they walk down a street (probably in the USA, judging from the cars parked alongside the pavement) wearing clothes that complement one another, with the camera framing them from afar. There is thus an element of distance there, but also of safety, both of which are heightened by the childhood image of the two singers in the CD booklet – a hint that the adolescent singers still have recourse to the safe zone of their childhood years: the unbreakable unit of Marit and Marion is theatricalised as having its roots in the very beginning of their history.





Figure 2.2. Front (top) and back cover for *Shades of Purple*.

This sense of unity, or better solidarity, is also conveyed through the vocals. As performers, the two singers’ voices are still sufficiently alike that they can function as “one”, notably in “Pretty Boy”, where the voices are mostly indistinguishable from each other, instead creating a continuum that conveys a seemingly unambiguous subjectivity. This relative lack of development is also audible in the voices’ lack of impact in deeper registers, such as in “Why”.

Despite the climate of the day, with ranges from the Spice Girls and Hanson to Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera, Larsen and Ravn negotiate a platform apart from this. On *Shades of Purple*, the aim seems to be to create the impression of singer-songwriters in the making. The situation with multiple producers and co-songwriters, however, along with the obvious pop aesthetics that the band gained access to as part of the *Pokémon* soundtrack and “Don’t Say You Love Me”, ensures that the singers are not trapped in any restrictive discourse of rock or singer-songwriter authenticity. Rather, the impression that is successfully conveyed is that of M2M as providers of the thinking person’s teen pop.

“Don’t Say You Love Me”

“Don’t Say You Love Me” was M2M’s first single for Atlantic Records, also included in the international version of *Pokémon: The First Movie*, which was

given a worldwide release the same year. As both a soundtrack hit and a hit single, "Don't Say You Love Me" propelled M2M to global fame in one fell swoop.

The song was released as a single in its own right in October 1999, some weeks ahead of the release of the *Pokémon* soundtrack album in November of that year. M2M's debut album, *Shades of Purple*, including this song and also spawning five further singles, was released in March 2000. The single reached number 21 on Billboard's Hot 100 list,³⁹ making it not only the band's highest-charting single in the course of their career, but also the second best position any Norwegian act had ever reached on the coveted Billboard list at that point in time – second only to a-ha, who reached the number one spot with "Take On Me" in October 1985.⁴⁰ Consequently, as the first single from the announced album, the song brought about great expectations on both global and local levels, generating the first wave of extensive coverage of M2M in the Norwegian media.⁴¹

Also worth noting is the fact that both Larsen and Ravn are credited as co-composers, together with the song's American producers, Jimmy Bralower and Peter Zizzo.⁴² The two girls share the singing, with Ravn singing the first verse and Larsen the second, and the two sharing the third verse in a similar fashion. The producers are credited with playing drums (Bralower) and guitar, bass and keyboards (Zizzo), certifying that the song is indeed the product of cooperation between artists and producers.

³⁹ Billboard.com, URL: <http://www.billboard.com/artist/276842/m2m/chart> (downloaded 13 August 2013)

⁴⁰ M2M have since been relegated to third place on this list after Norwegian comedy brother duo Ylvis surpassed them, reaching no. 6 on the Billboard Hot 100 with their surprise hit "The Fox" in the autumn of 2013.

⁴¹ It should be mentioned that despite the local media's fascination with the duo, Norwegian reviews of their musical output were often negative and focused on what journalists perceived as an "Americanized" sound. One music journalist titled his review of *Shades of Purple* "American shopping-mall pop from Lørenskog"; stating that he found the songs "extremely boring and identical", he also posed the rather opaque question "How honest is it for two teenage girls from Lørenskog to be sounding so thoroughly American?" (Thon, Kjell Henning: "Amerikansk kjøpesenter-pop fra Lørenskog", *Aftenposten* 19 February 2000, p. 12.)

⁴² Bralower and Zizzo are experienced and versatile producers and musicians who at the time had worked with a broad range of artists between them, including Celine Dion, Jennifer Lopez, Billy Joel, Peter Gabriel, and Carly Simon. URL: http://jimmybralower.com/JimmyBralower/Bio_2.html (accessed 10 February 2014), <http://www.allmusic.com/artist/peter-zizzo-mn0000273980/credits> (accessed 9 February 2014)

Don't Say You Love Me

[Verse 1]

Got introduced to you by a friend
You were cute and all that
Baby you set the trend, yes you did oh
The next thing I know we're down at the cinema
We're sitting there, *you said you love me / you start kissing me*
What's that about?

[Verse 2]

You're moving too fast, I don't understand you
I'm not ready yet, baby I can't pretend
No I can't
The best I can do is tell you to talk to me
It's possible, eventual
Love will find a way
Love will find a way ...

[Chorus]

Don't say you love me
You don't even know me
If you really want me
Then give me some time
Don't go there baby
Not before I'm ready
Don't say your heart's in a hurry
It's not like we're gonna get married
Give me, give me some time

[Verse 3]

Here's how I play, here's where you stand
Here's what to prove to get any further than where it's been
I'll make it clear, not gonna tell you twice
Take it slow, you keep pushing me
You're pushing me away
Pushing me away ...

[Chorus]

[Bridge]

Don't say you love me
You don't even know me baby ...

The music seems derivative of a broad range of contemporary songs. Driven by an electric piano reminiscent of TLC's "Waterfalls", the song also incorporates sampled or "fake" vinyl scratching in the chorus, in the style of Hanson's 1997 smash hit "MMMBop". What sets it apart from these examples is the acoustic guitar that is heard throughout, an element that both corresponds with the visual

appearance of M2M (with Larsen on guitar) and situates the song in a local context of teenage singer-songwriters such as Lene Marlin, whose breakthrough single “Unforgivable Sinner” had been launched as part of the soundtrack of the Norwegian film *Schpaaa* the previous year. The iconic images of the “girl next door”-styled Marlin performing live with her acoustic guitar on the promotional campaign for her debut album *Playing My Game* – a naturally gifted singer-songwriter, straight from the bedroom to the stage⁴³ – may well have influenced the visual aesthetics of M2M as well.

What is more, the song exemplifies transcultural popular music: the two Norwegian singers cooperating with American producers in the US to create a song where the singers sound convincingly Anglo-American. This is not to say that their subjectivities are lost in the mix; if anything, they are rather enhanced by it. Let me explain.

Starting first with Ravn’s voice, accompanied by an acoustic guitar, the song (which is also the opening track of *Shades of Purple*) can favourably be heard as a statement of agency. After the first half of the verse, the band comes in, and Larsen sings the second half to a full band backing. As the song moves into the chorus, it turns out that the key of the verse (c# minor) is in reality the relative minor. The chorus is in E major, lending a jubilant air to the song’s message: “Don’t say you love me / You don’t even know me”. This is further indicative of the agency of the protagonists, who implore – or, perhaps better, instruct – the “you” of the narrative to “give them some time”; the seemingly admonishing lines of “Don’t go there baby / not before I’m ready” equally signal a stance that sounds considered and assured rather than prudish. Somewhat superficially, this might be interpreted as the voicing of a stereotypically Christian abstinence, an adherence to the norms of a Middle American mindset of demure feminine

⁴³ The mythology of Lene Marlin centres on the story of her as an “artist by accident”, who was given a guitar for her 15th birthday, made a demo recording at 17, and was promptly offered a recording contract by Virgin Records (Eggum et al. 2005: 337–338). Marlin herself has emphasised a type of girl-next-door ordinariness in interviews, which she has used to great success in her public image as well: When the Norwegian research company MMI conducted a “youth survey” in 2000, one in four teenage girls purportedly mentioned Marlin as their greatest female idol (quoted in Olsen et al. 2009: 287).

virtuousness. With more than just a moralistic message of abstinence, however, the song rises above any obvious grounding in “wholesome” family values, and may equally well be read as the singers’ burgeoning agency at work, set to music that makes the agenda admirably clear.

The song follows an A-B-A-B-C-B structure of verse (A), chorus (B) and instrumental bridge (C). After the second chorus, the song moves directly into the bridge, also in c# minor but with a movement via Bsus4 up to D major, which creates an extra tension in anticipation of the return to the tonic. After the second occurrence of D major, the melody moves via two plagal cadences to the tonic of E major, where the title is interjected over a one-off chord progression of E – Bsus4 – Aadd9, with the guitarist strumming open E and B strings in a musical gesture that both refreshes and prepares the listener for the return of the chorus. After a slight alteration of the vocal melody, where Larsen and Ravn draw out the title over several bars, the song is given an extra lift by the transposition of the tonic from E major to F# major. If anything, this serves to further emphasize the point: when the line “Don’t say you love me / You don’t even know me” returns in the new tonic, the agency is voiced to the greatest effect.

The lyrics place the listener right in the middle of a situation where subjectivity is negotiated. After a brief introductory analepsis in which the narrator has been “introduced to you by a friend” who subsequently asks “you” out on a date at the cinema, the protagonist resists the advances of “you” when the antagonist tries to kiss her.⁴⁴ The present situation – “The next thing I know we’re down at the cinema” – introduces the song’s subject as “I” for the first time; up until this, everything has happened to the passive “me”, who then takes control, demarcating “you” explicitly from herself: “You’re moving too fast”, which leads to the protagonist taking a stance where “I don’t understand you”, occupying the

⁴⁴ The line “We’re sitting there, you start kissing me” in the lyrics of the original M2M single and album track was replaced by the line “We’re sitting there, you said you love me” in the *Pokémon* film and album version, allegedly out of concern for the listeners’ age and level of maturity. This “clean” variant also appears in the lyrics reprinted in the booklet for the compilation CD *The Day You Went Away: The Best of M2M* (2003); paradoxically, or most likely as a result of faulty editing, the song that appears on the audio CD contains the original, “uncensored” line.

subject position where the singer tells “you” to *talk* to her first. “I” resists the advances of “you” and actively takes control of the situation, upholding the division where “you” is all but told off, or at least instructed to play by the female singers’ rules: “Here’s how I play, here’s where you stand.” Larsen and Ravn take turns singing lead; consequently, the female singers unite to constitute a subject that resists being a singular object for the gaze of “you”, instead telling “you” to “take it slow” lest “you’re pushing me away”.

Rather than a stereotypical case of “female sexual repression”, the lyrics here become a display of female agency, heralding the emergence of subjectivity. Drawing on Barbara Bradby’s view of the construction of romance in 1960s girl-group songs, I suggest an interpretation of “Don’t Say You Love Me” as “a complex of active sexual desire tempered by real needs, such as that for reciprocation” (Bradby, 1990) (366) – or, in the case of M2M, the need for *control*, for asserting the narrative “I” as an active subject who shows how she keeps the nondescript “you” from violating her integrity. The song’s title also bears witness of this: “Don’t say you love me” can be read as subtly yet directly voicing “her inner feelings, what she wants, and the strength of her convictions” (Ibid. 355), where *me*, rather than reducing her to the passive object, functions as a part of the “complex statement by the girl *about herself*” (Ibid. 356). The underlying attitude of restraint, and consequently of control of one’s situation, is further theatricalised by the employment of the negation “Don’t” as the first word of the title. The term lends itself to an interpretation as a defence for the singers; however, it also works on another level, namely as a marker of subjectivity and agency.

In order to examine how pronouns act on each other in a pop lyric, Bradby also insists that, “(w)e need to know whether the female singer is singing of herself as an object of the boy’s desires and actions, or whether she herself is the desiring, acting subject” (Ibid. 347). Picking up on this, I suggest that in “Don’t Say You Love Me” both the agency and subject position of the female singer(s) are implied from the very start. Even though the lyrics do not start with a pronoun, the first line implies that “I” is indeed the narrator *and* the subject: “I got

introduced to you by a friend". Consequently, "I", voiced by the female singers, is the one who can be seen to call the shots, without ever overstating her (their) power in any vulgar way, but instead opening the narrative to identification for listeners.

In the video for the song, further glimpses of such agency are discernible. The narrative, which takes place at a drive-in cinema, contains elements of comic relief – like the clumsy technical assistant who mans the projector room and gets trapped in the strips of film, and the clever "money shot" parody when the popcorn machine gets out of control and blows sky high just as the song moves into the jubilant final chorus (2:24) – as well as a choreographed dance sequence, with cinema-goers turning the parking lot into an improvised outdoors disco. In one main narrative strand, we see Ravn in the passenger seat of a vintage convertible next to a handsome, but nondescript young man who looks disinterested and almost bored, but who also at one point makes advances on her, only to be firmly rejected by Ravn (2:05). These scenes complement the clips of Larsen and Ravn miming the words for the camera, clips that place the duo firmly at the centre of attention.

Towards the end of the story, the young man, disenchanted, steps out of the car (2:48–2:55); subsequently, Larsen, who has previously leaned against the passenger door strumming her guitar, takes his place behind the wheel (3:00). The story thus appears to turn full circle: The "friend" introduced "I" to a "you" who turned out not to be right for her; his advances unrequited, "you" leaves, and the "friend" returns to "I", who retains her integrity. The story thus rests on the standardised heteronormative narrative of boy and girl; but this obvious variant appears to be undercut by the girls' own agency, signalling both a distance to sexualised heteronormative love and a solidarity between the two singers. This way, the narrative of both song and video can be read as one of resistance to the adult world of sexuality, a resistance that creates a safe space for the duo of protagonists.

In retrospect, this idea of resistance assumes a certain gravity through statements by both Larsen and Ravn. In recent interviews, they have spoken about how the camaraderie between them provided M2M with a unity when it came to refusing suggestions that could possibly compromise their integrity.

First, Larsen:

It was the two of us against the world. [...] We were children, but we were real warriors! At the time, the music business was full of constructed bands. But we were hard as nails. We were real! We wanted to play our own instruments! We dressed like we wanted to! No adults could tell us who we were!" (Førsund, 2011)

Then, Ravn:

Even though we were only 14 years old, being genuine was of great importance to us. We refused to dance in the video for "Don't Say You Love Me". We had to have the guitar there. (Kristiansen, 2013)

From a critical perspective, one might say such statements draw heavily on notions of authenticity. By positioning M2M as a "real" band opposite the many "constructed bands at the time", Larsen cunningly intimates a lineage of "genuineness" (as opposed to the "construction" of the pop world) from M2M to her own persona – one who, despite her demure and endearing appearance, has never been willing to compromise. At the same time, she unambiguously refers to the band as "we", a gesture of solidarity that includes Ravn, rather than just reducing her to a strictly musical partner. Ravn, meanwhile, uses the term "genuine", which, while equally as opaque as "authentic", also suggests a continuity of persona as well as an inclusion of Larsen as her partner in authenticity. For both singers, the statements also echo the use of "Don't" as a form of resistance – as in "don't tell us what to do".

Arguably, these above quotes work more to preserve the history of M2M for posterity, with both artists ostensibly revealing personal details and thus re-writing history more in line with their present personae than convincing the listener of any greater existence of authenticity in M2M than their peers (one would be hard pressed to defend an assertion about a lesser degree of authenticity in Hanson than in M2M, for example). Nevertheless, the idea of a

duo of two teenage girls resisting the mandatory streamlining of the record company is not out of place when taken in context: a lesser band might have yielded to the suggestion (if there ever was one) of dancing in their first video. Instead, the agency of Larsen and Ravn in “Don’t Say You Love Me” and its accompanying video might well be read as a display of agency in the re-invention of both personae that came with the formation and staging of M2M.

“Give A Little Love”

Notions of agency and power asserted and negotiated in “Don’t Say You Love Me” are also central, and considerably more theatricalised, in “Give A Little Love”, one of the album-only tracks from *Shades of Purple*. Produced by Matt Rowe,⁴⁵ and co-written by Rowe with Larsen and Ravn, the song is characterised by a funky, sparse-but-menacing backing of bass and drums throughout, and by strummed, chiming acoustic guitar in the choruses. The bass is used to particularly great effect: at the start of each verse, the other musical elements are muted, leaving the slightly distorted bass as the only instrument accompanying the voice. This generates a subtle sense of menace, and also reinforces the highly theatrical staging of the narrative, a point I will return to immediately.

Give A Little Love

[Verse 1]

Every time I think I’ve had enough of you
I take you back again
Not because I need a friend
Just because I can’t pretend
Like the others do
You think you’re really serious
Clever and mysterious
Talking like you’re dangerous
Talking like a fool

[Verse 2]

Every day there’s someone else
Who wants to get with me
I’m telling you

⁴⁵ UK producer Matt Rowe’s previous credits at the time included production and engineering work with artists such as ABC, Jimmy Somerville, and East 17, and notably co-writing and co-producing the Spice Girls’ albums *Spice* and *Spiceworld*, including their hits “Wannabe” and “Spice Up Your Life”. URL: <http://www.mattrowe-music.com> (accessed 9 February 2014)

If you know what's good for you
Treat me like you used to do
Love me like before

[Pre-Chorus]

'Cos all I can do is watch and wonder
Where the boy I know has gone
You say that you want me, well it's
Time to tell your friends where they belong

[Chorus]

You can find it in your heart
Give a little love
Have a little faith
In the two of us
You can find it in your soul
Give a little love
Have a little faith
In the two of us
'Cos all I can do is watch and wonder
Where the boy I know has gone

[Verse 3]

Little boy I don't want anything to do with you
Get on your knees
I'm the one you have to please
Not the ones you want to be
I don't think you're cool

[Pre-Chorus]

'Cos soon you can only watch and wonder
Where the girl you knew has gone
And then you will realize that everything you
Did to me was wrong

[Chorus]

'Cos all you can do is watch and wonder
Where the girl you knew has gone

[Bridge]

And do you really wanna lose a friend?
You gotta understand or it has to end
'Cos I don't wanna wait for you anymore
Can't take it anymore

[Chorus]

'Cos all you can do is watch and wonder
Where the girl you knew has gone
You say that you want me, well it's
Time to tell your friends where they belong

While the song's tonic is C major, the harmonic and melodic material is predominantly in the relative minor (am), with the minor tonality adding to the menace of the song and the protagonist's almost reckless attitude towards the antagonistic "you". This, which I read as reckless, is certainly not unambiguous. In the choruses, the tonality fluctuates between C major and a minor, while in the bridge, the tonic moves to C major entirely before returning to a minor for the chorus. What is more, the rhythm section gives way in the bridge to a melodic interlude of two-part vocals backed by acoustic guitar and a muted, "softer" bass (2:22), with the singers gently but firmly warning the antagonist not to cast away their friendship (to all intents and purposes, the notion of "friendship" here recalls the Spice Girls' "Wannabe"). This moment of calm before the full band returns (2:40) effectively contrasts the more aggressive tone of the protagonist, and suggests a more accommodating approach to "you" as well as making the female subjectivity in play more nuanced.

The song is exemplary of *Shades of Purple* in that the grain of the two voices is quite similar. This allows them to blend their voices seamlessly and perform the lyrics as "one" protagonist, with the two singers sharing the words between them; it also ensures that the subjectivity of the narrator is never fixed. In "Give A Little Love", the narrative is seemingly one of a (female) protagonist who reprimands the antagonistic "you" (who is identified as a "boy") for trying to play it cool instead of treating her "like before". In this way, the lyrics may well be read as a straightforward message from a girl to her boyfriend to "treat her right", with the voices intertwining to make the point clear in the chorus.

However, such a simplification would overlook the complexity of the narrative. The matter of temporality is addressed in the retrospective observation that both "the boy I knew" and "the girl you knew" are gone, which suggests a rite of passage. Moreover, the seemingly straightforward message is complicated both by the protagonist's merciless laying bare of the boy's braggadocio, calling his bluff ("You think you're really serious / clever and mysterious / talking like

you're dangerous / talking like a fool"), and the assertive play with dominance and submission ("Get on your knees / I'm the one you have to please").

Here, the song has its parallels in a range of pop artists who have made use of representations of sadomasochism in music and image: examples would include bands such as The Velvet Underground, Blue Öyster Cult, Depeche Mode, and jazz/grindcore crossover act Naked City (Ålvik, 2008), and mainstream artists such as Janet Jackson, notably on her 1997 album, *The Velvet Rope*. In terms of both music and image, these artists employ a variety of markers that open the music to a range of insights into how ideas of gender and sexuality are socially and historically constructed and maintained.

This pertains not least to the theatricality of S/M imagery. As Anne McClintock points out with reference to Madonna's 1992 book *Sex*, it "makes no pretence at romantic profundity but flaunts S/M as a theatre of scene and surface" (McClintock, 2004 [1993]) (237). In the case of "Give A Little Love", Madonna provides a relevant reference point, as an artist who has arguably broadened the field for female artists' negotiation of agency through sexual imagery and role-play in a radical way with her 1990s work, which also includes the video for "Like A Prayer", the *Erotica* album and the subsequent *Girlie Show* world tour, and the documentary film *Truth or Dare* (a.k.a., *In Bed with Madonna*).

The idea of *play* is a crucial element and worth theoretical attention. Regardless of whether we interpret M2M as attempting to explore sexualised dominance and submission or not, their depiction of agency gives us the possibility to extrapolate from an understanding of S/M as "the theatrical exercise of social contradiction" that "performs social power as both contingent and constitutive", thus manipulating "the signs of power in order to refuse their legitimacy as nature" (Ibid. 239). Biological facts do not ground social norms in any deterministic way, deeming how to act correctly according to gender (Moi, 1999). Madonna clearly understands how this can be used favourably in the shaping of the pop subjectivity. Hawkins advances this point by suggesting that, "the act of changing one's identity through posturing can shift the 'core' to a

range of new positions” (Hawkins, 2002) (51). This is borne out by the assertion that whichever way we read Madonna’s various displays of feminine figures, “her impersonations remain a powerful strategy for shaping her identity” (Ibid. 50). One can map Madonna’s influence on to a band such as M2M, with regard to “play” as a strategy of empowerment. In the light of this, “Give A Little Love” can be interpreted as a variation on the assertion of awareness – “Here’s how I play, here’s where you stand” – in “Don’t Say You Love Me”.

Consequently, the song should not necessarily be interpreted as a display of what Sheila Whiteley has called “the erotic potential and appeal of children, not least the attraction of what can be described as an adult performance by a child” (Whiteley, 2005) (1). Rather, in “Give A Little Love”, Larsen and Ravn clearly play on “adult” notions of power and control, asserting subject positions where the act of taking “you” (the boy) back is staged as an act of authenticity (as in Larsen’s statement that she “can’t pretend / like the others do”; in true dramatic teenage fashion, she can only be “herself”), but also of privilege (as in Ravn’s assertion that “Every day there’s someone else / who wants to get with me”, thus robbing the antagonist of any illusions of being “the one”). When drawn together, these positions can be seen as expressing much of the ambivalence and love/hate relationship with social control that one would associate with the emotional rollercoaster of teenage life. Not unlike Madonna, M2M portray a female subjectivity who is in control and exercises power. On the other hand, they never lose sight of the gravity that boy-girl drama entails, eloquently expressed as they implore the antagonist to “Have a little faith / in the two of us” in the chorus.

A final feature worth referring to is found in the line “I don’t think you’re cool”, where Ravn sings the “I” with a slight creak in her voice. This is an effective employment of what Serge Lacasse has theorised as “the creaky voice” in popular music, a stylisation ploy that “can connote various attitudes and emotions, both positive and negative” (Lacasse, 2010) (144). Linking singing to the function of paralanguage, e.g. the vocal components that communicate emotions in everyday speech, Lacasse suggests that singing in popular music

might be approached as “a stylised means of conveying emotions” (Ibid. 142). As a paralinguistic feature, the creaky voice thus plays “a large part in conveying emotional clues” (Ibid. 151). In “Give A Little Love”, the notion of *playing a part* adds to the sense of theatricalised play with dominance and submission that is signified by Ravn’s subtle, but salient employment of the creak, adding a range of emotions to the protagonist’s subjectivity – her “I”.

M2M in the media

By 2002, M2M had made their mark on the musical landscape of their home country to the degree that they also began to appear in other parts of popular culture. Two examples are worth mentioning in brief here. In 2001, the band had a cameo appearance in the satirical newspaper comic *Bloid*, which then ran in the Saturday edition of tabloid newspaper *Dagbladet*.⁴⁶ In a surreal story line that revolves around Norway buying Sweden in order to stem the tremendous growth of the new oil-based economy, the duo appears during a studio session together with Swedish producer Max Martin. The Swedish-Norwegian superstar team is seen recording the song “Security Council”, which is released in order to become both a global hit single promoting a new, rather imperialistic variant of Norway and a sales pitch for securing the country a place in the United Nations Security Council (figure 2.3).

⁴⁶ Written and drawn by the author and humorist Knut Nærum, the comic *Bloid* centred on the journalist Rita Bloid’s adventures in the world of politics, with a humorous and often surrealistic twist. The story in question is an especially brilliant example of this, drawing on Norway’s complex relationship with Sweden and the nouveau riche situation because of oil income. In the strip’s storyline, the government of Norway decides to buy the neighbouring country of Sweden wholesale in order to increase the turnover of the massive surplus in the national treasury and relieve a growing national depression caused by wealth. One of the ensuing political goals of the new, hegemonic Norway is to gain a place in the United Nations Security Council. To this end, they decide to release a global hit single, performed by M2M and produced by Max Martin. In an act of protest, record-burning bonfires are organized in Sweden; resigned, the Norwegian government tender Sweden on the market. In a happy ending of sorts, Sweden is returned to national ownership. In the final panel, Bloid’s domestic partner comments that this has been “a quiet week for Britney Spears”, indicating that the tabloids tend to give priority to light entertainment items about pop stars (Nærum 2002: 3–9).

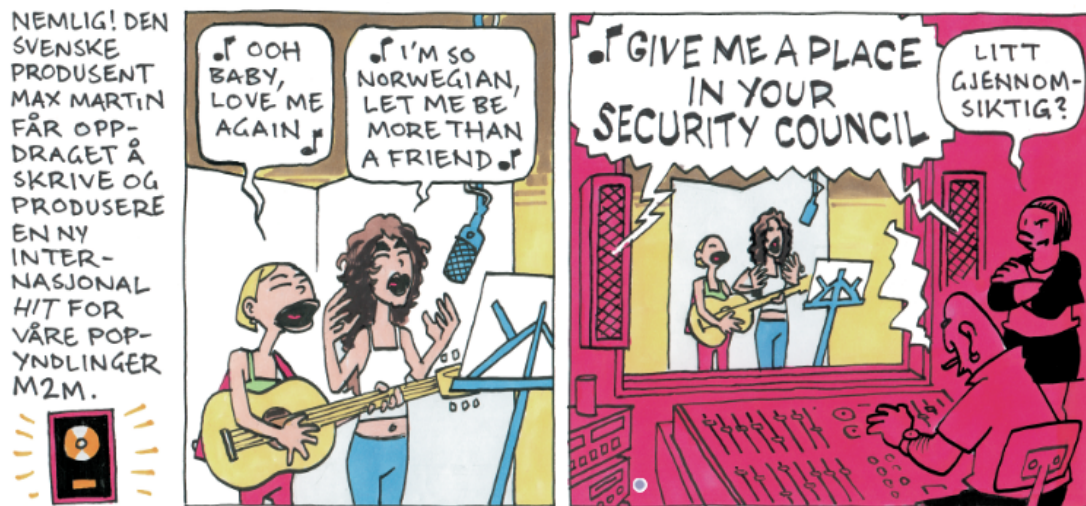


Figure 2.3. M2M's 2001 cameo appearance in the newspaper comic *Bloid*. The journalist's comment in the second panel roughly translates as, "A bit obvious?" Reprinted by kind permission of No Comprendo Press.

The following year, the author Arne Svingen published *Karisma*, a book about an eponymous duo of two young girls who are offered a recording contract by an American record company after working their way up with the help of local enthusiasts. Written for a target audience of teenagers, the book was interpreted by reviewers as drawing heavily on the story of M2M; even though the author himself stressed that any connection between the actual duo and the book was purely coincidental, he also admitted that there were similarities, drawing attention to the fact that M2M "had proved that such a story was indeed possible".⁴⁷

Both examples highlight the mythological status of M2M to a Norwegian audience and how the duo had made its mark on the national consciousness at that point. When we also consider the fact that the duo never played regular concerts in Norway and only communicated with the audience in their home country via their records and substantial media coverage, we may begin to see how M2M came across chiefly as a media phenomenon in the domestic market – albeit one with considerable clout, thanks to their stateside success, and thus a phenomenon that certainly enjoyed the support of their countrymen, even though this also came out in somewhat ironic ways.

⁴⁷ N.a.: "Svingen med pop-roman fra innsida", *Dagbladet* 5 August 2002, p. 54.

“Dance to the pretty Norwegians”: M2M on *Dawson’s Creek*

Apart from the release of their second album, *The Big Room*, the most sensational news item on M2M in the spring of 2002 was arguably the duo’s appearance on the US TV show *Dawson’s Creek*. As a part of the promotional campaign for *The Big Room*, M2M had a cameo appearance in episode 19 of the show’s fifth season, titled “100 Light Years From Home”; the episode aired on American TV on 17 April 2002. Their appearance consisted of M2M and their backing band lip-synching the single “Everything” in front of an audience, plus a minor speaking part for Marion Ravn, where she talks to the series’ character Pacey before the concert.

M2M’s appearance is neatly woven into the narrative. Set in Miami, the episode takes place during the so-called spring break, a weeklong mid-term holiday for students in North America. The band is introduced in an ensemble scene (08:43–12:13) where the show’s regular characters Joey (Katie Holmes), Jennifer (Michelle Williams), Audrey (Busy Philipps) and Pacey (Joshua Jackson) talk about how they would like to spend the holiday. They are subsequently paid a surprise visit by Audrey’s former boyfriend Chris (Tac Fitzgerald), who entices them with free tickets for an MTV concert where “this new band, M2M” will be performing (10:09). When Chris asks the others if they know the band, Jennifer responds: “Yeah, Mari and Marion from Norway”, and proceeds to cite trivial information about Ravn and Larsen’s choice of food and soft drinks (10:10–10:17). After a brief discussion, they decide to take up Chris’s offer.

The fact that M2M is marketed as “a new band” in the scene indicates that both the band and the record company were already working towards a re-invention of M2M, away from the image of the first album and the *Pokémon* connection. Jennifer’s repeated pronunciation of the name Marit with a uvular *r* and silent *t*, clearly reminiscent of French, is a detail that possibly highlights the exoticism of M2M for an American audience – an attractive Otherness that is theatricalised for an American audience via the French connection. Another interesting detail is how, in the scene, the duo of Joey and Jennifer bears a visual resemblance to the duo of Ravn and Larsen, playing on a similar set of stereotypes: the dichotomy of

the tall brunette and the quirky blonde (figure 2.4). The use of female stereotypes notwithstanding, this resemblance possibly also functions as a subtle signal to the series' fans that M2M would be an ideal choice of pop group for them.



Figure 2.4. Joey (Katie Holmes) and Jennifer (Michelle Williams) as harbingers of M2M in the episode "100 Light Years From Home" of Dawson's Creek.

I would argue that notions of Otherness of the Norwegian band in a North American context of popular music are both downplayed and emphasised in M2M's performance. The scene starts (12:15) with Pacey talking to Marion Ravn in the audience immediately before the concert, with the sound of the band tuning up in the background. From the conversation, we get the impression that she is chatting him up, and that he gently resists her advances. We enter the conversation as Pacey, obviously in reply to a suggestion by Ravn, says that, "I appreciate your offer, but I'm here with somebody". "I don't see her next to you right now", she says in a breezy voice. His response, though obviously humoristic, evokes old ideas of the patriarch controlling the women: "Occasionally, I actually let her mingle with the people. I'm good that way." Hearing the band's intro to the song, Ravn excuses herself and leaves Pacey in mid-conversation to enter the stage. Discouraged, he quips to a young man in the audience that "women just won't take no for an answer", adding: "Who does that girl think she is?" The camera cuts to Ravn in front of the microphone, shouting

“Hello, Miami!” over the music and shaking her fist in the air. Pacey, realising that he may have been wrong about her, says: “Oh ... that’s who she is.” As the song starts, we see Ravn confidently singing the first lines of the lyrics; this is intercut with the image of Pacey, embarrassed but laughing, presumably at his own misinterpretation; after clumsily clapping along for a few bars, he shakes his head and hides his face in his hands. It would seem that his potentially disparaging remark about women has been defused; the patriarch has been defeated, with the female artist coming out of the situation as victorious, making the obvious point that girls have a right to believe in themselves.

The performance is next filmed in one long crane shot (12:50–13:13), where the crowd parts for Ravn, as she walks down a catwalk-like bridge across a large swimming pool while the camera soars above the audience. On the bridge, she eyes a young man posing with his back to her before playfully pushing him into the water (13:11). The shot firmly establishes Ravn as the centre of attention; Larsen, who is seen standing on stage playing guitar, comes across more as a member of the backing band than as one of the stars. This perception changes as the song moves into the bridge and chorus: from here and throughout the performance, we see juxtaposed images of Larsen and Ravn, and the editing suggests a duo identity instead of a singer-with-backing-band image. After the first chorus, the image cuts to the next scene, and the music goes from the centre of the sound-box to being heard in the distance.

It is not without significance that in terms of their appearance, M2M comes across as entirely accessible to a North American audience. From Ravn’s American accent to the styling of the members of M2M (figure 2.5) to the music that is marketed, the performance is furnished with a strong transcultural appeal: in principle, there is nothing that sets them apart from their American contemporaries. It might seem strange, therefore, that their Norwegian background (read: Otherness) is brought up once again. Towards the end of their performance, Chris approaches Audrey (13:59) and attempts to revitalize their relationship. Caught off-guard, she states that she needs to get some water, telling him not to come with her: “You stay and you dance to the pretty

Norwegians and I'll be right back" (14:14). The reiteration of the origins of M2M might seem out of place; however, it can also be seen to draw upon the stereotypical idea of Nordic and especially Scandinavian beauty. This idea is concisely captured by the American guitarist and ethnomusicologist Steven Taylor, in his not unproblematic comment upon touring in Norway: "The beauty of the people here is a constant distraction" (Taylor, 2003) (245). Inadvertently connecting beauty to whiteness, Taylor's quote can be read as both constitutive of the Nordic region as "the epitome of whiteness" (Hvenegård-Lassen & Maurer, 2012) (122) and simultaneously as, in the words of Laura Mulvey, *to-be-looked-at*: beauty before intellect. If a similar point of exoticising Nordicness were being made about M2M in the series, it would probably be with the intention of emphasising the to-be-looked-at-ness of the female performers.



Figure 2.5. Marit Larsen (top) and Marion Ravn in the episode "100 Light Years From Home" of Dawson's Creek.

Ideas of whiteness, Otherness and gender norms are in play in M2M's appearance on *Dawson's Creek*, adding to the fact that, at the end of the day, the

band is firmly ensconced in a position as exotic Other in a domestic US music market. Given the band's relative fame after *Pokémon* and "Don't Say You Love Me", this would seem to work against the integration of M2M's music in North America. However, it might also well be a part of the sales pitch of individuality and distinctive character that came across as central to the reinvention of the duo as more mature singer-songwriters, in connection with their second album.

Up Close and Personal: *The Big Room* (2002)

As my analyses in the preceding section of this chapter indicate, the early stage of M2M, up to and including their first album, is characterised by a relative homogeneity of voices and personae. This is played out effectively in songs and videos as well as images, where the duo arguably comes across as a strong unit more than as two distinct individuals.

With the release of their second album, *The Big Room*, in 2002, some of these strategies had been altered. Certain stylistic and musical traits, such as Larsen on guitar and the two singers sharing vocal duties in each song, were retained. The writing and recording process have been radically different, trading the cosmopolitan city-hopping and array of different producers of *Shades of Purple* for an aesthetic and logistic unity: One recording location (Bearsville Studios in Woodstock), one backing band (session musicians Kenny Aronoff, T-Bone Wolk, and Jimi K. Bones), and one producer and co-writer (Jimmy Bralower), with production and songwriting assistance of another old acquaintance (Peter Zizzo) on selected songs. On the one hand, this pays off, as the overall production sounds more coherent and integrated than on the relatively sprawling first album.

The visual display, on the other hand, represented a departure from the first album. In the cover images, the two artists meet the camera's gaze both as a unit and as more distinct individuals (figure 2.6). While the dress code still signifies a relatively unitary expression and a definitive sense of style, there is also an impression of "up close and personal" aesthetics that is arguably significant for

the musical expression, both with regard to Larsen and Ravn as musicians (both are credited with playing guitar; in addition, Ravn is credited with playing piano and harpsichord) and the artists' singing styles.



Figure 2.6. Front cover for The Big Room.

With *The Big Room*, M2M were certainly contenders in a different league than on *Shades of Purple*, citing artists such as Sheryl Crow and Jewel as sources of inspiration.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, there is continuity from their debut album with regard to lyrical themes as well as sound: The acoustic guitar has a more prominent place in the sound-box, and the lyrics take up themes of agency and subjectivity as part of the more banal themes of love and identity.

Marion Ravn is showcased as a songwriter, with three songs. "Love Left For Me" and "Wanna Be Where You Are" are seemingly straightforward ballads, but they can also be seen as pointing ahead to Ravn's first solo album in 2005 and her collaboration with Meat Loaf the following year. This contributes to the

⁴⁸ Despite their citing both Sheryl Crow and Jewel as sources of inspiration for the album, M2M were also arguably competing for the same audience as Avril Lavigne, who released her first album earlier in the same year, and who, like M2M, also worked with producer Peter Zizzo.

impression of *The Big Room* as a pivotal record between *Shades of Purple* and Ravn's solo career, and therefore also significant of the continuity of her career as a whole.

In a similar way, there is continuity between Larsen's performance on the album and her output as a solo artist. A song such as "Don't", with its choice of lyrical subject matter and her use of a limited ambitus to contrast Ravn, may well be perceived as a harbinger of Larsen's solo albums. This indicates a certain continuity on Larsen's part as well, rather than a complete re-invention of her music and persona in the aftermath of M2M.

"Don't"

In "Don't", co-written by Larsen and Ravn, M2M again negotiate a protagonist's subjectivity through interaction with an antagonistic "you". In this song, though, the protagonist is less confident as "you" enters the narrative, as a disturbance of the peace that "I" has with "him" – she is "someone else's girl". This relationship is exposed as less than assured, as the protagonist's subjectivity is tempered by the presence of "you" who sees (and consequently objectifies) her, distracting her from her relationship with her current boyfriend. As opposed to songs such as "Don't Say You Love Me" and "Give A Little Love", then, "Don't" signifies doubt rather than confidence, thereby adding to the complexity of subjectivities in M2M's catalogue. Following Frith's theory of double enactment, where the performing artist enacts both a star personality (persona) and a song personality (the protagonist) (S. Frith, 1996) (212), we may regard the narrative of "Don't" as a hermeneutic process: the heightened complexity of the lyrics bespeaks a corresponding development in the performers' personae.

Don't

When you walked into my world
I was someone else's girl
Every time you look in my eyes
All that I felt somehow dies

[Pre-Chorus]
No, no, no, no
Can't you see what you're doing to me
No, no, no, no

[Chorus]
Don't look at me with that smile
Don't act like everything's fine
Stop putting dreams in my head
When I should've thought of him instead

When you say the things you do
It makes me want to be with you
And every time that he kisses me
You are always what I see

No, no, no, no
You make me forget about him
No, no, no, no

[Chorus]

No, no, no, no
Can't you see what you're doing to me
No, no, no, no

[Chorus 2x]

The music undermines the stability of the established relationship and reinforces the protagonist's doubts and emotional wavering. Open B and high E strings on both acoustic and electric guitar indicate "open-ended" narrative, as the protagonist questions her relation to a third person, "him", in the presence of "you". The tonic of the song is E major, but the song starts and ends in the subdominant A major (with the added ninth because of the open B string), suggesting a duality or duplicity that signifies the oscillation between two alternatives. Such instability is made vocally illustrative by the two singers upon sharing the lyrics between them, thus suggesting a duality that is *always already there*.

The distinctive rock band feel that characterises the album is sustained in "Don't" by several layers of guitars, including Larsen playing acoustic guitar throughout and Ravn playing the guitar solo. The song starts with acoustic guitars accompanying the voices; after the words "Every time you look in my eyes / All

that I felt somehow dies”, a distorted electric guitar comes in playing an arpeggio figure (A-B-E) and heralding the entry of bass and drums on the pre-chorus and a full band sound in the chorus, suggesting that the protagonist’s feelings come alive rather than die. This is underpinned by details such as the staccato electric guitar in the Bridge (after both the second verse and the guitar solo), which heightens the sense of urgency in the song, and the bass playing in its high register in the second verse, creating a counterpoint for the voices.

Both Ravn and Larsen show considerable vocal development, and also utilise the emerging differences between them, singing with a restraint in the verses and letting loose in the choruses. The lyrics can be seen to express both a resignation in the face of the new infatuation and a guarded openness *vis-à-vis* this new love. At the same time, the lyrics are replete with an almost stubborn refusal in the repetition of the terms “no”, “stop”, and “don’t”. This should not be taken as an example of malignant stereotypes about women, such as the girl “meaning yes” when she says no; rather, I propose that this employment of negations signifies a strategy of masking, in this case notably the singers’ ambition and the efforts that go into establishing and maintaining of Larsen and Ravn’s identities as talented personae whose minds are on the music and not the business.

When situated alongside the two previous examples, “Don’t” can be interpreted as significant of M2M’s music as a site for the negotiation of subjectivity and agency. The fact that the majority of the songs on *Shades of Purple* and *The Big Room* list Larsen and Ravn as composers or co-composers further illustrates their input in the shaping and negotiation of the band’s music.

This last point is worth dwelling on a bit further. Both Larsen and Ravn have referred to their time in M2M as an important learning process, learning the craft of song-writing together with a range of top-notch producers and pop composers, from Bralower, Zizzo, and Rowe to the production team Full Force

and renowned songwriter (and Burt Bacharach's one-time wife) Carole Bayer Sager.⁴⁹

Given that Larsen is often regarded as both the most prolific *and* gifted songwriter of the two artists, it is interesting to note that it was in fact Ravn who contributed most songs in the course of the duo's career together.⁵⁰ While some would probably interpret this as a "privileging" of Ravn, especially in the light of her solo contract with Atlantic after the disbandment of M2M, I propose that we understand this productivity as significant of both Ravn's investment in the band's sound and her drive as an artist, and Larsen's relative lack of input as due to her inexperience as a songwriter.

Again, in returning to *Moi* (1999), it warrants repeating that we cannot deduce from the corporeality of the singers' bodies (female teenagers) any universality of social norms. On the one hand, this might be precisely what gives M2M's music its appeal to fans regardless of gender. On the other hand, it seems from this that Larsen and Ravn, aided by their collaborators, manage to negotiate and perform out subjectivities that are not fixed (i.e. in stereotypes of the teenage girl), but emerging.

Differences: Stereotyping Larsen and Ravn

The Big Room is significant of the pop star's reinvention in order to construct identities that sell (Hawkins, 2009). It is also around the time of *The Big Room* that Larsen and Ravn begin to get pigeonholed as individuals by the press.

⁴⁹ Larsen has stated that one of the most valuable lessons Bayer Sager taught her was that, "when you read the lyrics [to a pop song], it should not have to depend on the melody in order to tell a story. And I have really put that to good use" (Frankplads 2008). In the same interview, she asserts that, "if it sounds effortless, it is probably because expressing myself in English is natural to me, I have a very close relationship to the language" (ibid.). Even though such statements have no doubt informed the idea that Larsen's songs have "contributed to an improvement of Norwegian standards of song writing in English" (Olsen et al. 2009: 363), it also bears witness that Larsen and Ravn are skilled in the trade of song writing in quite different ways than their Norwegian contemporaries.

⁵⁰ Ravn is credited as sole songwriter on four of M2M's songs: "Girl in your Dreams" on *Shades of Purple* and "Love Left For Me", "Wanna Be Where You Are" and "Leave Me Alone" on *The Big Room*.

This is exemplified in a newspaper feature where the journalist takes Larsen and Ravn along to a record store and offers them to pick out five albums each.⁵¹ The article is telling in that the journalist extrapolates from the artists' choice of music to draw a bigger picture. Starting with the observation that Larsen "comes forward as the musical centre of gravity" in M2M, he describes Ravn as "fluttering about the shop, not knowing where to start". Noting that Larsen refers to Joni Mitchell as "her big idol" and mentions that T-Bone Wolk, the session musician who plays the bass on *The Big Room*, gave her "five classic Mitchell albums" during the recording sessions, he also quotes Ravn as stating a central difference between the two: "Marit sits and talks about albums recorded in the 1970s, while I pick a record [by The Strokes] because I have heard that the singer is handsome." In concluding, the article lists the singers' choices: in addition to The Strokes, Ravn has chosen Mitchell's *Blue* ("Marit talks about this album all the time") and records by The Beach Boys, The Monkees, and Norwegian rock band CC Cowboys, while Larsen has settled for The Dave Matthews Band, The Cure, Sheryl Crow ("it really was not necessary [for her] to pose in a bikini in a men's magazine"), Radiohead, and Mitchell's *The Hissing of Summer Lawns*.

What is the significance of this? On one level, this is an early example of the explicit parsing of M2M as one talented/intellectual/musical individual and her counterpart.⁵² In this particular case, Ravn's relative lack of knowledge about the canonised music with which Larsen is familiar – a distinction of sorts – is reinforced by her confessed love of "clothing and fashion". If one adheres to the ideology of authenticity, this is unfit: As Jacqueline Warwick puts it, rockism, as gatekeeper of authenticity, "is wary of commercial success and disdains artists who demonstrate too keen an interest in the business of music and entertainment" (Warwick, 2012) (242). According to this particular logic, Ravn's love of "fashion" would doubtless place her in the unfavourable position of

⁵¹ Bakke, Sven Ove: "På shopper'n med M2M", *Dagbladet* 20 April 2002, p. 56.

⁵² As I will take up in later chapters, this is a regular feature in fans' as well as journalists' reasons for liking Larsen – the simple function of difference that makes Larsen all the more attractive because of Ravn's numerous disadvantages. To all intents and purposes, this particular discourse seems to start here.

someone who displays too keen an interest in the entertainment business. In such a situation, all Larsen has to do is to keep quiet except when she gets the opportunity to mention Joni Mitchell.

On another level, this particular newspaper feature can also be interpreted as the first in a long line of referring to Ravn in a condescending way. It warrants mention that the journalist was one of the first to interview Larsen on her reappearance as a solo artist in 2005; in that interview, he quotes from his own interview with Jewel in 2003, when the singer reportedly stated that, “they [Atlantic] gave one of the M2M girls a contract, but it is the other one who’s got the talent, isn’t it?”⁵³ This statement does not feature in the original interview with Jewel as it was published;⁵⁴ consequently, the journalist turns it into a piece of hearsay that he, supposedly confidentially, shares with his interviewee. Larsen’s reaction, coincidentally, is one of humble gratitude, calling Jewel’s statement “a compliment”. Considering that such a statement could just as easily be dismissed as venomous slander, it also shows how Larsen, in her solo persona, does not reprove details that may be to Ravn’s disadvantage. The later period of M2M, then, does not only show how the emerging personal differences between Larsen and Ravn are employed by each of them in their own identity politics, but also how stereotypes are generated and disseminated on the basis of such differences.

⁵³ Bakke, Sven Ove: “marit larsen”, *Dagbladet* 7 January 2005, p. 16.

⁵⁴ Bakke, Sven Ove: “Ny tidsriktig juvel”, *Dagbladet* 6 September 2003, p. 50.



Figure 3.1. Marit Larsen. Photograph by Thomas Brun. Unpublished outtake from winter 2006 photo session for the record covers for Under the Surface and "Don't Save Me". Reproduced by kind permission of the photographer.

Chapter 3

Touching From A Distance: Fake Naivety, Female Stereotypes and Banality in Marit Larsen's Music and Persona

In this chapter, I want to zoom in on Marit Larsen's solo artist persona, and examine how it is constructed and performed out. Since M2M disbanded, Larsen has launched a solo career beginning in 2005 and has gone on to build a significant following in her native country as well as enjoying continental success, notably in Germany. I will argue that several traits of her persona, frequently perceived as "natural", "real", and "cute", are evidenced in interviews and record reviews. These play a crucial part in her construction, notably in relation to the way she stages naivety in her persona. As I argue, banality also informs both her music and her persona in a complex discursive interplay.

As a feature of her post-M2M career, the early phase of Larsen's solo persona tends to be clouded by myth. The story usually told is that, after M2M disbanded following the termination of their contract,⁵⁵ Larsen retreated to her mother's house in Lørenskog, where she spent "a couple of years" wondering what to do with her life, and whether to go on making music or not. Eventually, she decided to take up song-writing again; after that, she wasted no time in securing a solo recording contract with the major label, EMI Records, and a new management deal. In the spring and autumn of 2004, she played two strategic concerts, performing her new material for an audience before returning to the public sphere in 2005.⁵⁶ In 2006, she released her successful single "Don't Save Me" ahead of the first album, *Under the Surface*, which she has since followed up with

⁵⁵ As I argued in Chapter 2, the termination of the contract simultaneously entailed the disbanding of M2M, as the band was a construction of the record company from the onset. The story of Larsen as a solo artist has as a rule omitted this, instead emphasising the split between Larsen and Ravn as decisive in the development of her solo project.

⁵⁶ The reason why her formal solo debut did not happen until 2005 may as well be contractual. As Ravn has later emphasised, the two singers were under individual contracts with the Atlantic Recording Corporation (Spets 2013). When M2M disbanded in 2002, this contractual arrangement effectively prevented them from releasing new material until 2005. This is an equally valid reason for Larsen's debut taking place that year, especially in the light of Ravn's first solo album also being released the same year.

two more albums, *The Chase* (2008) and *Spark* (2011). In addition to her success at home, Larsen has also made a name for herself in Germany, Switzerland, and Austria, resulting in the release of the compilation album *If A Song Could Get Me You* in 2009, and a re-edition of the album the following year.

I wish to make two points clear from the outset. First, there is nothing about Marit Larsen's solo persona that is not planned and constructed – there is nothing real, authentic, or natural about this persona. With this assertion, I adhere to the studies undertaken by both Frith (1996) and Auslander (2006, 2009), who insist that we cannot infer from the persona to the real person, a point that I emphasise throughout this thesis. Consequently, any claim to realness or authenticity in Larsen's star personality is contingent on the illusion that she is just "being herself", in line with her own claim that she "has no image" (Giske, 2008). I therefore take as a basic premise that any notion of her perceived realness must be considered in the light of her choice of discursive markers, visual as well as musical ones, and that her own purported realness is a part of the game she plays with the media and in public. As such, Larsen's absence from the public eye between the dissolution of M2M and the early solo concerts may just as well have been spent planning and doing groundwork for a solo career that was underway in any case.⁵⁷

Second, it is worth bearing in mind that Larsen has the pop star as her *métier*. As a child star in theatre and musicals, a recording artist since the age of 13, and a former member of a globally successful pop duo, she is exceptionally adept at constructing and performing out a pop star persona. I therefore take as a premise that there is always a split between the persona and the real person (Auslander, 2006), or the "veridical" self and the self as seen by others (Rojek, 2001) (11). As Rojek suggests, "[the] public presentation of self is always a

⁵⁷ According to newspapers, Larsen was in touch with her present management as early as September 2002, in the immediate aftermath of M2M (Hansen, Espen A.: "Kan gå solo", *Verdens Gang* 7 September 2002, p. 65). What is more, it was evident at the time of Larsen's first solo concert in March 2004 that she was being "courted" by record companies (Bakke, Sven Ove: "Tilbake i rampelyset – M2M-Marit jaktes av norske plateselskaper", *Dagbladet* 12 March 2004, p. 39). In addition, her statements in interviews at the time, such as referring to her own lyrics as "honest", can be seen to draw on the template that she has used throughout her solo career, and as such indicate that work on her solo persona was indeed underway by then (Bakke, *ibid.*).

staged activity, in which the human actor presents a ‘front’ or ‘face’ to others while keeping a significant portion of the self in reserve”(Ibid.); Auslander maintains that “[public] appearances do not give reliable access to the performer as a real person” (2006: 5–6). This split between public and private self can be disturbing to the celebrity herself, “[so] much so, that celebrities frequently complain of identity confusion and the colonization of the veridical self by the public face” (Rojek 2001: 11). Thus, it is not taken for granted that the celebrity would mind or even notice. In the case of Larsen, we may consider it equally as possible that the real person assumes traits of the persona as vice versa, but, to reiterate the point, we cannot at any time infer from the persona what the real person is like. Larsen is no exception to this, as we can never know what the person adds or subtracts from her personal traits when constructing the persona. As a trained and skilled pop star, Larsen performs out a persona that masks the person at any given time, and that is made to work on the basis of the traits she employs.

This has two further important implications. On the one hand, I perceive Larsen as an artist who, in the course of her career, has moved from a strategy that recalls Allan F. Moore’s first person authenticity to one that is more akin to Moore’s theory of second person authenticity. I will explain. In the first case, the artist creates the illusion that her work somehow describes how she is – “this is what it is like to be me”, as exemplified in her song “Under the Surface”, which I will analyse in this chapter. As her career has progressed, though, Larsen tends to move towards the second case, maintaining an idea that the artist somehow speaks the truth about the listener – “this is what it is like to be you”. One of the most alluring examples of this, as I will take up in the course of this chapter, is the seemingly authentic display of personal feelings of Larsen’s song, “Under the Surface”; extrapolating from the song’s theme of jealousy, Larsen supplied anecdotes of her own jealousy towards her then-boyfriend’s ex-girlfriends, and succeeded in imbuing the song with first person authenticity. More recently, she has become reticent about her personal life, instead describing her modus as one of seeking to “keep the mystique [about her songs] and not rob the listener of the

joy of creating their own stories when they hear my songs”.⁵⁸ In this, she appears to maintain a distance to her persona by “handing” the emotional dimension over to her fans. This indicates not only the lengths Larsen will go to in order to maintain control of her public persona, but also the extent to which people are willing to take her words on trust, that is, willing to believe that the artist speaks some kind of truth about herself through her music.

On the other hand, Larsen’s assertions about herself hardly, if ever, have any resonance in actions or details about her actual private life. As a thoroughly disciplined and controlled presence, always mediated by the press and in concert, Larsen’s persona can thus be seen to be a product of a discourse of *telling* rather than *showing*. This distinction is significant when it comes to storytelling strategies. As Wayne C. Booth formulates it, “[one] of the most obviously artificial devices of the storyteller is the trick of going beneath the surface of the action to obtain a reliable view of a character’s mind and heart” (Booth, 1983) (3). Certainly, this is a trick that Larsen fully employs in time for her first album, aptly titled *Under the Surface*.

It is my belief that, in constructing her persona as a solo artist, Larsen is sufficiently aware of the workings of the music business to be able to fashion a persona that is different both from her former M2M personality and from Marion Ravn’s solo artist. To this end, she employs figures of emotional authenticity, such as the child who sits beneath her mother’s grand piano and “learns” music by absorbing the students’ playing (Falkenberg-Arell, 2012), or the child of divorce who started training as a child actor because of her parents’ divorce (Gundersen, 2009), or the musician whose authenticity resides in that she is not bound by terminology: “When I employ what others would call a musical move [*grep*], I use it because it feels good and right. Because it gives me the right feeling” (Arntsen, 2008). By portraying herself as guided by emotions rather than anything to do with rationality (e.g. language), she takes on the role of storyteller, constructing a story of herself that masks the adroit artist and the

⁵⁸ Aas, Anne-Lill: “Sparer hemmelighetene til sangene”, *Telemarksavisa* 9 February 2012, pp. 50–51.

control she exerts over every aspect of her career. This also seems to pertain to her family background: As the child of two professional musicians, Larsen has had lifelong access to a considerable amount of knowledge not only about music, from theory to performance, but also of how to embody a musical persona. In drawing on her rich background of experience, then, Larsen is able to construct a solo artist persona that easily comes across as authentic or real by playing on traits that connote accessibility and universality, such as being autodidact and emotionally driven. The latter of these, as I will address in the section that follows, which deals specifically with character traits, is especially relevant as an example of how Larsen builds her persona on traits of nostalgic and sometimes conservative ideas of femininity.

The title of this chapter, then, promises an investigation into how not only Larsen's music, but also her persona, can be perceived as an accurate, and touching, representation of herself as a person. Moreover, in cultivating this impression, she also creates and maintains a distance to the real person that provides her with a personal security from public existence and also arguably makes her persona more efficacious as an ideal version of femininity based on markers of retrospection and nostalgia.

Masking ambition: Image, production, voice

I want to argue that Larsen's strategies of staging femininity can be understood as a cover for her own ambitions as an artist. In creating a persona that is drastically different from both Marion Ravn and M2M, she perpetuates a strategy of distancing that M2M also employed (signified by the use of negations such as "Don't"). Ostensibly, this is done in order to mask her efforts and arguably also her ambitions. Similarly, she masks her need for control in her own project through her employment of female stereotypes that come together to convey an endearing and demure persona. She can thus be seen to use strategies taken from M2M in her efforts to distance herself from M2M.

Despite stating in numerous interviews and public appearances that her paramount wish as an artist is to make music, Larsen has managed to avoid

questions of her ambitions and how she goes about realising them. One of her most vital strategies in this respect is masking, which Stan Hawkins has described in the context of the (male) pop dandy as a creative process that is “productive for understanding the structuring of a performance through strategies of seduction that seek to draw fans into submission” (Hawkins, 2009) (12–13). I would suggest that this can be applied to Larsen’s project as well, insofar as her masking of ambitions also entails a conscious play on stereotypical femininities that arguably demands that her fans accept, or submit to, her persona as it is conveyed through image, voice, and Larsen’s role in the studio.

Perhaps the most significant strategy Larsen employs in her masking of ambitions is the maintaining of a distance between her persona and the “real” person. Visually, this is carried out most effectively in the portraits of the artist on her record covers, as links between the music and the visual persona (and, as such, hermeneutic windows) that supposedly grant the audience access to the artist via her image.

On all four of her released albums (three albums of original material and one compilation album), the cover pictures are taken by renowned photographers; also, allegedly, photographers that Larsen herself has chosen to work with.⁵⁹ What is interesting is that all these images in various ways place Larsen at a distance from the viewer.

⁵⁹ According to Thomas Brun, who took the cover photograph for *Under the Surface*, Larsen gave the impression that she had personally decided to work with him. Brun interprets this as an example of Larsen’s interest in the visual side of her project and the importance of choosing her own collaborators (Thomas Brun, personal communication, 12 March 2013). This is corroborated by Larsen’s own statement that she “sanctions all photographs of myself that are put to use” (Hobbelstad 2006). While this can be taken as evidence of her professional attitude, we may also interpret it as significant of her urge to control every stage of her project.



Figure 3.2. Front cover for *Under the Surface*.

On *Under the Surface*, this distance is characteristic of the entire photo shoot. According to the photographer, the picture was taken through the window of the café Arakataka in Oslo, with the photographer and his assistant in the street outside and Larsen and her extras (one cello player and two people dancing) inside the café.⁶⁰ Features such as the lighting were in place during the shoot, enabling the photographer to reduce post-production work on the photograph to a minimum, such as the colouring of the windowpane.

Two points arise from this. First, the proximity of the finished photograph to the actual shoot provides the image with a *verité* that conveys a sense of authenticity. Second, in contrast to this, the fact that the artist is separated from the photographer by a glass window arguably creates a distance to the viewer as well as the photographer.⁶¹ This may come across as odd, given the purported honesty of the artist and the down-to-earth attitude that Larsen so often sets up. Then again, when we compare this to the images from Larsen's single "Don't

⁶⁰ Brun, *ibid.*

⁶¹ According to Brun, the placement of the photographer in the street was Larsen's own suggestion, implying that she herself wanted this distance (Brun, *ibid.*).

Save Me”⁶² (again by Thomas Brun) and the compilation album *If A Song Could Get Me You* (by Julie Pike), we may see this as a recurring trait in Larsen’s visual aesthetics: In all three cases, the view of the artist through a window signifies a distance that may be what she needs in order to create the illusion of proximity.



Figure 3.3. Front cover for *The Chase*.

The cover images for *The Chase* and *Spark* also utilise distance in various ways. On the former, distancing operates on multiple levels: the photograph, again by Julie Pike, shows Larsen at an actual distance, while the picture is tinted so as to resemble an old photograph, possibly from a family photo album. The appearance of Larsen, wearing a pink dress and rubber boots and poised as if caught by the camera while swirling around in a childish fashion, supports this interpretation by the staging of herself as a child; together with the subtly manipulated colours of the image, this creates the illusion of Larsen as a child, a figure that, I will argue below, is also a central characteristic of her persona. Taken this way, the overall impression of the image is that, despite the quaint framing of the artist as her own childhood memory, it is also indicative of the nuances of Larsen’s visual staging of her persona.

⁶² This picture is largely identical to Figure 3.1 in this chapter, with the difference that Larsen averts her eyes in the image used on the record cover.



MARIT LARSEN

Spark

Figure 3.4. Front cover for Spark.

The cover image for Larsen's third studio album, *Spark*, exemplifies yet another way of maintaining distance. The photograph, taken by Jørgen Gonnæs, at first sight conveys the illusion of a close-up. However, the manipulation of the picture, creating a multiple image of the artist, may well be indicative of a distancing effect, removing the "true" artist from focus and rendering the persona ambiguous. From this, I would suggest that Larsen's album covers may be interpreted as sites of manipulation and different distancing effects rather than depictions of the actual artist, and thus as elements in her construction of an identity and a persona that are made attractive through visual presentation.

The producer

In the studio, one of Larsen's closest collaborators is the producer Kåre Chr. Vestrheim. A producer of renown for Norwegian artists, Vestrheim is also a former member of the rock band Locomotives, with whom he had a brief taste of the pop world around the turn of the millennium, warming up for bands such as The Cure and The Allman Brothers Band in the USA (Eggum, Ose, & Steen, 2005) (323). Seeing as he thus shares a certain experience of pop life with Larsen, we cannot overlook the possibility that Vestrheim plays a part in the overall

fashioning of Larsen's persona as one of modesty and gratitude after having had a brush with life on the road.

The producer's contribution is comprehensive, and is also crucial to the band's sound, with Vestrheim playing a number of instruments on Larsen's records. In addition, through the former musician's studio, Propeller Recordings, Larsen has access to a number of musicians who also shape her sound.⁶³ On this point, Jacqueline Warwick suggests that in a recording session, the singer is often far removed from the politics of production: "An examination of the material conditions of recording determines that the musicians making the sounds documented in the recording process are the producers" (Warwick, 2004) (192). In Larsen's case, this pertains to the musicians employed by the producer as well as Vestrheim's various efforts as producer, arranger, co-writer and musician, a multiplicity of roles that support and guide Larsen in the ostensibly uncomfortable situation of having to be in charge – a situation that Larsen's persona rarely, if ever, seems comfortable with. This recalls Hawkins's suggestion that "[the] pop artist's relationship with the producer is about an intimate collaboration, having a direct bearing on the shaping of temperament" (Hawkins, 2009) (145). As such, it is highly likely that Vestrheim's input is crucial for the construction of Larsen's persona.

On this point, Virgil Moorefield has emphasised that, "[the] collaborative aspect to working in the studio, and the importance of studio musicians, recording engineers, and other contributors to production should always be acknowledged" (Moorefield, 2005) (xiv). In this respect, the input of Vestrheim

⁶³ This has a parallel in Larsen's live band for concerts and tours, which is assembled from a revolving coterie of hired musicians who recreate what Larsen and Vestrheim (often employing a different set of musicians) have created in the studio. However, Larsen has also used this interchangeable staff to create the illusion that her band is in fact a stable entity. Writing on her Tumblr blog in November 2011 that the recording of the video for the single "Coming Home" took place in Berlin on an off day during her press tour, she used the formulation "my lovely band came to visit". With this, she cleverly disguised the fact that the band, as evidenced in the video, most likely consisted of who was available for a day trip to Berlin on short notice. As it happens, the only "band member" in the video who actually plays on the recording is the bassist, Tor Egil Kreken. The pianist, lead guitarist, drummer, and backing vocalist, while frequently part of her live band, do not play on the record, and, consequently, none of them plays their "own" parts on stage or in the video. URL: <http://maritlarsen.tumblr.com/post/12682919690/the-past-couple-of-weeks-have-been-spent-in> (accessed 10 October 2013).

and the staff at his studio, Propeller Recordings, is crucial, supplying a coterie of musicians that help in creating the impression that these are Larsen's friends rather than hired hands, a trait that is also reflected in Larsen's presentation of her live band.

In interviews, the collaboration between Larsen and Vestrheim is vaguely defined as a joint venture. Notwithstanding, details shine through that create the impression of an old-fashioned, patriarchal work division. Larsen claims to have "a bit of computer anxiety", stating that, "it is not that easy for me to duplicate tracks in ProTools and suchlike" (Frankplads, 2008). The implication is that the male producer is the one who controls the equipment in the studio. On this point, Emma Mayhew suggests that, "[a] dichotomy is articulated here between the emotional expression of the artist and the technical objectivity of the producer. Within this dichotomy of subjectivity/objectivity those who use the musical technology intervene and shape the emotional artist into a meaningful product to sell, as well as one to be understood by an audience" (Mayhew, 2004) (157). This harks back to Larsen's theatrical, ostensibly sincere, description of herself as degenerating into "a stew of feelings" if she is not allowed to sit down at her piano and write songs at least once a week (Gonsholt, 2006). Thus, the producer is positioned as rational, lending technological expertise, instrumentality and structure to a "feminine" performance (or, rather, performance of "femininity") that lacks an ability to edit or transform emotional expression into a general communicative format.

This is further illuminated in Mayhew's assertion that, "[women], who have dominated the position of pop singer, have often been devalued through a construction of femininity as an unskilled, and/or a 'natural' musical position" (2004: 150). In terms of identity politics, Larsen can be seen to consciously employ a discourse of "naturalness", styling herself as unskilled – and thereby authentic – in taking a position as stereotypically "female" in opposition both to her skilled musician parents and to the male producer's technological mastery.

It is noteworthy that Vestrheim also verifies Larsen's originality by emphasising her independence from other artists: "When we work, only rarely do we cite any references. We always take Marit's songs as a starting point, and then we have a joint palette, a universe where we work" (Frankplads, 2008). This assertion of independence from external influences differs from Vestrheim's statement in a 2006 interview about the recording of *Under the Surface*. Here, he cites Rufus Wainwright and Ben Folds as mutual favourites of producer and artist, and refers to his own recent work with film music as a motivation for including "symphonic Hollywood strings" on the record.⁶⁴ This shows how the construction differs from one project to the next, not only concerning the artist-producer relationship, but also the artist's authenticity. In this case, I would argue that it depends on whether the autonomy of the artist in the studio is what matters most, or whether familiar references should be mentioned to delineate the artist's music to new listeners.

In the same interview, the producer speaks highly of both Larsen's go-ahead spirit and her work ethic. On the first of these, he tells of how EMI approached him in the spring of 2005 with the offer of producing Larsen's first album: "I was not quite convinced by the demos I heard, but Marit did not give up. She turned up in the studio with her mandolin on her back, sat down by the piano here in the kitchen and played three or four songs, and I was blown away." Once they were working together, Vestrheim was even more impressed by Larsen's capacity: "Marit has an impressive work ethic. She could spend an entire night practicing a mandolin riff."⁶⁵

Clearly, this has important implications. The image of Marit Larsen as tirelessly peddling her music (and persona) to an unfamiliar producer is not at all incompatible with Larsen's strategy of self-presentation, and could well create the impression that the producer "fell for her charms" as much as her music, thus downplaying the professionalism of the female artist. What is more, the image of the artist practicing her mandolin "all night long", while lending itself to a

⁶⁴ Pedersen, Bernt Erik: "Slik jobber han", *Dagsavisen* 14 November 2006, p. 40.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

gendered reading (would Vestrheim evaluate a male artist as displaying an “impressive work ethic” on the same conditions?), could just as well be interpreted as a prime example of Larsen’s need for control. It is worth noting that the image of Larsen’s “impressive work ethic” can be traced back to her pre-M2M days: Kenneth Moen (a.k.a. Kenneth Lewis), one of the producers of Waterfall Studio, who worked with Marit & Marion and also took part in the recording of *Shades of Purple*, noted in 1998 that, “the girls come running to the studio straight from school and are incredibly eager and clever”.⁶⁶ It would seem from such reports that the “eagerness” in the studio has since become one of Larsen’s devices for masking control, a feature of Larsen’s *modus operandi* as solo artist that has its origin in her M2M persona.

Moorefield also emphasises the producer’s central role in that “the producer who puts his name on the record takes responsibility for the overall production” (2005: xvii). Seeing as it is Vestrheim’s name that adorns the covers of Larsen’s records under the heading of “produced by”, this fits well with a reading of Larsen’s work in the studio as a site for reactionary meaning production, where the rational male takes responsibility for the emotionally-driven female. On this matter, Mayhew also notes that, “[as] the producer has become more and more associated with an authorial position (both taking writing credits and also being associated with a brand of sound), a female performer’s positioning as a valued artist is tied up with her relationship to this role” (2004: 152). Vestrheim appears to tick all these boxes, allowing Larsen to position herself as an artist inextricably tied to the male producer’s role, reliant on his input to structure her ideas.

The point I am arriving at here is that, while the actual division of labour on Larsen’s studio recordings may well be less stereotypically separated, the overall impression that she creates is one of the female artist who is driven by emotions and the male producer who controls the technology for her. This is indicative of Mayhew’s observation that “the objective/subjective and producer/performer

⁶⁶ Moslet, Håkon (1998): “Fjortiser med stjernedrøm: Marion og Marit fra barnesanger til pophits”, *Dagbladet* 22 March 1998, p. 32.

opposition is often easily read through an essentialized gendered subject, in which discourses of femininity and masculinity reinforce aesthetic values” (2004: 157). Rather than any natural occurrence, though, I would argue that Larsen endorses such an essentialistic division, and employs it for the benefit of her persona as a “feminine” and therefore attractive trait.

Vocal costume

Larsen appears to employ a number of markers that distinguish her persona and make it both intelligible and familiar to listeners. The most significant of these markers is arguably her voice. How it functions as a central factor for all other traits that make up the star personality, as well as the various song personalities of her work, is well worth exploring in detail.

Successfully, Larsen creates the impression that she is just being “herself” when she makes public appearances, whether on television or in concert. She formulates this point convincingly in interviews as well: “To this day I have no image, I am just who I am” (Giske, 2008). I see the success of this illusion as testament to the construction of her persona and her way of distinguishing the star personality from her private self through strategies of distance. Larsen’s voice, which arguably sounds both entirely staged and simultaneously non-committal, plays a crucial part in this.

As a metonymy for Larsen’s control of her persona (and, arguably, her attempt at controlling her surroundings), the construction of this voice can be understood as an impressive feat. For example, she makes her singing voice so similar to her speaking voice that the two are virtually indistinguishable, as evidenced in televised interviews and Larsen’s small-talk between songs in concerts. This point has its resonance in Hawkins’s analysis of Morrissey’s vocal strategies: “Staging the voice convincingly is ultimately what we buy into, and indeed the recorded voice functions as an imaginative canvas for aestheticizing the combined effect of a song’s delivery” (Hawkins, 2011) (318). In Larsen’s case, the recorded voice as it sounds on her recordings may be perceived as the template

for her vocal personality in all public appearances. While this trait would certainly be read by fans as a sense of coherence and authenticity in Larsen, I argue that it can also be taken as indicative of the carefully planned and performed style of Larsen's solo artist, in line with her temperament and physical presence.

Temperament is a powerful factor in the cultural credibility of an artist's persona. In his exploration of the concept of the vocal personality, Frith suggests that in hearing a song we like and singing along to it, we also take on the singer's vocal personality, "putting on a vocal costume, enacting the role that they are playing for ourselves" (S. Frith, 1996) (198). On the one hand, this highlights the staging of authenticity as it is carried out in recordings. On the other hand, the idea of a vocal costume is particularly fruitful for my understanding of Larsen's structuring of her voice. Hawkins has extended Frith's idea of the costume in the process of responding to a singer's voice, which, he argues, necessarily "entails some evaluation of the persona presented in a song" (2009: 123). He insists that the vocal costume is "useful for working out temperament, style and intention", and he makes the valid point that, "the vocal costume is what we, the listeners, turn to when we respond to the voice as a carrier of meaning" (Ibid., 123, 124). In a context of meaning, let us say, where readers may take for granted the assertion that Larsen "has no image", that her voice is seemingly unchanging – "I am just who I am" – this becomes a paramount carrier of meaning and a site for identification with an artist that the audience may easily perceive as entirely honest. All this is signified by a voice so apparently even-tempered that it resembles a speaking voice even when she is singing, and vice versa.

On this note, I would also argue that Larsen's voice is the single most important signifier of control. Staging her persona within a frame of femininity that entails a number of principally non-threatening and seemingly docile stereotypes, such as the child and the housewife, her appearance is characterised by a large degree of discipline, including a highly mannered voice that, while arguably theatrical and artificial, could also well be taken as straightforward and thus significant of "the countercultural ethos of authenticity" in popular music (Auslander, 2006)

(82). In this context, the employment of stereotypes of femininity allows Larsen to link the vocal costume to feminine figures, notably the girl-child. In this particular figure, the seeming lack of temperament – an illusion created among other things by the absence of vibrato – in Larsen’s voice enables her to fashion the vocal costume, through the use of “breathy voice”, so as to “suggest a childlike bearing for the character” (Lacasse, 2010) (149). Two points arise from this. First, the girlish manner of speaking that Larsen frequently employs may well lead to a view of her as an endearing, not yet adult person, with the intention that “audiences are encouraged to hear her as a girl rather than an adult” (Stras, 2010) (51). Second, “girl” here designates an aural and technical construct rather than any “real” girl’s voice – the play on the girl figure is, again, based on stereotypes.

At the same time, the voice remains flexible enough to apply itself to other female figures as well, such as the girl next door, in Larsen’s careful employment of creaky voice; as Lacasse suggests, this particular trait “can connote various attitudes and emotions, both positive and negative” (2010: 144). On the subject of Larsen’s voice, this indicates that what listeners may hear as a natural voice, meaning the unmannered, “authentic” vocal expression of a “real” person, is shaped and staged via a number of characteristics.

Lest we forget, the purportedly authentic voice is also contingent on functioning in a musical context. As a singer and songwriter, Larsen clearly fashions her lyrics, and consequently her song personalities, so as to be congruent with her vocal costume, ensuring that “[her] singing underscores the lack of agency inscribed in the tune itself” (Leppert, 2008) (195). This lack of agency, which is characteristic of so many of her songs’ protagonists, constructs her vocal costume and vice versa, with the resulting effect of generating an illusion not only of sincerity, but also of intimacy. Not unlike an artist such as Morrissey, then, Larsen succeeds in staging her credibility and ostensible authenticity as she accesses her fans on an intimate level (Hawkins, 2011) (310). This, she executes even when she engages in the process of “double enactment,” where in performing a song, she enacts both the star personality and the song personality

(Frith, 1996: 212), none of which are identical to Larsen herself. Larsen's vocal costume thus takes on its most important function as a device for keeping her distance to the public persona, while at the same time succeeding in creating an illusion of intimacy and authenticity.

Fake naivety

In the following sections, I argue that Larsen makes use of a number of female stereotypes (the girl-child, the girl next door, the housewife, and the singer-songwriter) as aspects or characteristics of her persona. These stereotypes dovetail with each other and also bridge the gaps to make up a continuum of clichés, providing a gallery of masks for Larsen to exchange with each other according to the setting.

One key term for Larsen's use of these characteristics is *fake naivety*. While I do not assert at any time that Larsen displays a genuinely naive character – there is ample evidence in her project that she knows perfectly well what she is doing – I argue that she is faking naivety as part of her persona, first and foremost in order to equip it with an appeal that is not hampered by displays of power.

In a trajectory of female stereotypes, the concept of fake naivety runs through a lineage of the figures that I identify in Marit Larsen's project. The girl-child, the girl next door and the housewife appear as different facets of the same feminine figure, which play on an Arcadian nostalgia for "the ideal woman" and retain the wide-eyed infantile appeal of Barbara Bradby's concept of the "baby" in popular music, the infant human being who is handed over from the mother to the boyfriend without developing a subjectivity on her own (Bradby, 1990; Bradby & Torode, 2000).

This context of gender stereotypes is especially relevant as a framework for analysing Larsen's career so far. If we consider Larsen's debut album with Ravn (1996) as significant of her "girl-child" phase, and her career with M2M as an arena for the development of a "girl-next-door" figure, her solo career – where Larsen has frequently made explicit use of the "housewife" as a signifier of

(female) authenticity – builds on both previous types and also incorporates them into the apparently seamless and convincing whole that is Larsen’s solo artist persona.

John Alberti identifies the roots of pop naivety in the critical theatre of Bertolt Brecht, who used the imperfection of amateur actors as a tool to reveal the constructedness of theatrical representation, encouraging the audience “to question the assumed inevitability and righteousness of the status quo outside the theater by challenging the supposed naturalness of the acting inside the theater” (Alberti, 1999) (175). Alberti sees fake naivety as a tool used by several rock bands and artists to various ends: from the mannered (and clearly intellectual) naïveté of early Talking Heads and Jonathan Richman’s near-Brechtian mimicking of performative styles to the anti-intellectual use of cartoon graphics by punk bands from the Ramones to Green Day.

By foregrounding predominantly male artists (Talking Heads’ Tina Weymouth notwithstanding), Alberti – coincidentally or not – proffers the point that fake naivety is not contingent on gender, and thus not inherently “feminine” in any way. This, in turn, prompts me to argue the point that Marit Larsen employs stereotypes of femininity rather than any intrinsically feminine traits. This permits her to construct images of an idealised femininity that is often bordering on being nostalgic and even reactionary in order to give her persona its appeal.

The example of Larsen demonstrates that a strategic use of naivety in popular music has now extended beyond punk, successfully applied by mainstream pop artists today. In his reading of Annie Lennox’s video for the song “Money Can’t Buy It”, Stan Hawkins points to a strategy of fake naivety where the singer “evoke[s] impersonations of a ... standardised, conventional and safe femininity” through the employment of “the pretty-girl image in the video clip magnified by the ‘little-girl’ vocal timbres” (Hawkins, 2002) (126). This use of a range of narratives about femininities may well be seen to anticipate Larsen’s similar mix of stereotypes. What is more, the figure of the little girl is especially pertinent to Larsen’s project, where the girl-child frequently plays a main role in her music

videos and song lyrics. I argue that this highlights a strategy on Larsen's part of disguising her agency.

As a result of Larsen's transformation from the teen pop star of M2M to an ostensibly more mature singer-songwriter, her persona has frequently been described by fans and reviewers alike as "real" and "authentic", but also as "charming" and "cute", as well as "sweet" and "enchanting". These descriptions overlap with characterisations of her music, which similarly rest on 'rockist' ideas of the real and the authentic. In both cases, we may read this as indicative of a similar type of fake naivety that Matthew Bannister describes in UK indie music and the pronounced fascination and nostalgia for the 1960s, where "words such as 'cutie' or 'charming' were used to underline the infantilism of the songs and personalities" (Bannister, 2006) (138). Bannister sees this nostalgic fascination as indicative of how, for many 1980s indie musicians, the 1960s took on a double function as "both a time of literal childhood memories" and "the golden age of pop culture" as a respite from "the grim realities of the present" (Ibid.). Larsen, whose music makes use of inspiration from both early 1960s "girl groups" and late 1960s singer-songwriters, can thus be seen to situate her project in a lineage of rock nostalgia that certainly enhances her credibility in fans' eyes.

Temperament is a key ingredient of fake naivety. Hawkins makes the point that naivety "suggests something excessively simple – a trusting view of one's environment – and often the result of youthful expression and inexperience"; thus, such a definition "can be construed as romantic, charmingly straightforward and refreshingly unaffected" (2009: 40). This is equally relevant in Larsen's case, where the child's naivety provides a rare case of excess in an otherwise thoroughly disciplined persona. As Matthew Bannister suggests, a childlike view of the world is not necessarily innocent (2006: 44); an artist such as Larsen may just as well use infantility and naivety in order to "control without appearing to be in control" (Ibid. 48). We also need to consider, then, how this strategy functions as a cover for Larsen's own agency.

In the course of her career, Larsen has managed to stage her naivety successfully. From the images on her record covers, where she wears flowing dresses and demurely averts her gaze, to the music, where the vocal costume is complemented by largely acoustic band settings and gently eclectic traits of styles such as Country & Western and musicals blend into what is frequently referred to as a kind of folk-pop, she displays a clever variant of “normality” and apparently succeeds in re-inventing herself as the former girl next door who, almost by accident, has been re-discovered as a mature singer-songwriter. This is no small feat, considering the fact that she has been in the pop limelight since her early teens, but neither is it in any way mysterious or inexplicable. Given that the script for femininity is written into a culture and is transmitted over time through family, peers, teachers, and the media (K. Frith, Shaw, & Cheng, 2005) (56), Larsen employs a combination of “feminine” traits that obviously resonate with fans and listeners across a potentially large cultural space. In the following section, I will identify four such characteristics and analyse how they function as structuring entities in Larsen’s project.

“Have you seen my childhood?”: The girl-child

The first of these characteristics is the *girl-child*, as Larsen employs it in the musical and visual spectacle of her persona. As a theatrical effect that allows the artist to stage an illusion of the adult as child, Larsen’s strategic presentation of her persona as a kind of woman-child could indicate that she consciously employs childlike or childish traits in order to veil her agency and create a room of her own for negotiating subjectivity. This invokes the character trait that Jacqueline Warwick has named “girlness”, which is different from the physical stage of girlhood as part of a woman’s life cycle in that it is “not a liminal phase but a set of behaviors and attributes available to females at any time during their life”; consequently, anyone can “adopt a girly manner for strategic purposes, and they can play with the characteristics of girlness for their own enjoyment” (Warwick, 2007) (3). Sheila Whiteley makes a similar point in her theory that being a girl is “not a pre-given fixed human characteristic”; rather, like subjectivity, it is “continually in the process of formation and is thus capable of

reconstitution” (Whiteley, 2005) (69). Whiteley takes this into the context of gender with the suggestion of “the construction of innocence (and its relationship to immaturity)” as an important part of “the ensemble of presentations that constitute women’s gendered subjectivity” (Ibid. 116). This highlights the girl-child as both *girl* and *child*, thus giving us a point of entry into how a pop artist like Larsen negotiates an identity that sells by making the child an element of her persona.

Nowhere is this displayed more eloquently than in Larsen’s 2009 video for her hit single, “If A Song Could Get Me You”. Originally included on her second solo album, *The Chase*, in 2008, this song was released as a single in Germany, Austria and Switzerland the following year, rising to the top the German charts. This prompted Larsen’s continental record company, Sony Music Germany, to release a compilation album of the same name. In conjunction with this, Sony Music also funded the making of a new music video for this and two other songs off the compilation album. The new video clip was produced by Katapult Filmproduktion GmbH and directed by Hinrich Pflug.⁶⁷ It is this video that is scrutinized during this section.

As with the song, the video is well-paced, with busy editing and clear-cut images. The narrative takes place in one single space, inside a house in a state of disrepair or possibly under renovation. Through a series of sub-narratives, Larsen stages and plays out various facets of her persona, symbolised by the distinct colours of her dress and the different acts she performs. Among these, she is depicted in a blue dress in a boat on a plastic “ocean”, in a red dress at the piano or with the acoustic guitar, and in a black dress in the rehearsal space (which doubles as a makeshift stage) of a rock band.

On first viewing, the video might easily come across as a piece from children’s TV: the rock band stage becomes a playground for the little girl to fool around with the adults’ (electric) instruments. She horses around and rolls on the floor

⁶⁷ This information is taken from the booklet to Marit Larsen’s compilation CD *If A Song Could Get Me You* (2009).

with the unwieldy guitar and bass, and attempts to play the drum kit with such fervour that her hair is flying. This is juxtaposed with images of Larsen's mastery of acoustic instruments (guitar and piano), but also of her persona as inhabiting a pre-adolescent world, with signifiers such as a toy boat on a fake sea of blue plastic, and an angel's costume.

Throughout Larsen's performance, she employs specific traits of body language to perform out a presence poised between child and quirky young woman. To this end, she utilises clumsy movements, for example in her attempts at playing electric "rock band" instruments, and fits of laughter that seemingly disrupt the action of the narrative and turn into accidental comic relief.

In addition to the acoustic instruments, the singer-songwriter ethos is maintained through images of Larsen sitting with pen and paper, ostensibly trying to write a song, which hints at her creativity. This is given further gravity by the reference to Bob Dylan's 1965 promotional film clip for "Subterranean Homesick Blues", with Larsen holding up cue cards for the camera. However, this pastiche is given a twist, as the cue cards do not always correspond to the lyrics. In a seemingly self-deprecating manoeuvre, Larsen instead adds a meta-level to the video, holding up cue cards that implore the "you" to come back, stating that she is "really sorry", and having one card refer to herself as an idiot, presumably because she has left the "you" of the lyrics and has since come to regret it. The "idiot" sign may be read as what Stan Hawkins has called "an exaggerated guise of self-deprecation" (Hawkins, 2009) (39), a trait of the pop persona as the performer projects it to the audience. In this way, Larsen creates an image of herself as "just" a fallible human being – an ostensibly universal realisation – but also appropriates the male pop star's strategy, thereby veiling her agency by trying out the adult man's trick to her own ends, thus both drawing attention to her persona and retaining control; the emotional universality is not merely to be found in the male artist, but also in the girl-child.

Such purported universality is reinforced by the apparent absence of choreography in the video. From this, I would read Larsen's appearance as an

antithesis to the more “slick” videos of pop artists from Michael Jackson and Britney Spears to Justin Bieber and Lady Gaga. The apparent non-choreography and clumsiness, deliberate or otherwise, easily function as a sort of comic relief that at the same time provide the artist with an ironic distance to the spectacle of her persona. This distance also echoes the dissonance between music and lyrics, where a tale of loss and heartbreak is set to music so cheerful it resembles a nursery rhyme.

Further depth to all this is provided by Larsen’s use of fake naivety. Certainly, in the video, naivety becomes a central facet of her temperament, underpinning her happy-go-lucky attitude to life and the world. I would argue that this veils the amount of work invested in the persona and also the precision with which she performs it at any given time. Furthermore, I would contend that naivety constitutes a central part in the construction of Larsen’s persona, although functioning only insofar as it is put to use by the disciplined artist behind it.

When we first witness Larsen on the band stage [0:04], she appears to be in a reverie, wandering around with the electric guitar (a Gibson Flying V model) around her neck; when the camera literally sneaks up on her, she turns to face the camera with an apologetic expression on her face, as if being caught in the act, having borrowed the guitar without asking permission. The following scenes of her in the band space include Larsen posing for the camera wearing a T-shirt with the Iron Maiden logo⁶⁸ and performing the hand gesture “sign of the horns”, in a clearly ironic fashion, and trying her hand at the electric guitar, the bass guitar, and the drums. While the guitar initially does not come across as too hard to handle, Larsen’s attempts at both bass and drums are portrayed as all the more feeble because of the ostensible unwieldiness of these large instruments in the hands of a little girl. She appears to make a spectacle of herself to make up for any inadequate handling of the instruments. Consequently, these scenes may be interpreted as the child cavorting with the instruments not only for her own enjoyment, but also for the viewing pleasure of the spectator.

⁶⁸ Interestingly, there is a historical precedent for this in that Lene Nystrøm, then-singer with Danish-Norwegian band Aqua, wore a T-shirt with the Iron Maiden logo on stage during several of Aqua’s concerts around the turn of the millennium.

These scenes are contrasted with the clips of Larsen playing acoustic instruments, where the scenography of the room and the *mise-en-scène* of the artist suggest that this is Marit's room of her own: a space where she can truly be creative, mastering her instruments and writing songs – including the song that could possibly get the “you” to love her.

Throughout the video, Larsen appears to be pandering to the gaze – that of the spectator as well as the camera – which constructs her as to-be-looked-at, allowing her to perform, so to speak. It is as if this is granted by the same gaze that constructs Larsen as a Lolita-like figure in the first frame in the rock band sub-plot, where her embarrassment is rendered ambiguous through the coyness of her posture.

In these and other scenes, the protagonist in the video retains a childlike, pre-sexual (and therefore naive) attitude to the idea of love. At the same time, Larsen hints at a certain *sagesse* about adult life from behind the mask, playfully returning the camera's gaze and adding microscopic, seemingly insignificant gestures (such as the angel's conspicuously enticing movement of the hands [3:00], where she appears to simulate exposing herself, or the display of subordination when she lies sprawled and exhausted on the stage with the electric guitar on top of her [1:33], which could indicate subordination to the masculine-coded rock signifier). Such gestures nevertheless connote a Lolita-esque curiosity about the adult world as much as any knowledge about consensual “adult” pastimes. This renders her persona in the video ambiguous and potentially problematic. However, the mask remains firmly in place, securing the performer's distance to her audience.

The narrative is pursued on several distinct levels, signified by the various roles Larsen takes on:

- The singer-songwriter in a red dress, performing and writing
- The girl-child in a black dress with a silvery filigree pattern and an Iron Maiden T-shirt, playing around on the rock band stage
- The girl in a blue dress and with a tie in her hair, playing that she is in a boat at sea
- The girl in a green dress, playing with a radio and a set of megaphones
- The angel in a white dress, with wings and a fake tattoo
- The silent woman in a patterned black and white dress, holding up cue cards

The theatrical staging of several of these takes place in the early scenes of the video, where we see Larsen as singer-songwriter preparing the room for her performance, in the blue dress rolling out blue plastic on the floor, and in the green dress putting the radio and the row of megaphones in place.

The quirkiness of the woman-child is made even more ambiguous by Larsen's attire. She sports an A-line dress that recalls the swinging Sixties and "it" girls such as Twiggy and even Jackie Onassis. The bell-like shape of the black-and-white dress she is wearing in the placard shots emphasises the child by disguising any curves of Larsen's own body; the bell-like shape makes the dress resemble a child's outfit (figure 3.5). At the same time, this tells of a sense of style and fashion that certainly has a nostalgic appeal.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ On the question of style and fashion, the angel's wings that Larsen wears in the video also signify an "adult" fashion trait for the artist's own times, namely the wings sported by the mannequins of Victoria's Secret. I am grateful to Mari Barwin for this observation.



Figure 3.5. Marit Larsen with cue card in the video for "If A Song Could Get Me You".

On the face of it, the contradictory traits that outline her persona make Larsen an unreliable narrator, notably in that her perpetual smug smile disguises her control of the visual spectacle, but also in how she can be seen to stage a send-up of her own song. In the song, she sings of how she would try any identity to get the loved one back – waltz, rock ‘n’ roll, et cetera. However, after the bridge, she is seen dragging a stand with a fake electric halo on it, into the picture; subsequently, we see her displaying the support for the wing costume, and she pretends to be drowning in the fake plastic sea, waving a “Help!” sign. In this way, she discloses the constructedness of all the roles, arguably allowing us to see how this is all a game. On the one hand, she sings/tells of how she would be anything for the song’s antagonist (an act of self-effacement, and therefore very problematic); on the other hand, she shows the spectator that these roles are, at the end of the day, a joke. This is reinforced by her physical awkwardness in the video, a trait that she employs deliberately, whether she sits beside the row of megaphones laughing or rolls around with the guitar.

In my opinion, to read Larsen’s persona in the video only as an endearing woman-child, devoid of theatricality, just “being herself” would be to sidestep the

question of agency. From a feminist perspective, this type of self-infantilisation may be interpreted as a patriarchal strategy for undermining the woman's subjectivity and agency – she is reduced to what Barbara Bradby has termed the “baby” who has not yet been symbolically chosen by the man. On another note, this staging of Larsen as a pre-sexual woman-child could also be indicative of her employment of a childlike/childish persona that veils her agency, and thus creates a room of her own for the negotiation of subjectivity.

In the video, Larsen can be seen as putting on a performance for both the gaze of the camera and the spectator. This assertion I use as a point of entry for turning to Laura Mulvey's model of the gaze. In her seminal 1975 article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, Mulvey argues that the controlling gaze in cinema is always already male. Taking Hollywood feature films as her object of study, she explores how woman is constructed as an object of desire for the man:

“Spectators are encouraged to identify with the look of the male hero and make the heroine a passive object of erotic spectacle” (Chaudhuri, 2006) (31). Mulvey outlines two main ways of spectatorship, or two contradictory aspects of “the pleasurable structures of looking”, in Hollywood cinema: scopophilia (pleasure in looking) and its complementary function, narcissistic pleasure in being looked at (identification with the image seen) (Mulvey, 2009 [1975]) (18). The power resides in the male gaze, which determines whether the female object is desirable: “In their traditional exhibitionist role women are traditionally looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*” (Ibid. 19, emphasis in original). In line with this, the male gaze is tripartite: the audience, the camera, and the male actor work together to maintain masculine control. In the first instance, scopophilia is contingent on distance, on an Othering of the object in order to make it desirable for the self; in the case of narcissism, identification requires proximity in order to receive confirmation.

Grounding her theory in psychoanalysis, Mulvey goes so far as to refer to the twin ways of looking as “the scopophilic instinct” and the “ego libido”, which “mould this cinema's formal attributes” (Ibid. 25). This is indicative of how,

throughout her essay, she is in danger of essentialising both the spectator as male and women as spectacle. Even though she implies that cinematic codes create the gaze, “thereby producing an illusion cut to the measure of desire” (Ibid. 26), she firmly fixes the gaze as male and the object of desire as female.

Mulvey’s model “placed a feminist agenda at the heart of film-theoretical debates” and generated such a response that it “must surely rank amongst the most provocative academic essays ever written” (Chaudhuri, 2006) (2). The idea of the gaze that constructs an object as desirable so that it connotes “to-be-looked-at-ness” is a salient theory even today, and, as I will return to below, very useful for my purposes in this chapter.

It should be noted that Mulvey’s theory has been thoroughly criticised in recent years, notably by musicologists who point out both the lack of female agency and spectatorship in Mulvey’s seminal article (Fast, 2001) and “the extent to which men have been objectified in popular culture of the 1980s and 1990s”, as well as the growth in number of studies dealing with this issue (Hawkins, 2002) (17). A number of film theorists also emphasise the fluidity of both representation and identification. Yvonne Tasker states that, “One of the pleasures of the cinema is precisely that it offers a space in which the ambiguities of identities and desires is played out” (Tasker, 1993) (17). Similarly, Milestone and Meyer have pointed out that the subsequent critiques of the model of the male gaze “raise the questions whether the gaze is always male or if there could be a female gaze ... what happens when the spectator is a woman and the object a man?” (Milestone & Meyer, 2012) (180). In both these instances, there is also the context of the male body on display, which turns the idea that the (passive) object is female on its head, opening up for female spectatorship.

Most importantly, these critiques allow us to question the traffic of power in Mulvey’s model. In a context of rock music, Susan Fast has emphasised that the spectacle of hard rock and metal as performed by male musicians is a powerful reversal of Mulvey’s theory of the gaze (Fast, 2001) (186); adding to this, she argues that erotic pleasure is only one way in which images can be received,

even though “it is unlikely that eroticism can be neatly separated out from various other responses” (Ibid. 188). Thus, the ambiguity of Larsen’s persona in the video, and how she plays on different and contradictory modes of attraction, offers up a pertinent example of this.

Taking into account the historicity of Mulvey’s model, Susanna Paasonen provides an equally illuminating reading. She points out that the two modes of looking are contingent on an active/passive split that leaves the female with “the position of exhibitionist and masochistic object of a spectacle” (Paasonen, 2011) (175); thus, “[the] historical specificity of Mulvey’s analysis is lost if and when the male gaze is seen as a general visual order and dynamic of looking” (Ibid.). Paasonen’s reading exposes the essentialising trap in Mulvey’s model, but also shows how this can be turned around: “Ultimately, the problem lies in identifying looking with control, distance, and mastery through the psychoanalytical notions of voyeurism and scopophilia, as well as in associating relations of control, as depicted in pornography, with the control of the viewer” (Ibid. 176). This shifting of focus is applicable to music video analysis, and especially useful for my project. The idea that control, and therefore power, reside in the spectator, could easily confine the audience to seeing Larsen’s persona as “just a girl” performing for the camera’s male gaze. This would demand that Larsen relinquish control and agency other than as the passive exhibitionist who silently enjoys being looked at. But who controls the gaze here?

Perhaps the answer to this question lies in the opening frame of the video. The visual narrative opens with a close-up of Larsen’s face; she fixes the viewer’s gaze with her own and sings the opening line of the lyrics, with the smallest hint of a smile. This moment places the song’s protagonist, the “I”, firmly in the middle of the narrative; from then on, the story revolves around her, with the viewer being invited – or rather, *commanded* – to take on the role of “you”. This makes the contract abundantly clear from the first frame: Larsen is the one who is in control of both spectacle and spectator, a fact subtly emphasised by the fact that the first word out of her mouth is “I”.

Already in the first frame, the strategy behind the child's naivety becomes visible: Larsen's naivety is "fake" insofar as it is theatricalised and played out within the confines set up by the artist herself. Consequently, in Larsen's performance in the video, I would contend that *it is the object of the gaze who is in control*. Behind the naive countenance, the artist's agency is at work, but covered by the mask of fake naivety – a mask that cleverly disguises the power of representation.

In this video, I perceive Marit Larsen's employment of *girlness* and fake naivety as masking both her agency and ambition. Moreover, it serves to reinforce her persona as ostensibly "authentic" in a non-threatening fashion, which draws equally on her employment of childlike traits – as can be heard in her voice – and on nostalgia, as in her telling a story of herself as a "closet housewife". Both are elements of a strategy of distance, which in turn conveys the illusion of authenticity.

One may read this as a kind of "look, don't touch" attitude which, as time goes by and Larsen's solo career takes flight, would seem to outgrow the adorable child. In the video, however, the girl-child feeds into Larsen's persona in ways that both reassure and intrigue the spectator. The artist also clearly makes an effort to control the gaze of the audience by framing the narrative as hers alone, without any supporting characters to interfere with her performance. The video thus clearly connotes fantasy, as if the child is putting on a performance to herself in her room, dreaming of a nondescript "you" who in the end is less important than her own show. The girl-child, then, feeds into Larsen's subjectivity as an artist in more complex ways than one would think at first sight. This also raises the question of just which version of "herself" Larsen is performing out at any given time.

As a central characteristic of Larsen's persona, the girl-child does not come across as just a generic infant. One important point of this is to see the child of her persona in connection with Marit & Marion as child stars of popular music,

and how they built their appeal on ideas of childhood and authenticity in the context of the child star.

Another vital question is whether the childlike/childish character of Larsen's persona is about retrieving an actual childhood, or the staging of an ideal childhood. From what Larsen has told in interviews, she may have regarded her own childhood as interrupted by such incidents as her parents' divorce, which allegedly fuelled her decision to go into acting (Gundersen, 2009), and subsequently postponed by her years as a member of Marit & Marion and M2M. On these grounds, we may interpret her solo project as partly an attempt to personify or re-create the figure of the child she may once have been – or rather an idealised, Arcadian version of it – via traits such as voice, mode of dress, view of creativity and musicality as rooted in her childhood memory of sitting underneath her mother's grand piano and listening to her mother's piano pupils (Dysthe, 2008), and stylistic choices such as the use of a toy piano in promotional videos and photographs.

In turn, this reading could reinforce a perception of Larsen's solo persona as somehow Arcadian, a pre-pubertal figure who benefits from emphasising the retrospective: nostalgic and childlike. In the light of this, her time in M2M takes on significance as that which blocks the retreat to actual childhood, the dividing line between Larsen the solo artist and the time of innocence, and consequently a time from which she seeks to disentangle herself – a theory that may be evidenced by her making reference to the M2M years in most interviews as “a great adventure”.

In a way, this makes Larsen's persona look quite grotesque – an adult woman who attempts to portray herself as a child, and who only succeeds insofar as she manages to appear as “cute” (as she repeatedly does in interviews and fan commentaries) and to create the impression that she is just “being herself”, suggesting that the persona and the real person are identical. This way, she asserts a crucial trait of authenticity from the ostensible naturalness and lack of

restraint that characterise the child – in the case of the female artist, notably the girl-child.

Two precautions need to be exercised at this point. The first is that this does not pertain to how Larsen herself conceives her persona (of which I do not know anything). It is, however, possible to interpret her solo project this way, with regard to the centrality of the woman-child. Larsen employs several markers in her persona that connote the child, and she may not be aware of how this comes across to the listener. The second is that it is, again, impossible to infer from the persona to the person. It is, however, possible to assert that a former child star like Michael Jackson may have contributed to the cultural intelligibility of the childlike traits of Larsen's persona, and to her attraction as a pop star. In her analysis of Jackson's transition from child star to (adult) superstar, Jacqueline Warwick makes the point that "navigating from child star to adult entertainer is no mean feat" (Warwick, 2012) (250); with reference to Valerie Walkerdine's work on child movie stars, she suggests that "the child star must be simultaneously innocent in looks and knowing in manner" (Ibid. 244), a description that applies equally to Larsen's persona in the video. Warwick's interpretation of the young Jackson as performing out "a rehearsed naughtiness" that combines "menace, humility, sexual knowingness, and innocence" (Ibid. 247) can also favourably be used about Larsen, but I see it as applicable only when it is reversed. Consequently, in the video, Larsen does not so much appear as the child playing at being an adult as the adult artist playing an adolescent, or rather childlike, version of herself; in this, her appeal to the spectator to "just look at me" becomes all the more poignant as it appears to be the child asking for confirmation – or, just as well, the artist imploring us to admire her staging of an ideal childhood. This serves as a reminder that the girl-child is an ideal means for Larsen to maintain her distance to her own persona as well as the audience.

Eternal sunshine of the quirky mind: The girl next door

The second central characteristic of Larsen's persona is the *girl next door*. Bridging the gap between the girl-child and the housewife, this character can be seen to carry traits of both these stereotypes. This composite of traits also opens

for a consideration of the quirky young woman, as seen in TV series such as *New Girl*, in Larsen's persona.

In one of her first interviews as a solo artist, Larsen herself outlines her music (which was then unheard by an audience) as revolving around "three directions", one of which is "eccentric and exciting, like Björk".⁷⁰ If we consider Björk's biggest hit, "It's Oh So Quiet", the comparison seems more relevant than Larsen herself may have been aware of. In the accompanying music video, directed by Michel Gondry, Björk's mannerisms and idiosyncratic moves, as well as her dress, could very well have influenced Larsen's visual appearance ten years later. Notwithstanding the fact that Björk's song is not her own composition, the waltz of "Under the Surface" could indeed be said to slightly resemble the subdued intro and verses of Björk's own recording of "It's Oh So Quiet". Stan Hawkins has referred to the verses of Björk's song as "a delicately positioned 'playground' waltz" (Hawkins, 1999) (46), a description I consider apt for interpreting Larsen's song. With this attempt at opening up Larsen's background with references such as ABBA and Björk, I wish to argue that she not only draws on multiple sources of inspiration in the construction of her subjectivity, broadening the scope of her project, but also that this multiplicity makes her music and persona legible within a larger transcultural space.

My mention of Björk pertains especially to Larsen's own video clip for "Don't Save Me". Originally released in January 2006 as the lead-off single for her first solo album, the song was accompanied upon its initial domestic release by a minimalistic video of Larsen lip-synching the song in the back seat of a car. In 2009, the song was re-released as a single in several European markets to coincide with the continental release of the compilation album, *If A Song Could Get Me You*. To tie in with this, director Hinrich Pflug made a new video clip for the song for the German division of Sony Music.

The professional polish of the video renders visible certain traits both in Marit Larsen's pop persona and their contingency upon gender norms, and hints subtly

⁷⁰ Bakke, Sven Ove: "marit larsen", *Dagbladet* 7 January 2005, p. 16.

at sources of inspiration. In the video, Larsen bears a passing but distinct resemblance to a young Jeanne Moreau, easily invoking 1960s films such as *Jules et Jim*. The appearance of a marching band, and of children playing cowboys and Indians, indicate a pre-adolescent world of “eternal sunshine of the spotless mind” – an Arcadian recourse to childhood and summer holidays. In this respect, the images appear to contradict the lyrics – Larsen herself has described the song as “a rather dark song about a break-up” – but not the music, which easily evokes a bright summer’s day.

The adults in the video are shown playing various acoustic instruments, reflecting the instrumentation of the song; moreover, they are all obscure, vaguely benevolent figures whose faces are hardly, if ever, visible. This indicates an absence of sexuality and an emphasis on what Jacqueline Warwick has called “girlness”, which she describes, contrary to girlhood, as “a set of behaviors and attributes available to females at any time during their lives” (Warwick, 2007) (3). While the idea of girlhood certainly evokes the unassuming girl-next-door aesthetics of Larsen’s persona, it also takes on a significance in that this persona seems entirely devoid of sexuality. While this would broaden her appeal to listeners of all ages and orientations, I argue that Larsen epitomises what Barbara Bradby has referred to as a virginal or “negative” sexuality in the construction of female strength (Bradby, 1992) (90). This constitutes a crucial part in the construction of her persona’s agency. Then again, even though Larsen’s persona may come across with a so-called negative sexuality, she is still flirtatious and Lolita-esque in her appearance, returning the camera’s gaze with a roguish and playful look. Consequently, one of this girlish figure’s most alluring qualities is arguably how it panders to the male gaze by infantilising the female persona (Hawkins, 1999) (45). For Larsen’s protagonist in the video, then, the girl figure may as well be about retaining control – and, by implication, power – as a nostalgic “not a girl, not yet a woman” who is marketable across borders without challenging conventions.

Girlness is complex and contradictory, and in Larsen’s case, any notion of sexuality is subdued by what might well be termed a naïve demeanour. In the

video, naivety is employed as a central facet of what we might call her persona's attitude, or *temperament*. Stan Hawkins has pointed out, in his theorisation of temperament as a key component of identity politics, that "naivety suggests something excessively simple – a trusting view of one's own environment – and often the result of youthful expression and inexperience", and accordingly, "this definition can be construed as romantic, charmingly straightforward and refreshingly unaffected" (Hawkins, 2009) (40) – a gallery of strategic qualities to which we could add "natural" and "authentic". Rather than an actual naïve attitude towards her existence as pop persona, Larsen's "fake naivety" would seem to determine her persona's temperament by making it both low-key, unobtrusive, and un-ambitious – waiting to be seen rather than taking steps to gain attention. To this end, Larsen's version of what Angela McRobbie has termed "the [idealised] global girl" (McRobbie, 2009) (89) is made legible across cultures via visual markers of femininity as well as musical codes. I argue that this is a testimony of Larsen's dexterity in constructing her persona. Notions of naivety, together with innocence and girlishness as acceptable properties in a female pop artist, make the case for a musicological investigation in tandem with a feminist critique of the artist.

The figure of the girl next door is particularly complex in that it signifies on several, and often contradictory, levels. As a cultural stereotype in the US, the girl next door has a history at least since World War Two as the clean-cut young woman who complements the American male; "she's the angel in the house, the goddess in the kitchen" (Rossi, 1975) (92). This figure also certainly connotes honesty, which in Larsen's case provides a point of entry into the sphere of the singer-songwriter. Nicola Dibben, following Allan Moore's theorisation of authenticity, points to the connection between the singer-songwriter and the idea of telling the "truth", where authenticity "becomes the idea that the performer speaks the truth about the situation from which he/she comes"; consequently, the listener comes to expect that "[the singer-songwriter's] subjectivity is heard through their singing voice" (Dibben, 2009) (132). This is in line with the media's, and consequently the fans', interpretation of Larsen as both singer *and* songwriter.

On another, albeit contentious, level, the girl next door is a pornographic object of desire that panders to the male gaze by appearing to be innocent and sexually accessible at the same time, signifying a place of fantasy and desire exempt from responsibility. Rossi, in his analysis of soft-porn magazines of the 1970s, suggests that if the women in *Playboy* are girls-next-door, then the women in *Penthouse* and *Oui* are “whores”, and that sex in their case is somehow dirty, whereas in the case of the girls-next-door, there is a “kind of blasphemy” in their presence in such a magazine (1975: 92). Moreover, the women in *Penthouse* and *Oui* “embody a decadent sexuality which is a lot more exciting than the healthy, well-scrubbed sexuality of *Playboy* ... they are much more voluptuous, world-weary, and tough than the girl-next-door” (Ibid.). Rossi further points out that “the proportion of black, Oriental, Mexican, and racially mixed women is significantly higher in *Penthouse* and *Oui* than in *Playboy* (maybe one in three rather than one in twelve)” (Ibid. 93).

The allure of the girl next door, then, could also be interpreted as resting on her “normality” insofar as she constitutes a norm against which the more decadent and exotic Other may itself be reified as object of desire for the male gaze. This is aligned to the suggestion by Inglis et al. that, “cultural representations of beauty often result from the stereotypes held by media gatekeepers, as when casting directors intuitively select a ‘Nastassia Kinski-like, full-lipped look’ for a champagne ad or a ‘fresh-faced, girl-next-door’ look for a new teen hair product” (Inglis, Solomon, & Ashmore, 1994) (51). This highlighting of the fresh-faced-ness of the girl next door is a splendid example of what Inglis et al. call the division between cultural stereotypes in “a sort of cultural short-hand” that also seemingly fixes female figures on several levels. In line with this, the authors point to the need for a closer scrutiny of “media vehicles in which the dominant portrayals of beauty may differ ... just as rap music emphasizes a sensual/exotic form of beauty, Disney movies may emphasize girl-next-door or cute looks” (Ibid. 60).

The signifiers suggested by the above theorists range from the ideal American woman and the housewife *in spe* via the cute Disney girl to the “clean” pornographic ideal that contrasts the exotic Other. Taken together, these all signify aspects of a conventional femininity that easily comes across as unassuming, not openly vying for attention. On the one hand, this is employed by Larsen herself in everything from her song lyrics to her demeanour in interviews and on stage. On the other hand, such an employment of convention feeds into Larsen’s image as an unassailable pop artist. As Jacqueline Warwick suggests, “the emblem of the conventional girl has been and is a powerful emblem in cultural discourse. She has served and continues to serve as a token of nostalgia for some idealized past; an icon for a bright future; an embodiment of innocence to be protected at all costs” but also “an unspoiled object of lust” and “a model of pouting selfishness and egocentrism” (Warwick, 2007) (2–3). This ties in with a theorisation of Larsen’s act as predicated upon a nostalgia for an unambiguously, unashamedly *feminine* figure, an Arcadian woman-child who offers stability and hope in a volatile world.

With Larsen’s re-invention of herself as pre-adolescent girl next door, she provides us with a prime example of someone whose artistic persona is an elaborate construct through the doing of gender and making it appear “natural” via codes that may be dismantled via feminist musicological criticism. Even though her act would seem to many listeners and fans to be a convincing display of natural and authentic femininity, Larsen’s strategies, like Ravn’s, are open to scrutiny and worthy of feminist investigation.

On this note, I am also aware that an investigation into the music and identity politics of the former duo M2M risks repositioning the two artists as obvious opposites. Rather than reiterating any binarisms, though, I wish to perform this kind of tandem analysis of the artists chiefly to provide examples of how they stage their personae. On the one hand, this binary division of “Marit and Marion” was certainly a driving force behind their popularity as M2M, and has undoubtedly persisted in listeners’ minds as a shortcut for keeping track of them as solo artists, a point which should not be overlooked. On the other hand, this is

also a salient point for analysis, because the difference(s) come to the fore and become available for scrutiny. Larsen's perhaps greatest trick is the way in which she manages to naturalise her character; her voice and persona become defining traits of her style, thus underpinning what the audience may perceive as the real or "authentic" artist.

The girl-next-door variant that Larsen employs may also be said to have a quirky element to it. As a creature of the visual media of film and television, personified by actors such as Zooey Deschanel in TV series *New Girl*, "quirk" has been analysed by film and media scholars in recent times. James McDowell describes the quirky figure as resting on a seemingly effortless combination of ironic distancing and emotional sincerity: "an oscillation between sincerity and irony, enthusiasm and detachment, naiveté and knowingness".⁷¹ Taken together, these traits give the quirky persona an artificial, histrionic character. Actors such as Deschanel utilise this theatricality as part of the aesthetics of indie cinema. Gry Rustad suggests that the quirky girl deliberately employs naivety and childlikeness, and that these traits are apt to confuse because they make the woman-child both endearing and an object of desire: As an example, she cites Deschanel's character in *New Girl*, who "depicts a quirky but also highly infantilized femininity".⁷²

This provides us with a hermeneutic window into how Marit Larsen can be categorised as a quirky figure in popular music. On the one hand, such traits are in line with my theorising of Larsen's persona as employing a strategy of fake naivety, whereby she controls the gaze of the audience and retains control without appearing to be in control (Bannister, 2006) (48). The resulting type of ambiguity – the child as object of desire – may help us deconstruct Larsen's act as predicated upon a nostalgia for an unambiguously, unashamedly *feminine*

⁷¹ MacDowell, James (2011): "Quirky, Tone and Metamodernism", retrieved from *Metamodernism.com*, URL: <http://www.metamodernism.com/2011/07/19/quirky-tone-and-metamodernism/> (accessed 25 January 2013).

⁷² Rustad, Gry (2012): "Metamodernism, Quirky and Feminism", retrieved from *Metamodernism.com*, URL: <http://www.metamodernism.com/2012/02/29/metamodernism-quirky-and-feminism/> (accessed 25 January 2013).

figure, an Arcadian woman-child who offers stability and hope in a volatile world.

On the other hand, the recognisably quirky traits of Larsen's persona are also traceable in her music, where both her singing voice and the choice of instruments may be taken as attempts to quirk her style. On Larsen's first two solo albums, *Under the Surface* (2006) and *The Chase* (2008), she and the other musicians use a range of instruments that may be labelled experimental in a context of popular music: traditional non-Western string instruments such as sitar, zither and tampura, as well as classical instruments such as celesta, piccolo trumpet, and harpsichord appear on a number of songs, albeit always in "guest appearances", never overshadowing the principal instrumentation (acoustic guitar, piano, bass, drums). Even so, they complement the overall mode of folk-tinged pop with a strong hint of Americana musics, as symbolised by the employment of banjo, accordion, and mandolin. This way, the music may be seen to work in tandem with the image of Larsen's persona, investing her records with what may easily be termed a quirky sensibility as far as instrumentation goes.

In this context, I would argue that her third album, *Spark* (2011), signifies or perhaps foreshadows something of a change. On this record, the odd instruments are mostly absent, in favour of a combination of more mainstream pop/rock aesthetics and lush string arrangements. There is certainly a possibility that Larsen has consciously decided to leave the quirky elements out, instead taking steps towards conventional instrumentation in order to make her music more accessible to the global mainstream. I propose that Larsen, probably wary of how the wide-eyed woman-child might lose credibility and become a static figure in the long run, is instead attempting to alter the persona in order to maintain its longevity in the pop market.

“Sweetness, beauty, and poise”: The housewife

The mention of “the angel in the house” brings us to the third central characteristic of Larsen’s persona. The *housewife* is a female stereotype that Larsen has invoked on several occasions, two of which will serve as the starting point for my discussion here.

The first instance is an interview in the spring of 2006, in connection with the launch of *Under the Surface*. The interview starts off with Larsen describing how “something was not quite right”; when the interviewer inquires if she is talking about the chain of events that led to M2M disbanding, Larsen states that, on the contrary, she is talking about the whipped cream she has made for her Shrovetide buns. She laughs “a light and trilling laugh” and adds: “You see, I have become a real housewife.” Later, the journalist corroborates this with the observation of Larsen as “characteristically home-loving, a pleasant home gives her energy”, and quotes her saying that: “Actually, I find great happiness in domestic chores.” Rounding off the interview, the journalist asks Larsen if her partner is happy with her being both a seasoned pop star and a fond homemaker, to which Larsen replies: “Haha, it sounds so nice when you say it like that. Yes, I think he is happy.”⁷³

The second instance involves an in-depth interview in Norway’s largest national newspaper, *Verdens Gang*, from the autumn of 2008, coinciding with the release of *The Chase* (Giske, 2008). Over several pages, Larsen is presented visually in photographs mainly taken in her own home: she is in the kitchen, wearing an apron and baking muffins that, according to the interview, are for “her band”. The interviewer tells us that Larsen “scurries back and forth” while she pays close attention to her cooking, “smiling, of course, and laughing, of course”, giving the interviewer the impression that she is “just as cute and kind as you would think”. Midway through the interview, Larsen “stops and licks her fingers” and interrupts her own train of thought, stating: “I am probably good material for a housewife. I can spend two to three hours in the kitchen.” The interviewer goes on to note that Larsen “jots down song lyrics over the cookbooks when she

⁷³ Knapstad, Miriam Lund: “Vesle, voksne Marit”, *Adresseavisen* 3 March 2006, p. 6.

bakes” and that “almost all her lyrics have been through the kitchen” in the writing process.

In both these cases, Larsen plays on the idea that the housewife is somehow relevant to her present situation. In the first instance, we may read her answers as a straight attempt at presenting herself as attached to her home; but it might also be that she is simply humouring the journalist, who appears to build the interview around the notion that Larsen is a “genuinely home-loving person”, and therefore a figure of identification for a certain segment of readers. Likewise, in the second case, the entire setting for the interview is so overtly theatrical that an ironic reading is fully possible.

I wish to make the point that any employment of the housewife is rooted in Larsen’s use of naivety as a personal trait. On this note, it is also of significance that a successful media presentation of Larsen’s fake naivety requires a certain naivety on the journalist’s part as well. This can be observed in the cases quoted above: In both instances, the interviewer seems to take Larsen’s persona at face value and chooses to portray her as if she were “real” – meaning that *this is really the way she is*. To this end, both interviews provide us with signifiers of the “real”: love and creativity. In the 2006 interview, the presence of the boyfriend suggests both an everyday life and a heteronormative frame for the housewife; in the 2008 interview, the kitchen grounds not only Larsen’s happiness, but also her creativity.

These factors notwithstanding, the questions arise: Where does the housewife come into it? Why is Larsen so taken with this figure that she assigns it such centrality, for example over several pages in a bestselling newspaper? What is the significance of this figure for Larsen’s persona? To what ends does she stage this particular stereotype? In order to answer this, we need to begin by taking a look at the historical backdrop for the housewife.

As a concept and a persona, the housewife has been most central to the modern Western world both as a role model for women and as the Other of modern man.

Coinciding with the industrial revolution, the bourgeois nuclear family emerged as a norm, which in turn contributed to a merging of the public-private dichotomy with a new understanding of the man-woman dichotomy (Myrstad, 2012) (23). Perhaps *renewed* would be more to the point than “new”, as this understanding would consolidate the idea of men as breadwinners and women as housewives (Danielsen, 2002) (14). This mindset is central to the development of a bourgeoisie of commerce and finance during the 17th and 18th centuries, where women would gradually lose their traditional role as active producers and participants in the traditional household economy and emerge as non-productive, “pure” family keepers (Solheim, 2007) (69). This symbolic figure would come to represent the counterpart to the Enlightenment idea of the male citizen, at the same time as the woman/wife would assume the function of the man’s necessary counterpart (Ibid. 70–71), the Other that allowed the man to assert his own identity.

One keyword here is *bourgeois*. As both Myrstad and Solheim argue, it is through the civic discourse of modernity that the *man* is positioned definitively as active subject and producer, while the *wife* – meaning the married woman – is transformed into a passive homemaker (Myrstad, 2012) (26, emphasis added). The industrial revolution thus also encompasses a gender revolution, which fixes the modern demarcation lines between work and family, and between the public and the private (Solheim, 2007) (67–68). Solheim suggests that this engendered a new, *bourgeoise* female role, which set a precedent in the course of the 19th century as an ostensibly universal norm, in a way that was set to make its mark on modern culture (Ibid. 69). At the same time, this modern gender division is naturalized as part of the past, making women’s attachment to the private, reproductive sphere of the family appear as a social and cultural constant, unaffected by economic or political changes (Ibid. 67).

The transformation of gender roles that consolidated men as breadwinners and women as housewives, took shape during the industrial era. In the 1950s, these roles appeared in a distilled variant (Danielsen, 2002) (14). The bourgeois nuclear family was established as a social norm during the industrial era, a

construction that entailed that the public/private divide was fused with an understanding of the man-woman dichotomy (Myrstad, 2012) (23).

In tracking the figure of the housewife, literary texts are useful aids. For example, both Ahmed and Myrstad emphasise the importance of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's pedagogical treatise, *Émile*, from 1762. Here, Rousseau depicts "the ideal couple" Émile and Sophie, with the former as an economically productive man and the latter as his "unproductive" wife whose greatest contribution is to support her future husband (Ibid. 24). Sophie's happiness is contingent upon Émile's, and therefore she has to add to his happiness in order to keep the family together (Ahmed, 2010) (55). This is an early example of how the woman's happiness is constructed as being situated, not to say fixed, in the home.

Another text that runs through the discourse of the housewife is the poem, "The Angel in the House," by the 19th century British poet, Coventry Patmore. The poem, written as a tribute to Patmore's late first wife, has been lauded as "the sort of achievement that could only have arisen out of the lives of a young and happily married couple" (Oliver, 1956) (47), its "permanent human truths" (Ibid. 59), and for emphasizing "the dignity of a woman" through "stressing the quieter feminine virtues" (Ibid. 51). Originally published in two main parts between 1854 and 1862, this book-length poem was enormously popular in its time, probably in part because of the influence on Patmore by the so-called Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, a group of conservative English painters and writers who cultivated a nostalgia for previous epochs, notably the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and searching to attain "a devotion to Nature" and a "natural expression of feeling" (Ibid. 35, 44). In the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution, this nostalgia for things past undoubtedly held an appeal for many.

Danielsen, Myrstad, and Solheim all make reference to this poem. In line with Victorian ideals, this figure exemplifies the ideal housewife: the self-sacrificing angel who puts her own interests aside for the good of the family and society (Danielsen, 2002) (13), an ideal that is also the goal and means of a woman's life (Myrstad, 2012) (26). According to Solheim, the angel in the house is "the very

incarnation of sensitivity and self-sacrificing care, who dedicates herself to the continuous caring for and looking after the husband and children” (Solheim, 2007) (70). Moreover, this figure corresponds perfectly with Ahmed’s description of the happy housewife as a fantasy that nevertheless “evokes the embodied situation of some women more than others” (Ibid. 50).

The figure of the angel in the house has been widely criticised and deconstructed as a liability for women’s liberation. Perhaps the most prominent piece of criticism is offered by Virginia Woolf, who took it upon herself to literally kill the angel: In Woolf’s essay “Professions for Women”, the figure of the angel, “immensely charming” and “utterly unselfish” though she may appear, stands in the way of the author’s work and implores the author to “be sympathetic; be tender; flatter; deceive; use all the arts and wiles of your sex” and “[n]ever let anybody guess that you have a mind of your own” (Woolf, 1942) (150). Woolf’s narrator turns upon the angel and, catching her by the throat, strangles her, in self-defence, thereby reversing the experience that was “bound to befall all women writers at that time”: “Killing the Angel in the house was part of the occupation of a woman writer” (Ibid. 151). In no uncertain terms constituting an act of defiance, Woolf’s symbolic action not only alerts us to the struggles for women’s rights in her time, but also how the housewife-as-angel is perpetually “faking it” in order to appear as the ideal woman: flattering, deceiving, and the ability to be tender are portrayed as essential parts of the woman’s sex, and thus significant of a biological determinism that is at the same time a marker of “the extreme conventionality of the other sex” (Ibid. 152).

In one sense, the angel in the house provides a link between the girl next door and the housewife as an emblem of normality: the lovable, unassuming girl, who will later blossom into the perfect spouse, “a completely human being and a wife” who is simply “in her rightful setting” (Oliver, 1956) (59–60) – like the angel of the poem, the housewife has “sweetness, beauty, and poise” (Ibid. 25). These two figures – or the two aspects of the same figure – may also be seen to impose the iron law of heteronormativity on modern men and women. Ingraham notes that heteronormativity, as “the view that institutionalized heterosexuality constitutes

the standard for legitimate and prescriptive sociosexual arrangements” (Ingraham, 1994) (204), naturalises heterosexuality and “conceals its constructedness in the illusion of universality” (Ibid.). Ingraham has developed this further through a concept of “thinking straight”, referring to the mindset where, by treating heterosexuality as taken for granted, we participate in establishing heterosexuality – “not sexual orientation or sexual behavior, but the way it is organized, secured, and ritualized” – as something both entirely natural and unaffected by development, “as though it were fixed in time and space and universally occurring” (Ingraham, 2005) (4). This resonates with Solheim’s observation that the modern gender division is naturalised so as to appear timeless and universal, thereby establishing a brand of modern, private femininity which in time becomes a central girder of the modern social order (Solheim, 2007) (69) – and, as I will argue below, for the female singer-songwriter.

The heteronormativity of the housewife is certainly contextual as well. As Ahmed observes, the housewife emerges “at least in part as a response to feminist claims” (2010: 53). In 20th century Norway, such claims not only shaped, but also likely supported this heteronormative stance. In her historical scrutiny of institutionalised heterosexuality in the early 20th century, Melby suggests three distinct causes for this disciplining and regimentation of sexuality: the complementary gender division as a condition for the establishment of modern society; the active definition of women as housewives and attendant heterosexualisation as the price for the social acceptance of women’s rights; and the emphasis on women’s role in reproduction as (un)intentional heteronormalization (Melby, 2007) (62–64). Melby makes the valid point that heteronormativity was in fact a consequence of the call for women’s liberation. This would pave the way for “a grand-scale heterosexualisation” in the years between the wars (Ibid. 62), a heterogendering, to use Ingraham’s term, that would in turn become a central facet of the post-war housewife, the “white bourgeois fantasy of the past” that was “never possible as a present for most women” (Ahmed, 2010) (52).

This further exposes how conventional femininity, in the context of the housewife, becomes *bourgeois* femininity; as Milestone and Meyer suggest, the 19th-century ideal of woman as a domestic goddess or “angel in the house”, devoting herself to the care of the family home, the children and her husband, has never been realistic for many working-class women (2012: 104). Danielsen points out that bourgeois women controlled greater resources in everyday life, which allowed them to organise their existence in different ways than the ones – i.e. working-class wives and mothers – who had to spend their energy trying to make ends meet (2002: 14). Solheim, meanwhile, sees this modern female archetype as more mythical than real, but also suggests that one distinctive feature is that this woman no longer does manual labour; she is exempt from all forms of productive activity, and it is precisely this exemption that is her hallmark as a woman (2007: 71). This observation discloses two important clues as to the allure of the housewife. On the one hand, the “happy housewife heroine” was both heterosexualised against the background of social struggle for women’s rights, and further refeminised in the post-war years in the aftermath of gender role disruptions provoked by World War II (Milestone & Meyer, 2012) (47–48). On the other hand, this “return to the home” took place in tandem with the growth of a consumer society, and not least a mediatised society, that informed women not only about how to keep their homes, but also about how to look good.⁷⁴ It is certainly from this period in time that we get the iconic and influential images of the housewife that arguably inform people from all social strata today, not least through popular culture.

Ahmed further notes that the notion of “the happy housewife” not only retains its force as a placeholder for women’s desires, but could even be said to be making a return: On the Internet, “we witness a new generation of bloggers who take on this identity of ‘the happy housewife’” (2010: 52), which entails a reframing and

⁷⁴ Myrstad analyses the so-called housewife film (*husmorfilm*), a series of pedagogical feature films that served as a channel of information for housewives in Norway in the 1950s and 1960s. In addition to the importance of these films, she also sees them as part of a larger picture of post-war media development, where weekly magazines, radio, newspapers, and the emerging television format all frequently catered to “what they perceived as women’s tastes and interests” (Myrstad, 2012: 18). This suggests a standardisation of femininity through the media, which arguably also played a part in the general heterogendering of society during this time.

certainly a re-aestheticization of the domestic woman. Looking at popular culture through the lens of film and TV, Milestone and Meyer suggest a similar tendency to glamorise the housewife: “instead of being domestic workers weighed down by a range of not very glamorous tasks, such as cleaning, ironing, washing up, women are now often portrayed as homemakers ... The homemaker is the person responsible for turning the house into a tasteful, aesthetic and comfortable sphere, complete with fresh flowers, colour-matched carpets and walls, plumped-up pillows and fresh scents” (Milestone and Meyer, 2012: 104–105). The absence of labour leaves the modern housewife free to do the kind of aesthetic work that references nostalgic notions of the post-war years. Along with the rise in popularity of vintage and second-hand attire and furniture, this signals an idealisation of times past that also accommodates seemingly unambiguous gender roles. In a world of upheaval and disruptions, the past may appear both comforting and inspiring.

The notion of the woman who does not do manual labour brings to the fore another division that assumes centrality to Marit Larsen’s project, namely the distinction between “work” and “labour”. In their discussion of the factors that make up the framework of modern social life, Christie and Bruun suggest that this distinction separates *labour*, meaning the mandatory tasks that range from women’s giving birth via the daily grind for subsistence to the prisoner’s penal servitude, from the pleasurable *work*, where people take pleasure in creating works of art at leisure, without the constraints of having to earn a living (Christie & Bruun, 2003 [1985]) (34–36). On the one hand, this recalls the image of the modern housewife who can dispose of the unglamorous chores and afford to be a “homemaker”. On the other hand, this figure appears as an ideal outlet for Larsen, who does not have to make music in order to make a living (labour), and so can afford to make music out of a personal need for creativity (work).⁷⁵ Taken

⁷⁵ According to media sources, both Larsen and Ravn earned sufficient amounts of money during their time as M2M to be well-off and able to concentrate on making music for pleasure in the aftermath of the band’s end, rather than having to play concerts or release records to earn money. As early as 2003, Ravn bought her parents a house for the price of 3.5 million kroner, paid for in full by the artist; at the same time, Larsen was reported as having assets of 1.6 million kroner to her credit (Hansen, Espen A.: “Kjøpte hus til familien”, *Verdens Gang* 11 October 2003, p. 62). A little less than a decade later, Larsen, her solo career now well underway, was reported

in this context, the housewife could be interpreted as a metonymy for the surplus of leisure time and creativity that characterises Larsen's life and work, and also helping to maintain the illusion that for the singer-songwriter, life and work are inseparable.

Against this background, we can begin to map out the significance of the housewife in Marit Larsen's project. Indeed, there is nothing that suggests that Larsen herself would want to trade her pop star status for a life of domestic bliss. For instance, when asked about her schedule in the spring of 2012, her manager Morten Andreassen replied that "the rest of 2012 is fully booked",⁷⁶ with reference to the artist's touring activity ahead. On another level though, the housewife appears to provide Larsen's persona with several potentially endearing traits. The heterogendered, bourgeois, home-loving angel in the house, who takes equal pleasure in cooking and song-writing, seems like an uneven match for any critic: this comes across as a persona that potentially appeals to an extremely broad range of listeners.

Considering that Larsen has employed the figure of the housewife so explicitly in the construction of her visual persona, it might seem curious that, despite her frequent use of passive or introspective female protagonists, she does not thematise domestic life to a similar extent in her music. Even so, at least one of her songs lends itself to an interpretation in the light of this particular figure. "Solid Ground", from *Under the Surface*, was one of the songs that garnered praise from the media for its "epic" qualities upon the record's release, but no reviewers have yet taken up the subject of the lyrics. Here they are in full:

Solid Ground

[Verse]
Cannot fall
Never do regret

as "making more money than she needed"; her manager stated that, in addition to doing "tax planning", she was currently investing the returns in her own work, e.g. for the purpose of touring both home and abroad (Selsjord, Knut: "Marit tjener nå mer penger enn hun har bruk for", *Dagens Næringsliv* 18 April 2012, p. 50).

⁷⁶ Selsjord, *ibid.*

Know just what is being said
Know the risk you take
Keep your head above it all
Sure you can fall but not now
You gotta prove something new
Being you, being you

Cannot feel
Keep from asking why
Be the strongest at goodbyes
Know your place in life
Now expand your wings and fly
It reaches high though not enough
You seem to me so incomplete swept off your feet
Now let me tell you

[Chorus]
They will always pull you down
Before you know it
They will take your smile and push you around
They will fight and struggle to blur and trouble
Your sense of solid ground

[Verse]
Cannot know
Lose your self control
Be an angel overall
Know your secret way
Laugh at everything they say
Will you remain the same
Now you dare not see what's letting go
Inside of me
(Is it me?)

[Chorus]
They will always pull you down
Before you know it
They will take your smile and push you around
They will fight and struggle to blur and trouble
Your sense of solid ground

Keep your head above it all
Sure you can fall but not now
You gotta prove

They will always pull you down
Before you know it
They will take your smile and push you around
They will haunt your every dream *[not in CD booklet]*
They will make you come undone at the seams *[not in CD booklet]*
And they will fight and struggle to blur and trouble
Your sense of solid ground

Keep your head above it all
Sure you can fall but not now
You gotta prove something new
Being you, being you

Within a context of the dutiful housewife, the lyrics read like a set of instructions for the “you” who has to keep a straight face. One obvious (and, frankly, banal) reading would entail understanding the song as words of warning from the experienced Larsen to a young artist – a future Marit, possibly – about the perils of the music industry. However, the song lends itself to other interpretations as well, not least because of the exhortations about the undisclosed “they” of the narrative, as well as the symbol of the angel. In the second verse, the advice to “be an angel overall / know your secret way / laugh at everything they say” could well be directed at the housewife who, in Ahmed’s words, has to “give up having a will of her own” (2010: 62) in favour of the self-sacrificing care so significant of the bourgeois homemaker: She is expected to cook for her family, devote herself to her children, and humour her husband. The angel in the house moves through the lyrics, accompanied by a ghostly-sounding descending piano melody that seconds the living-room (read: domestic) piano accompaniment of the song.

This also makes for the possibility that, instead of a piece of advice from “I” to “you”, the lyrics indicate an inner monologue, wherein the “I” admonishes herself and makes sure she remembers how to behave as expected. The “solid ground” of the title could thus be interpreted as domestic space, the interiors of the home, outside of which she runs the risk of loss of control. Reynolds and Press assert that women’s adventures often take place in “the great indoors, as opposed to the external spaces ... that are the backdrop to male rock adventurism”, an indoors that is “literal (the bedroom) and figurative (the imagination)” (Reynolds & Press, 1995) (348). In such a setting, the “being you” of the song becomes a contradiction. Reynolds and Press refer to the home as “a space of pristine surfaces and restrictive role-play”, and consequently “the last place that a woman can be herself” (Ibid. 349). In this respect, rather than being “you”, the dutiful character in Larsen’s song appears to be “what they expect you to be”.

The absence of two of the lyric lines from the album booklet (see above) might quite likely be a typographic omission. Nevertheless, the fact that the line “they will haunt your every dream” is omitted from print could also be interpreted as an act of secrecy on Larsen’s part: The dreams of the subject’s antagonist (and quite possibly of the protagonist, too) are clandestine and have to be kept away from sight. One is reminded of Woolf’s angel: “Never let anybody guess that you have a mind of your own.”

As a central characteristic of Larsen’s pop persona, the housewife is ostensibly a marker of subjectivity. On the one hand, the nostalgic conception of the housewife might help in rendering visible the “invisible” work that women have traditionally done in the home, thus even providing Larsen with what resembles a feminist stance. On the other hand, the renaissance of the housewife may be read as a signifier of agency: Whereas the post-war housewife assumed this role out of necessity, the post-millennium housewife in Norway – a country renowned for gender equality – often seems to be a role taken voluntarily by young adult women. In the latter case, the housewife becomes a heroic figure that signifies a conscious choice, as well as a figure of power: Not only can the family afford to have one adult doing unpaid labour at home – the young wife and mother who cares for her husband and children is also arguably coded as a “good” woman, an immaculate figure whose motivation is less *amor fati* than to bask in the glory of being the perfect wife and mother.

Admittedly, this would be essentially a reactionary reading. It is vital to remember that the housewife is bound up in a discourse of heteronormative gender division, which arguably rests on notions of biological determinism. It is also invariably bound up in ideas of authenticity, from being “able to cook real food” to “being a real woman”. Such authenticity thereby becomes gendered, and also essentialised, when perceived as a true way of being that applies to “all women”. In keeping with this, Larsen’s statements about being good raw material for a housewife could easily pander to any anti-feminist stance: In what arguably seems like a backlash against feminist thought, it appears, in Ahmed’s

words, “as if the speech act (‘I am a happy housewife’) is itself a rebellion against a social orthodoxy” (2010: 53). If equality for women has become a social orthodoxy, we may not have to wonder why Larsen’s angel in the house is so popular after all.

The housewife is also reactionary because it assumes the function of the binary opposite of the working-woman. Life at home thus becomes antithetic to independence, agency and freedom of choice (lack of freedom). Furthermore, the housewife is coded as heterosexual, and thereby becomes emblematic of heteronormative society (heteronormativity).

In all these instances, the image of the housewife appears to be at odds with Larsen’s pop persona. As a working woman and independent artist whose happiness lies in her ability to write songs, and a shrewd businesswoman who runs her own business, to a large extent independent of her record company which “does not interfere” when she is in the studio (Frankplads, 2008), ostensibly with the freedom to travel wherever she likes for as long a time as she chooses (as evidenced by her stay in New York City in 2010-2011), unmarried and with no children (as per 2013), the entire housewife character seems comically out of place.

Then again, reading the housewife within Larsen’s project also suggests that this figure is somehow meant to disclose her inner wishes and feelings. In addition, she appears more than anything to be pandering to nostalgic dreams of the “mother at home” as part of an effort to make her persona attractive to a prospective audience: “the feminine ideal of the Western housewife of the 1950s, in a trim dress and high heels, striking a mildly sexualised pose”⁷⁷ (Lutz, 2011) (1), a figure who performs the housework, by virtue of her “womanly purpose”, as a “‘labour of love’, which takes the form of ‘love as labour’” (Ibid. 3). This interpretation, in the light of the girl-child, could further indicate that Larsen uses the figure of the housewife to play at “adulthood”, significant of the

⁷⁷ The notion of the housewife as high-heeled and sexualised indicates yet another similarity to the girl next door. Like its younger counterpart, the housewife also invites notions of realness and gendered authenticity as well as pornographic titillation (Paasonen 2011: 107).

exploratory phase of her solo artist persona (Danielsen, 2002: 53) as well as a signifier of the “normality” Larsen claims to covet (ibid.).

In sum, Larsen can be said to appropriate the figure of the housewife to position her persona as ideal pop subjectivity. Poise, after all, tells us much about how social identities are spectacularized musically (Hawkins, 2009a: 39), and the housewife – who seems blissfully unaware of any bothersome feminist leanings towards equality, the right to work, or economic independence – provides Larsen’s persona with the illusion, and also the allure, of the “real woman” of previous generations. Subsequently, this allows her to theatricalise nostalgia and old-fashioned normality in a purposely naive, trusting way that both disarms critics and panders to the audience’s desire for a less binding, more dreamy escapism that fits well with both the stylization of post-war times (compare, for instance, *Mad Men*) and the idealisation of singer-songwriters’ sincerity and authenticity so prevalent in present-day popular culture.

“Will you take me as who I say I am?": The singer-songwriter

The fourth characteristic that Larsen draws on as a solo artist is the figure of the *singer-songwriter*, notably as personified by Joni Mitchell, whom Larsen has consistently cited as a crucial influence. As a fixture of popular music history, the singer-songwriter may be read as the apotheosis of the line of development that characterised popular music in the North American folk music revival of the post-war years, notably the 1960s: from the folksinger as song-writer, via the band as a creative entity, to the solo artist who writes and performs his or her own songs – songs that, as a rule, convey the feelings and reflections of the singer-songwriter’s own life.

The popularity of the singer-songwriter grew during the late 1960s, a development that Gillian Mitchell notes as setting a new standard: “since the folk revival, the presence of the solo singer-songwriter in popular music has been constant” (G. Mitchell, 2007) (184). One important reason for this is that the solo performer, singing and playing their own songs, “attained great distinction for their poetic and ‘meaningful’ compositions”, which she attributes to revival-style

folk music and popular music mixing and mingling, so that “the two began to merge and enrich one another” (Ibid. 137). I understand this as signifying that the singer-songwriter invested popular music with a type of meaningfulness that came from folk music. From this, I propose that the singer-songwriter figure transports with it ideas not only of musical meaning, but also of the performer’s authenticity.

Joni Mitchell is a good example of the complexity of the singer-songwriter of the first generation. As a North American singer and instrumentalist with a folk revival background, she grappled with themes such as disillusionment with politics and world goings-on on her early records. An album such as *Blue* (1971) signified a turn in Mitchell’s work to a more introspective mode; the narrative concerns, among other things, the travels she made, which were facilitated by her favourable financial situation as a result of her work as a successful pop star and songwriter. These factors work together both in Mitchell’s work in creating albums such as *Blue* and in her invention, as it were, of the modern singer-songwriter.⁷⁸ Rather than being the perceived ingénue of the Canadian folk scene, Mitchell comes across as a shrewd artist and businesswoman, very aware of what she is doing and how listeners perceive her. In terms of how listeners and critics infer from Larsen’s music and public persona that she is both “cute” and “honest”, therefore, Larsen can certainly be regarded as a post-Mitchellian artist.

The term singer-songwriter reminds us that, in talking about this particular genre, content is always contingent on form. With the singer-songwriter

⁷⁸ The use of the term singer-songwriter warrants two comments. First, the term singer-songwriter is itself a relevant example of a transcultural trait in popular music. According to the various Wikipedia sites on the subject, the English term is used in Danish, Dutch, German, Norwegian, and Swedish to designate this type of artist. In other languages, the term is translated directly, as is the case in Finland (*Laulaja-lauluntekijä*), Italy (*cantautore*), and Poland (*piosenka autorska*); still, all the above Wikipedia sites reference North American artists (e.g. Woody Guthrie, Bob Dylan) as typical examples of singer-songwriters, suggesting that the stylistic template for the modern singer-songwriter designation is indeed Anglophone. Second, I find the French term *auteur-compositeur-interprète* (“writer-composer-interpreter”) more precise than just “singer-songwriter”, as it implies that the artist also *interprets* his or her own work for the listener. As I see it, in the case of artists such as Joni Mitchell and especially Marit Larsen, this means that the artist can also be seen to provide guidelines for the audience’s understanding of her through the music as well as the persona’s *modus operandi* in the media.

aesthetic, musical content is inextricably bound up in the question of style (for example, acoustic instruments and apparently autobiographical lyrics). Also with regard to the origins of the term and the figure, the character that comes across as dominant is distinctly Anglo-American. This is evident in how language plays a central part – the designation signifies an implication that the lyrics should be in English in order to be both truly authentic (in the style of the first singer-songwriters who gained global fame, who were North American and Anglophone) and, at the same time, universally available (this is the language that everyone understands). This is most likely a reason for Larsen’s use of English rather than her native language in her solo project.

The figure of the singer-songwriter – the individual who sings about her- or himself in a way that is meaningful to the listener – can be understood in relation to Allan F. Moore’s three modes of authenticity. Moore, in writing about “who it is that a performance authenticates” (Moore, 2012) (269) rather than what it is in the music that appears authentic, distinguishes between three possibilities, two of which are crucial to my argument: *First person authenticity*, or “authenticity of expression”, occurs when the originator of the music “succeeds in conveying the impression that his/her utterance is one of integrity, that it represents an attempt to communicate in an unmediated form with an audience” (Moore, 2002) (214). *Second person authenticity*, or “authenticity of experience”, arises when a given performance “succeeds in conveying the impression to a listener that that listener’s experience of life is being validated, that the music is ‘telling it like it is’ for them” (Ibid. 220). In the first case, the listener interprets the originator as saying, “this is what it’s like to be me”; in the second, the listener hears the message as being “this is what it’s like to be you”, in which case the artist authenticates and confirms the validity of the listener’s subjectivity. I quote Moore at length to demonstrate that the oscillation between these two positions is of vital importance to any understanding of singer-songwriters’ purported honesty and of their appeal.

Moreover, the figure of the singer-songwriter provides us with an example of Moore’s *third person authenticity* or authenticity of execution (Ibid. 218). This

suggests that Larsen can be seen to employ some of the same strategies as Joni Mitchell has done earlier in her career, both as a stage performer and in negotiating her persona in public.

Joni Mitchell's *Blue* is generally regarded as her most personal work, a view promoted by biographers such as Brian Hinton (1996), Karen O'Brien (2001) and Michelle Mercer (2012). These writers refer to the artist herself in their attempts at explaining the greatness of the artist and the record: in their works, Mitchell is quoted in interviews as stating that *Blue* is "... probably the purest emotional record that I will ever make in my life" (Hinton, 1996) (135) and that part of its impact on listeners is "... because it's extraordinarily emotionally honest" (K. O'Brien, 2001) (126). In Mercer's book, she reinforces this honesty in a rare interview with the author about the recording of the album: "We had to lock the [studio] door 'cause if somebody came in and looked at me cross-eyed I'd burst into tears" (Mercer, 2012 [2009]) (120); on the album's effect on listeners, she suggests that, "The people who get the most out of my music see themselves in it" (Ibid. 3).

Here, Mitchell effectively authenticates the listener's experience by suggesting Moore's second person authenticity at work. Though her own harrowing experience in making the album, she invests it with a pervasive and universally accessible sense of universal authenticity. The authors, in turn, pay tribute to this ostensibly universal appeal of *Blue*: Hinton calls it "her most personal and emotionally tortured album" and states that it "strips her love life down to the bare bone" (1996: 12). O'Brien sees the album as a turning point in Mitchell's career, stating that the artist would never be "quite as nothing-left-to-lose openly vulnerable again" (2001: 132). Mercer, who puts her own discovery of *Blue* and subsequent "existential transformation" at the centre of her narrative about Mitchell's "blue period", asserts that on the album, "Mitchell tore her heart out and put it on tape as masterfully as it's possible to do" (2012: 7) and calls it "stories of self from a time when she had no defenses at all" (Ibid. 37).

It is noteworthy that none of the above writers questions Mitchell's own narrative about the album. In tandem with the artist's own statements in the interviews, the writers appear to dutifully echo her version. Indeed, Mercer goes so far as to elevate her own transformation into a normative experience: "[Mitchell] clarified murky emotions so you could immerse yourself in them ... studies have shown that the music we meet at our most self-involved, in adolescence, is the music that hits us deepest. For me and *tens of thousands of other teenagers*, that music was from Joni's autobiographical period" (Ibid. 2; 4, emphasis added). In this, she seems to be attempting to generalise her own subjective experience, but also to internalise Mitchell's own narrative and try to fashion her own experience from this – taking not only Mitchell's music, but also her telling of her own story, at face value.

This is crucially important because it sheds light on how ideas of honesty and authenticity are produced in the discourse of Joni Mitchell as singer-songwriter. Mercer's assertion that Mitchell's album "clarified murky emotions" for young fans and the artist's own statement about how those who get the most out of her music "see themselves in it" suggest an oscillation between first- and second-person authenticity: Joni tells the truth about herself in her work, which in turn rings true with the listeners who "get it", meaning those who hear the music as informing their subjectivity, "formulating their own emotions", and who in turn understand Mitchell's own subjectivity. In this feedback loop of "authenticities", listeners are free to invest whatever emotional interest they want both in the music and in Mitchell's theatricalised telling of her own story.

Telling is a key word here. In the discourse on Mitchell and *Blue*, the rich body of work by journalists (which Hinton, O'Brien, and Mercer amply draw on), researchers (Gaar, 2002 [1992]; L. O'Brien, 2012 [1995]; Whiteley, 2000), and biographers contains a wealth of stories about Mitchell's life at the time of making the record, including her loves.⁷⁹ Even though Karen O'Brien attempts to

⁷⁹ It is a truism of Joni Mitchell's persona that the songs on *Blue* are "autobiographical", with the majority of the lyrics chronicling her travels and her love life at this point in her life. Biographers generally assume that the songs describe situations with specific people who Mitchell was romantically involved with at the time, including Graham Nash, James Taylor, and Leonard Cohen

denounce “the myth that there are few things more interesting about a woman than her lovers” as not true then and not true now (2001: 8), and Mercer claims that celebrity gossip is “not very compelling to me” and that it seems “based on the notion that details of celebrity lives are inherently more interesting than those of our own” (2012: 12), both writers go far in assuming that the songs on *Blue* are about particular men, thus utilising gossip to maintain a new set of myths. These tend to co-exist with the fans’ idea that there is one truth of Joni Mitchell’s work in general and *Blue* in particular.

The idea that the singer-songwriter somehow *tells the truth*, or indeed confesses, be it their own or the listener’s, rests on a number of such assumptions. First, the *Blue* album is generally regarded as “being about” Mitchell herself, suggesting unmediated autobiography, a trait that Mitchell herself has remained ambiguous about.⁸⁰ Second, the fans tend to turn this into Mitchell’s ability to tell the truth about the listener regardless of the context of identification (for one, command of the English language is a prerequisite for understanding Mitchell’s lyrics).

Third, the idea of Mitchell is invariably bound up in ideas of gender. Sheila Whiteley provides an example of this belief with her analysis of *Blue*, where she links the album to ideas of both femininity and truth. Starting out with the pertinent idea that *Blue* “offers a window into [Mitchell’s] subjective universe, marking the start of a recognition of the problems associated with the feminine mystique and, more especially, the effect when this realisation hit home” (Whiteley, 2000) (78), and thus echoing Mavis Bayton’s observation that

(see e.g., Mercer 2012, O’Brien 2001, and Hinton 1996 throughout). These assumptions are, as a rule, based on what Mitchell has herself suggested in interviews, and what the men in question have supplied in turn, in interviews and biographies. On the one hand, such assumptions run contrary to the fact that none of the above men’s names appears anywhere in the lyrics on the album. On the other hand, the fact that neither Mitchell nor any of the men have ever disproved such conjecture arguably reinforces the mythology adumbrating the artist and fuels fans’ fantasies about her and interpretations of the songs on albums like *Blue*.

⁸⁰ Hinton (1996: 133) quotes Mitchell from an interview by Timothy White (1990) where she asserts that, “People assume that everything I write is autobiographical. If I sing in the first person, they think it’s all about me, but many of the characters I write about – even if their tone is entirely first person – have nothing to do with my own life in the intimate sense. It’s more like dramatic recitation or theatrical soliloquy.” This foreshadows Marit Larsen’s description of her own modus operandi as a lyricist at the time of the release of her third album, *Spark*: “Sometimes I lie a little, at other times I lie a lot” (Kydland 2011).

Mitchell, together with female singer-songwriters such as Joan Baez and Judy Collins, has been an important role model for young women (Bayton, 1998) (15), Whiteley goes on to note that a song such as “Both Sides Now” implies “a truthfulness, a connection between the ‘who I present and who I am’ in its exploration of the personal in everyday life” (Whiteley, 2000) (81). Her notion of “truthfulness” comes across as a slippage of logic, as the truth of the song may equally be a result of Mitchell’s talent as a songwriter, knowing how to put banal truths into words; and, lest we forget, Whiteley also commits the fallacy of inferring from music to artist, or from persona to person.

Similarly, when Whiteley describes Mitchell’s aural impact as “one of truthfulness to experience” (Ibid. 82), there is a slippage between music and biography, or between persona and person. Whiteley evidently deduces from the music Mitchell makes to how the artist really “is”, a feature that also highlights the erroneous idea that in the singer-songwriter, there is no difference between persona and actual person.

Whiteley adds gender to the mix when theorising that “feminine modes of self-expression are characterised by an intuitive, figurative, more ‘felt’ lexicon than masculine modes which may be more coldly rational and concrete [e.g. Wilfred Mellers]. This is illustrated by the statement of fact in ‘Eli’s Song’ (‘Born in the month of June’) and Mitchell’s allusion to the astrological ‘Age of Aquarius’ in ‘Little Green’ (‘Born with the moon in Cancer’) which is rich in iconography, with the moon linking the child to the sexuality of the mother, fertility and birth, Maiden and Mother” (Ibid. 85–86).

The straightforward framing of the genders as a binary opposition based on the feminine as such being based on intuition and feelings comes across as hippie gibberish at best, and not a viable description of “femininity” in any way. One notable exception to this would be in a context of Joni Mitchell’s music, where the essentialist idea that femininity equals feelings and intuition seems to take on a normative function, a sort of Moore’s authenticities gone seriously wrong: “This is what it is like to be a woman.” This, in turn, easily becomes a close

relative of the idea that sex is always pervasive, and thus a justification of biological determinism (Moi, 1999) (12, 14).

The idea that Mitchell as a female artist might be operating from “an intuitive, figurative, more ‘felt’ lexicon” also determines the fans’ apprehension of her talent. Mercer, in her often hagiographic work, emphasises that Mitchell “didn’t have formal musical training and never learned to read music”, a trait that, to Mercer, secures that Mitchell’s musical vocabulary is “purely expressionistic, with emotions or ideas taking the form of ‘weird chords’ or ‘chords of inquiry,’ as she calls them” (2012: 106). This notion of artistic purity – the self-taught genius who intuitively reaches listeners with her music – is portrayed by Mercer as something Mitchell had to fight for: “She never studied music theory, and carefully maintained her musical illiteracy while listening to and absorbing work of great sophistication” which in turn enabled her to “make music in which every note and word is spirited and shaped by feeling” (Ibid. 109). This is especially interesting in an analysis of Marit Larsen’s persona, as Larsen’s story of sitting beneath her mother’s piano and absorbing music is not too far removed from this depiction of the allegedly perfectly untrained – and therefore perfectly authentic – singer-songwriter. Two points of observation arise from this: First, that this dream of the pure creative artist resembles the girl next door in the emphasis on naivety. Second, that the untrained artist is situated as exceptionally vulnerable to critique – that is, as an artist one cannot critique, since she does not understand the language of the critic. In this sense, Mercer also inadvertently points to the underdog nature of vulnerability, a trait that is not out of place in the context of Larsen’s persona.

The point I am arriving at is this: any ideas about the ostensible “truth”, “honesty” or “authenticity” conveyed on *Blue* are contingent on context and situation, notably as an example of popular music. To any listener, the meaning(s) of Mitchell’s songs on *Blue* are always already made available through popular culture.⁸¹ As such, the record provides a relevant example of

⁸¹ This is arguably a trait that informs Larsen’s own understanding of the album as well. Stating in at least one interview that Mitchell’s song “My Old Man” is about Graham Nash, a knowledge

how ideas of authenticity are constructed, and how we can identify links between understandings of gender and acts of assigning meaning to music.

Judging from the studies conducted by Hinton, Mercer, and Whiteley, it might seem as if, by sleight of hand, Mitchell created the template for “honesty” in popular music with *Blue*. There is a logic to this that may not be entirely out of place. We need to remember that Mitchell is of the generation of artists that in reality invented the singer-songwriter, and shaped it to their needs; Mitchell’s identity politics and the ways in which she negotiates her persona through the music are so convincing on *Blue* in no small part because she is a pioneer in the field. Markers of authenticity in demeanour, dress, and interview statements as well as in the music, lyrics, and voice have seemingly been made universally available by artists of Mitchell’s generation. For an artist such as Marit Larsen, then, the groundwork done by singer-songwriters such as Mitchell, Carole King, James Taylor and, arguably, Johnny Cash has delineated the field and provided her with the means to theatricalise her persona in certain ways.

From this, I want to identify two important strategies that Larsen employs in her construction of her persona as singer-songwriter. One is the discourse of truth and honesty that surrounds Mitchell’s work, allowing Larsen to riff on the same mythology, as when she suggests that she has to “write from the heart” (Giske, 2008). The other is the oscillation between modes of authenticity, which Larsen has utilised throughout her career, both in a general, gradual move from first-person to second-person authenticity in her way of hinting at personal experiences that may inform the lyrics and more specifically in interviews, where ostensibly personal stories about her exercise program or the music she listens to are followed by statements that she “wants to keep her private life to herself” so that listeners “may have the pleasure of making up their own stories when they hear my songs”.

that is not imparted in the song’s lyrics or anywhere on the album, Larsen also perceives lyric lines such as “He’s a walker in the rain, he’s a dancer in the dark” as “written directly for him” and thus ostensibly signifying Nash (Kyddland 2011). Here, we may understand Larsen as applying hearsay or even celebrity gossip to her understanding of the song in order to imbue it with meaning; the implication is that there is but one possible interpretation of the song, and that this has to start with biographical facts about the person behind the pop star.

Dreams of America (1): Marit Larsen and Elwood Caine

Bridging the gap between M2M and the onset of Larsen's solo career is the bluegrass band Elwood Caine, which was active between 2003 and 2008. Consisting of Ture Janson (mandolin), Ketil Aasen (double bass), Marius Graff (banjo and vocals), his cousin Håvard Graff (violin), and Larsen herself on guitar and vocals, and styling themselves as a band performing in "a traditional bluegrass and hillbilly style with roots going back to the thirties and forties",⁸² Elwood Caine was originally the result of Larsen's and fellow Norwegian Marius Graff's discovery of traditional American musics, an experience that would also have an impact on Larsen's own music. As the band's history has never been sufficiently documented, and information on the Internet is sparse at best, I have chosen to include a historical overview here.⁸³

Graff, who was hired on Larsen's recommendation as the guitarist for M2M's live band in 2002, credits that band's bassist with introducing him to a wealth of Country & Western and bluegrass music during the subsequent tour. In addition, the Coen Brothers film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* had recently become a critical and commercial success, and brought performers such as Ralph Stanley, a former member of seminal bluegrass act The Stanley Brothers, back into the public eye. Graff considers the Stanley Brothers, along with the Kentucky mandolinist and bandleader Bill Monroe (whose band The Blue Grass Boys originated the term "bluegrass") and Flatt & Scruggs (who were both members of Monroe's band prior to achieving success as a duo), as his main source of inspiration for Elwood Caine. In 2003, some months after M2M had returned to Norway after their aborted US tour with Jewel, Graff, who had also acquired his first banjo while on tour in the US, asked Larsen, who shared his fascination with American traditional music, to join him in establishing a bluegrass band where they could explore their infatuation with this music.

⁸² Last.fm, URL: www.last.fm/music/Elwood+Caine (accessed 13 January 2014).

⁸³ The following sketch of Elwood Caine's history was provided by Marius Graff (personal communication, 5 September 2013).

Both Marius and Håvard Graff⁸⁴ have described Elwood Caine as an informal meeting place where they could explore the music and have fun in the process. Also, most of the band's members did not play their "regular" instrument – Håvard Graff is a jazz pianist, and both Ture Janson and Marius Graff are accomplished guitarists – which contributed to the "circle of friends" feel of the band. The band's repertoire consisted of a range of cover songs, from The Stanley Brothers to The Carter Family and Dolly Parton, as well as a selection of original songs by Håvard Graff, performed in what Marius Graff refers to as "authentic bluegrass style". They played a number of concerts in and around Oslo, as well as producing two demo recordings in 2005, which are still available on the band's MySpace page as of 2014.⁸⁵ Towards the end of the band's existence, as Larsen became occupied with the recording of her second solo album, the band hired stand-ins Silje Hrafa (an accomplished artist in her own right) and Anne Marit Bergheim (of all-girl band Katzenjammer) in her place for a handful of concerts. Even though there has never been a formal announcement of their disbandment, Elwood Caine in effect ceased activity after a warm-up show for The Lovell Sisters in Oslo in the autumn of 2008, shortly before the release of Larsen's second solo album, *The Chase*.

Bound up in notions of authenticity, bluegrass clearly has a transcultural appeal as both fundamentally American – a reminder of the "space on the side of the road" in the story of the USA⁸⁶ – and also immediately accessible because the signifiers are free-floating, ostensibly available to anyone who picks up a banjo or fiddle. This situates bluegrass as a blue-collar alternative to more established, high-grade Country & Western styles such as the Nashville sound; arguably, it

⁸⁴ Håvard Graff, personal communication, 13 June 2013.

⁸⁵ URL: <https://myspace.com/elwoodcaine> (accessed 13 January 2014).

⁸⁶ I borrow the formulation "a space on the side of the road" from the anthropologist Kathleen Stewart, whose book of the same name documents what she sees as "the Other America", a narrative space that acts as background and counterpoint to the myth of the US as a symbol of modernity and progress, exemplified by the small Appalachian mining communities in West Virginia that are slowly drained of people by depopulation and the dismantling of the local mining industry. Stewart refers to this space as "the site of an opening or reopening into the story of America" (Stewart, 1996) (3), a perception that also generates a sense of authenticity in its function as the silent underdog of the glamorous America. I am grateful to Anita Høyvik for this reference.

also informs Marit Larsen's later underdog solo persona by dint of its homespun nature.

How is bluegrass made accessible? Trent Hill formulates three features that are emphasised by construction of tradition in country music: continuity in time, contiguity in space, and cultural consensus (Hill, 2002) (170–171). Continuity in time, which purportedly provides a direct lineage between old-time fiddlers and modern country stars, recalls Allan F. Moore's third person authenticity in its grounding of the music's validity in an ostensibly naturally occurring tradition. Contiguity in space has similar links to third person authenticity in that it brings up "a general tendency in American culture to identify country music with the southern and western United States" (Ibid. 171) and specific sites such as the Grand Ole Opry, a stronghold of the stylish Country & Western aesthetics that contrast bluegrass as more easily accessible "music of the people". This point is further developed as part of cultural consensus: the construction of tradition in country music portrays "tradition" as "a collective and real social form ... something that is 'handed down' through musical and institutional lineages and negotiated in a variety of discursive and social processes" (Ibid.). Despite the impression of a band that happened more or less by chance, Elwood Caine appears to tick all of these boxes.

Adding to this is the connection with the singer-songwriter movement. As Gillian Mitchell argues, the North American folk music revival movement took a shine to bluegrass, an interest that "was crucially bound up with 'a sense of place', a sense of regional diversity" (2007: 13). Reaching an apex in the 1960s and continuing throughout the 1970s, the interest of the revivalists in specific styles such as bluegrass "was also shaped by certain preconceptions and biases", such as a disdain for "contemporary country music for its electric instrumentation and blatant commercialism", and thus considered "only Bluegrass to be a viable genre because it employed acoustic instruments" (Ibid. 104), an attitude that foreshadows Marit Larsen's ambivalence towards the "show-business" side of the music industry in the aftermath of M2M. Joti Rockwell sees the revivalists' attitude to bluegrass as in line with Bill Monroe's efforts as a bandleader to

“construct and sustain a sound that conformed to his own aesthetic sensibilities while advancing his career; and the project of defining bluegrass as a type of music that, in theory, anyone could play” (Rockwell, 2012) (365). In terms of the aesthetics of the folk music revivalists, this was picked up as an idealisation of the traditional genre of bluegrass, which was also expressly linked to the idea of the genre’s original performers as untutored musical virtuosi, “admired for their ethnic and cultural ‘authenticity’” (G. Mitchell, 2007) (105). Mitchell further suggests that this is exemplary of “the left-wing sympathy for the workers, and the students’ idealisation of the poor people they desired to help” (Ibid.). The authenticity of such “poor people” would in turn possibly inform a view of bluegrass as the underdog’s music, and thus a relevant addition to the framework of Marit Larsen’s project.

I would suggest that Elwood Caine happened as a confluence of several factors: the relative accessibility of bluegrass in the age of music reissues, the “continuity in time” (and subsequent “authenticity”) of Marius Graff’s introduction to this music through an American colleague, the global impact of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, the lure of Americana mythology that informs the above factors, and the effect of singer-songwriters and folksingers on Marit Larsen’s burgeoning solo career.⁸⁷ Notions of authenticity run through all this; so, too, do ideas of American music and, arguably, of the mythology of the USA as “the promised land” and American culture as transculturally hegemonic and accessible.

This last point is emphasised by the band’s own use of cultural markers that connote “America”.⁸⁸ The Stanley Brothers’ song “White Dove”, which Elwood

⁸⁷ Larsen frequently cites US Americana singer Gillian Welch as a source of inspiration. It is worth noting that Welch is one of several contemporary Americana artists who appear on the soundtrack to *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, notably on the song “I’ll Fly Away” together with Alison Krauss, another influential artist in the field that also encompasses present-day bluegrass music.

⁸⁸ “America” has been used as a synonym for the United States by Norwegian emigrants at least since the beginning of the 20th century. Siv Ringdal extensively documents the trans-Atlantic travels of workers from Lista, in the southernmost region of Norway, to Brooklyn during two distinct periods – after each of the World Wars – in order to find work in the US. A great number returned home after a while, bringing goods and lifestyle from the new world back to the old country. Ringdal, who chronicles the resulting changes on a local level, points out that the American influence made its mark on everything from people’s choice of cars and refrigerators to

Caine recorded, tells of a family in Virginia (or, as rendered in both the original and Elwood Caine's version, "ol' Virginny"); on their Last.fm web site, Elwood Caine states that their music "evokes imagery of the plains of Kentucky to the mighty Appalachian Mountains". This is underpinned by the band photo, which is sepia-tinted and shows several band members in hats and clothing that connote a bluegrass (or country) aesthetic (Håvard Graff, perhaps inadvertently, even goes so far as to strike a bow-legged "cowboy" pose); the prominent theatrical display of "American" style is certainly in line with the music. Marius Graff asserts that this was not a conscious decision, and that even though they did dress up "to a certain degree", this was not planned beforehand: it was more a case of stylistic traits that "just came with the music" (and possibly vice versa).⁸⁹ Be that as it may, the band's employment of theatricalised Americana does not look out of place, partly because of the ubiquity of US popular culture, partly because the variants of "America" to which young Norwegian musicians have access are so manifold and complex. In Larsen's case, the variety of US influences ranges from Paul Auster and The Flaming Lips to Dolly Parton and The Stanley Brothers,⁹⁰ a diversity that situates bluegrass simultaneously as a piece of "authentic" Americana and one course among many on the menu of American popular cultural artefacts.

At any rate, we need to be aware that Americana connotes authenticity in quite specific ways for a transcultural audience. As a traditional (read: authentic) artefact from a long gone (read: mythological) era in US cultural history, bluegrass, *qua* Americana music, exerts an enormously strong pull on virtually any consumer of US popular culture across the globe. Being both remote and with a certain proximity in time,⁹¹ bluegrass grants listeners access to American

how they spoke, with American English words and phrases still permeating the regional dialect in the private as well as the public sphere (Ringdal, 2002) (242–43).

⁸⁹ Marius Graff, *ibid.*

⁹⁰ These names are among a number of artists, authors, and composers that Larsen mentions as sources of inspiration on her official Facebook web page. The entire list of influences was reproduced in an interview with Larsen in *Morgenbladet* coinciding with the launch of *The Chase* in 2008. See Gundersen, Bjarne Riiser (2008): "Små ord om store ting", *Morgenbladet* 17 October 2008, p. 30–31.

⁹¹ According to *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, bluegrass as a style "grew in the 1940s from the music of Bill Monroe and his group, the Blue Grass Boys", and the repertoire "includes traditional folk-songs but is dominated by newly composed music – sentimentally

mythologies via markers such as acoustic instruments, folk music roots, and a pervasive influence on present-day popular music performers from Ryan Adams to Gillian Welch. One important function of the bluegrass connection via Elwood Caine is that it grants Larsen access to a large portion of the American mythologies that inform her music, in part with an element of authenticity, in part with musical signifiers that inform her overall musical expression.

Underpinning this is the fact that Elwood Caine was in the vanguard of a short-lived bluegrass revival in Norway in the mid-2000s, which also included bands such as Ila Auto (who have since achieved chart success) and the now-defunct Holstein United Bluegrass Boys. As Marius Graff sees it, bluegrass grew in popularity among young Norwegian musicians in the first years after the turn of the millennium, resulting in a small revival of which Elwood Caine was a part. He attributes this to the effect of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, which for a brief period turned bluegrass into “hip, urban music” for young people. At the height of this revival, the concert venue Parkteatret, in Oslo’s gentrified district of Grünerløkka, hosted a bluegrass festival, something that, Graff asserts, would likely never have happened before the success of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*. As the hype passed, bluegrass once more retreated to the margins of Oslo’s music life; however, Graff also concurs that the effect of the post-millennial hype made its mark on Larsen’s own music.

One relevant example is the song “Only A Fool”, from *Under the Surface*. Released in 2006, while Larsen was still a member of Elwood Caine, the song utilises markers of bluegrass and generic Americana music, but hardly in a straightforward or directly nostalgic way. Rather, Larsen employs free-floating

reminiscent secular songs, religious spirituals and revival hymns and instrumental numbers” (Rosenberg, 1980) (812). Rockwell quotes Rosenberg’s later work on bluegrass, where he observes that “... although music now widely considered to be bluegrass existed in the mid-1940s, the term ‘bluegrass’ didn’t begin to circulate until about a decade later” (quoted in Rockwell 2012: 364). This would expose any use of the term in conjunction with *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* as premature: Middleton writes of the irony that “in the late 1930s, this sound [the full bluegrass band sound] did not yet exist (although most of its constituent features did) and the label ‘bluegrass’ had not yet been invented” (Middleton, 2007) (61). Middleton’s article provides a pertinent memento that bluegrass, whose authenticity bands such as Elwood Caine would perhaps understand as resting on its status as “old” music, is in fact just as “modern” as most other country music variants today, and certainly a product of modernity.

signifiers of bluegrass, which are anchored in a densely layered, recognisably modern popular music sound. Together, these elements engender an "impure" mix of elements compared to the stricter boundaries of bluegrass, which Larsen uses to her own ends, chiefly to create an endearing persona and an attractive mix of musical styles.

The song, in the key of D major, has an allegro, mid-tempo beat. Banjo (played by Marius Graff) and mandolin (played by Larsen herself), instruments that also featured in *Elwood Caine*, are prominent throughout, and the bass plays a simple line alternating between tonic and dominant, or root and fifth, significant of so much country music. Larsen adds to this a number of features significant of popular music history. The presence of a mellotron easily recalls The Beatles; as does the double-tracked voice. An electric piano plays figures that resemble honky tonk, albeit in a modern, electrified version, while Larsen's use of harmonica hints at Bob Dylan in his role as folksinger. The employment of a slide whistle in the song's bridge, arguably also reminiscent of Dylan and the use of an acme siren on the album *Highway 61 Revisited*, creates a comical effect that could well be perceived as working against the gravity of the lyrics; it might be a point in itself for Larsen to entertain the listener rather than to tell a serious story. In this respect, the dense, studio-created piece of music sounds anything but subtle; rather, the abundance of melodic elements, such as swelling cinematic strings, comes across as banal, purposely overstating and theatricalising the song's narrative.

The lyrics tell a story of the end of a relationship, in the shape of a protagonist's response to a now former fiancé's complaints. It is also arguably a display of self-confidence and newly rediscovered subjectivity: Starting with the antagonist's words ("So you say I need to consider this ...") set to a bouncy, lightweight backing of banjo, mandolin, and stomping drums, the protagonist takes over the conversation ("Well, I say ...") as the bass comes in, anchoring the singer's words with a welcome gravity. The song develops into the protagonist's response to the antagonist's reproach, plainly stating that "only a fool" would "let you back in".

A defining moment is discernible in the final line of the chorus, “Isn’t it only fair that you try and let it go”. Ending the first chorus, this line provides a *de facto* moment of clarity as the crowded band sound is omitted; only banjo and mandolin accompany the voice, asserting the protagonist’s stance and interpellating the antagonist to “let it go”. In the line’s reappearance in the second chorus, bass and drums join in as well, emphasising the protagonist’s agency on words such as “fair” and “try”.

Lyrics and vocal performance also signal a noticeable ambiguity. This is in part significant of a negotiation of subjectivity, as when the protagonist states that, “I’ve been changing after what you put me through” – obviously for the better – in the second bridge. However, the lyrics also contain one of Larsen’s most puzzling lines. In the chorus, she states that, “I was armed with the faith of a child”. This certainly recalls the stereotype of the child-figure as a characteristic of Larsen’s persona – a figure that can be both disarming and empowering. The image of the child’s faith as something with which you arm yourself – as part of a person’s arsenal – can possibly be interpreted as the child’s defence against the adult world of love and loss, and thus against having your heart broken. This brings to mind Jacqueline Warwick’s term “girlness”, which she employs in her discussion of 1960s girl groups. In Warwick’s work, *girlness* is different from *girlhood* in that it denotes “a set of behaviours and attributes available to females at any time during their lives”, and in that “children as well as adult women (and men, for that matter) can adopt a girly manner for strategic purposes” (2007: 3).

In this sense, Larsen’s vocal costume takes on the function as both mask and protection. The ambiguity that such a device generates is further reinforced by the display of Larsen’s awkward persona, signified by clumsy accent and syntax, as in the line “Yours was the choice to stay away from her”, where “away” is pronounced as a trochee rather than the expected iambus. This is a trait that Larsen employs in several songs, and that might well signify as a quirky, and thus endearing, trait of her persona.

While “Only A Fool” may well be interpreted as a straightforward country pastiche, the song is arguably characterised by tension. The apparent gravity of the lyrics is rendered ambiguous by elements of comedy, such as the slide whistle. Signifiers of bluegrass – the sparse rhythm section, banjo and mandolin, and, by extension, the voice – contrast the densely layered pop music. Overall, Larsen’s singing style does not differ notably from the style of her other songs. Nevertheless, in what cannot be overlooked as a calculated move, her voice sounds “untrained” here, and thus dogmatically “authentic”: employing an ambitus from low G to high A, Larsen’s voice loses power and becomes but a whisper in the low register and strains (with an added nasal quality) in the high register, in addition to sliding up to the high A on the word “fool” in the outro, thus avoiding a direct hit on the note.

The internal set of contrasts can also be read as a theatrical move, as exemplified by the smugness that characterises Larsen’s persona: she sings to the antagonist that “mine was the smile that you broke”, but her smile is as good as audible throughout. The elements of bluegrass and other Americana, then, can thus be seen to confirm that the song is chiefly a vehicle for Larsen’s voice, which sounds “untrained”, and thus connotes a “homespun” authenticity that is indisputably a part of her appeal.

Dreams of America (2): Marit Larsen in New York City

Marit Larsen’s work with Elwood Caine flags up another salient aspect of her persona, namely how she projects her experience of the world – and of the US in particular. As part of the launch of Larsen’s third album, *Spark*, in the autumn of 2011, she spoke in interviews of her recent seven-month stay in New York City, where she wrote the bulk of the material for the album. After what she refers to as “a forced attempt at vacation” (Fotland, 2011), when she allegedly tried to just “be in Oslo with my friends, drink wine, attend festivals, do nothing, just have a good time” (Førsund, 2011), the music came in the way: “I had not written any music in two years, I was famished. And then, I could not manage to be – ordinary” (ibid.). Her solution was to go to New York City for half a year, where

she got the musical ideas out of her system; after this, she “came home and had six months in Oslo where I *really* could be present in people’s lives” (Falkenberg-Arell, 2012) (emphasis in original).

These variants come across as well-rehearsed renditions of the same story, fit for print. Both together and separately, they tell a tale at once intelligible and dreamlike, ordinary and enchanting: the pop star goes abroad, getting away from it all in order to write new songs. What makes this story interesting in the context of my thesis is the balancing act that Larsen sustains. She appears to be giving the reader a glimpse of a pop star’s everyday life, telling about how she would start her days “writing and recording songs, thinking, and drinking morning coffee” (Kydland, 2011) – a life that resembles the start of anyone’s working day, apart from the creative work that distinguishes her. In the same breath, she seems to tell of going to the US for half a year as an everyday thing for her; in an effortless gesture, she turns an adventurous move (living in the US) into an act of ordinariness, mirroring her friends’ “normality”.

This is evident in one of Larsen’s most beguiling tricks, whereby she makes the pop star persona resemble her peers, thus providing her persona with an almost transparent authenticity: the illusion she creates is that there is no illusion. The story of the stay in New York City neatly demarcates both her striving for a “normal” life and what separates her life as a pop star from her friends (and her audience). She maintains the pop subjectivity – the flamboyant persona who has the means to go to New York City on a whim, and stay there for several months – at the same time as she tells of her love for her friends, and their normality as something she can return to without much effort.

The way she pulls this off suggests a clever construction of authenticity: She portrays ordinary life as something that her friends have, and that, consequently, she has access to. At the same time, she tells of song writing as a vocation, indeed a calling – she *has* to do this (and she has the means to do it). This echoes her standardised phrases in interviews when she launched her previous album in 2008, such as “Without my music, I am nothing” and “I have to write from the

heart” (Giske, 2008). This clearly resembles Moore’s first person authenticity, in that the artist purportedly tells the audience about “what it is like to be me”. By depicting her own (extraordinary) life as a pop star as a separate sphere, from which she is nevertheless able to return to her (ordinary) friends when the work with the music is over, she seems to claim a part in normality while simultaneously keeping it at arm’s length. This is exemplary of Joseph Roach’s theorisation of the “it” factor of celebrities as “the power of apparently effortless embodiment of contradictory qualities simultaneously: strength *and* vulnerability, innocence *and* experience, and singularity *and* typicality among them” (Roach, 2007) (8, emphasis in original). To this end, the greatest trick of Larsen is to portray her pop star persona as that of an everyday person – at once singular and typical – and to make the press and audience buy “it”.

The flamboyance of New York City is not to be underestimated: As home to globally successful TV series such as *Friends* and *Seinfeld* and visual backdrop in an abundance of films, as well as the home of the writer Paul Auster, whom Larsen has called her “favourite author” (Kydland, 2011),⁹² it is a site of fascination and adventure for many Norwegians. One interviewer also appropriately refers to the city as “every music enthusiast’s Mecca” (Falkenberg-Arell, 2011), and points out that “it was a dream that came true” when Larsen “packed her largest suitcase” and moved there.⁹³ The reason for choosing New York City, then, is evidently more complex than just the “necessity” Larsen initially speaks of.

⁹² Paul Auster is widely regarded as one of the most distinct American writers today, and also has a considerable audience in European countries, including Norway. The Norwegian psychiatrist and writer Finn Skårderud has suggested that part of Auster’s appeal lies in the simplicity, “the banal observation and the refined human experience, which thematically grapples with the biggest questions” (Skårderud, 2004) (85). The idea of banality in Auster’s work, as exemplified by the everyday observations in his manuscripts for the films *Smoke* and *Blue in the Face* in the mid-1990s, stands in contrast to Marit Larsen’s own work, where she purports to put common yet universal experiences into words, and banality is employed to similar ends, but with different results.

⁹³ This image of New York City as a locus of dreams echoes Ringdal’s analysis of migrants from Norway to the US in the early 20th century; workers whose motivation was “a mix of adventurousness and necessity” when there was a shortage of jobs in Norway (2002: 31). In the light of this, Larsen’s choice of New York City as a refuge for song-writing is at once rooted in older ideas of “the promised land” and indicative of the modern luxury that she, as both a Norwegian and a pop artist, can amply afford.

The choice of this specific city is probably no coincidence either. In the visual history of fashion as well as film, New York City has come to signify glamour more than almost any other city in the world: As Virginia Postrel suggests, thanks to the imaginative re-creations of the city in the 1930s by “writers exiled from Manhattan to Hollywood”, “New York gradually displaced Paris as the touchstone of glamorous urbanity” (Postrel, 2013) (172). This displacement, without a doubt, also contributed to making the image of the city universally available because of the distance between the city itself and the “exiles”. Consequently, “a composite ‘dream city’ arose from films set in New York” (Ibid. 180); the notion of “dream” is crucial here.

The idea of glamorous urbanity also raises the question of how Larsen’s stay in the city would inform the pop artist’s subjectivity. In his investigation into music and urban geography, Adam Krims points out that “cities form the crucible for new cultural practices, as they always have done” (Krims, 2010) (70). Looking at music as part of the *design* of modern urban spaces, Krims suggests that, “just as urban cities focus innovation in aesthetic practices, so the appearances of new urban subjects and subjectivities take on enhanced social significance” (Ibid. 70–71). He sees the emergence of the young female singer-songwriter in the late 1990s as one such platform for subjectivity, notably in the appearance of Vonda Shepard in the TV series *Ally McBeal* and the music’s interplay with the intimate view of the protagonist: “As soon as the television series had become a hit, the female singer-songwriter’s constitution of the urban woman’s subjectivity had been established internationally” (Ibid. 72). When Larsen states the reason for her choice of New York City as being that “I have always felt attracted to the city”,⁹⁴ then, it speaks less of her own choice than of a larger discourse of pop subjectivities. Her move to New York City (and her subsequent return to Oslo) lends itself to an interpretation of female urban subjectivity as it has been brought to her audiences through the screen of popular culture since Larsen’s M2M days.

⁹⁴ Aas, Anne-Lill (2012): “Sparer hemmelighetene til sangene”, *ibid.*

How is this discernible in the music? On the resulting album, *Spark*, Larsen makes no direct references to New York City, but several songs are certainly characterised by a more urban sound than on her previous albums. In “Coming Home”, the album’s first single, she uses piano and electric guitar rather than the first two albums’ choice of acoustic instruments such as mandolin and banjo; “What If”, with a spacious piano-and-strings arrangement over bass and drums that draw on trip hop, comes close to Portishead; “Don’t Move” has layers of electric guitar and synthesizer, an insistent beat, and lavish strings. This way, she can be seen to replace the quirky elements of her early albums with a more streamlined sound that prepares the ground for a broader, more urban appeal.

Traces of an urban subjectivity are arguably most obvious in one of her earlier songs, “This Is Me, This Is You”, from *The Chase* (2008). Against a band backing of acoustic instruments (piano, harpsichord, celesta) augmented with lap steel guitar and a cinematic (read: banal) string arrangement, Larsen sings of the break-up of a relationship in a decidedly urban context, as in this excerpt from the first verse:

Your skin feels like
Counting the bricks in the city
You temper’s light
Like all the girls in the city

The simile between a loved one’s skin and temper and artefacts of an urban landscape could certainly be read as in line with the female urban subjectivity at play in Larsen’s music, which is arguably a central trait of her appeal. In the image of the bricks (brick houses) in the city, she also explicitly makes a connection to Krims’s theory of music as “blending into the world of design” in urban spaces: the city itself becomes a metaphor for the thoughts and inner feelings of the song’s protagonist, thus contributing to the emergence of “a strong feminised subjectivity” in what becomes an urban music-scape.

The impact of the famous metropolis on her subjectivity also dovetails with the discourse of Larsen’s “cuteness”, of which she must have been well aware at this

point in time. In the story of her stay in “the big apple”, this character trait is given a twist that anchors it in the everyday reality that she appears to hold dear. Discussing the writing process, one interviewer takes up Larsen’s routine of writing music in the morning, and then going out for a walk, listening to the musical sketches on a portable MP3 player in order to sift through them and decide on which ones could be developed further:

She would then find her way to one of the fashionable piano shops on the Upper East Side. Here, she would sit down by a grand piano. She would give the distinguished sales assistants the impression that she was there to purchase [a grand piano], and every 15 minutes, she would ask pertinent questions about shipping, price, delivery time, and suchlike. She then played on, undisturbed, and slowly, the exclusive grand pianos brought her sketches to life. [...] If she felt that she had worn out her welcome in one shop, she went ahead to the next one. (Førsund, 2011)

The image of the bestselling pop artist, disguised as an “ordinary” customer, who tricks the “distinguished” staff of a “fashionable” Upper East Side shop is certainly indicative of the playfulness that lies behind Larsen’s figures such as the housewife – and of Larsen’s acting skills. Even more importantly, it is also a blatant display of fake naivety. Pretending to be an (adult) customer, Larsen utilises the charm of the girl-child, employing a wide-eyed innocence that comes across as “at once beguiling and vulnerable” (Walkerdine, 1997) (2) and as a product of Larsen’s employment of “girlness”, which differs from “girlhood” in that it is “a set of behaviors and attributes available to females at any time during their lives” (Warwick, 2007: 3). The resulting figure has cultural resonance in a number of female roles in film – and I would include here Audrey Hepburn as well as Shirley Temple (regarding the class of the “distinguished” clerk, there is likely also a hint of Little Orphan Annie here). In Larsen’s use of fake naivety, there may also well be an element of the untrained (authentic) artist fooling the agents of high culture: the idea of distinction that allows her to talk about the “distinguished sales assistant” places her on the other side of this demarcation line, namely, on the side of her fans who perceive her cuteness as “natural”.

Lest we forget, such naivety works on at least two levels: Larsen’s own story as she tells it to the journalist, and the journalist’s rendering of that story. As such,

it probably does not matter how the original situation played out. It is Larsen's re-telling of it, and the journalist's (probably uncritical) rendering of the story in the third person (as if he were actually there, not intruding), that confirm the reader's impression of her "cuteness", which she employs to fool the "distinguished" adults. This reminds us that any employment of fake naivety by the artist is simultaneously contingent on the co-operation of the mediator (in this case, the journalist).

All this suggests a careful re-launch of Larsen's persona. Now older and more worldly-wise, she hints at a process of maturity that can also be interpreted as contrary to "settling down". She takes on the world – and what could be more apt than the iconic metropolis of New York City, immortalised through popular culture in innumerable films, books, and songs? This way, she can also be seen to attempt to write her own story into a larger narrative: not necessarily in an Anglo-American context (although a well-documented New York City sojourn certainly looks good on any pop artist's résumé), but equally to her European audiences. As Larsen's project may well be interpreted as an attempt to construct and sell Americana to European audiences, her now well-publicised familiarity with New York City sits well with her globalised, transcultural persona as a signifier of both artistic development and an avoidance of stagnation.

(Un)settling the pop score: Of other readings

In a short segment towards the end of the video for "If A Song Could Get Me You", we see Larsen looking straight into the camera, wielding a bass guitar in a belligerent fashion and making a face that suggests challenge rather than docility or compliance (3:15) (figure 3.6). Even though there is, in principle, nothing in this image that departs from the display of the girl-child persona in the video, the image could be interpreted as exceeding the limits of this figure, in that it poses a challenge to the spectator, or even offers a moment's disclosure of the artist's power. At any rate, the idea of Larsen's persona pandering only to "the male gaze" does not suffice for understanding this image. The question arises, then: Whose gaze is she meeting head on?



Figure 3.6. Marit Larsen with bass guitar in the video for "If A Song Could Get Me You".

Theorising the gaze also invites a critical consideration of just how Larsen is to be looked at. So far, I have chosen to read Larsen's project as building on strategies of heteronormativity; but this also begs questions about its discontents, and their implications for comprehending Larsen's project.

This pertains not least to Larsen's own employment of the gaze in her songs. One relevant example is found in the song "Have You Ever" (from *Spark*), where the narrative revolves around the protagonist who watches a happy couple from a distance, fantasising about breaking the woman's heart in order to win her boyfriend. The narrative of the lyrics remains open to interpretation as to whether the protagonist would actually want her fantasy to come true, or whether she is just as comfortable remaining in her reverie about perfect love, gazing at the two lovebirds and imagining their life together. If we read the latter alternative through Mulvey's model, it would align the protagonist with the position of a peeping Tom (Chaudhuri, 2006) (34), whose satisfaction is wholly dependent on looking – being touched from a distance, as it were – and which also has implications for the listener, who is thereby placed in a framework of voyeurism (Kerton, 2006) (158).

This opens for a debate on the discontents of Larsen's project, the factors that contrast and thus shape her persona. A queer reading of a song such as "Have

You Ever”, for example, would highlight the possibility that the narrator is somehow off rather than straight (read: heteronormative). But, why might this be relevant to Larsen’s project? The answer to this question can be formulated as a counter-question: Why should Larsen’s music and persona not also be attractive to any listener – and, in this case, spectator – who does not share the persona’s presumed preferences?

This is a particularly salient question, as it opens for a reading of Larsen’s use of female stereotypes and how they accommodate humour and irony. Above all, her employment of the stock character of the housewife, when interpreted as having ironic intent, can also come across as a send-up of sorts. This suggests that the seductive power of Larsen’s persona is not in any way confined to the listeners who harbour nostalgic dreams of old-fashioned gender division and housewifery, nor to any longing for the pre-sexual arcadia of the child. Larsen’s use of female stereotypes seemingly fix her persona so that only one reading is possible – the artist as “cute” and natural. Observing the fluidity of the construction, however, provides us with an opportunity to disentangle the seemingly fixed elements.

On the face of it, Larsen’s pop subjectivity easily comes across to the viewer as an idealised female figure: sexy yet unspoiled, talented yet cute, endearing without being demanding. Because of the heteronormative thrust of the female stereotypes she employs, there may not be anything in Larsen’s persona that could possibly signify as queer. Indeed, there may not be anything there but the picture-perfect heterosexual artist persona who sustains her image crucially by keeping everyone and everything at a distance in order to keep up a convincing appearance. Nevertheless, the very presence of non-straight gazes among her fans⁹⁵ suggests that there are more ways to read Larsen than the obvious

⁹⁵ One obvious example is openly gay blogger Perez Hilton’s plugging of “If A Song Could Get Me You” in the autumn of 2008: “You can’t watch this video and help but instantly fall in love with Marit Larsen”. URL: <http://perezhilton.com/2008-09-25-watch-listen-our-new-favorite#sthash.xEHgbkH1.iULeY0SB.dpbs> (accessed 15 December 2013). On a different note, the blogger “jetgirl” promoted Larsen’s music as early as 2006. Even though she only writes about the music, “jetgirl” also states on her biography page on the blog that she has been “Making Girls Gay Since 1987” and warns readers: “[d]on’t friend me if you don’t love GAY, in all forms”.

“straight” one, whether through the gaze of the researcher or the straight (male) fan, and that the Larsen persona also has an impact in queer spaces.

Why would this matter? Two instances can help in answering this question. In her investigation into “women’s music” and lesbian identity, Barbara Bradby asks the pertinent question, “Does it matter who is singing?” She finds that pop music, as open to appropriation, enables listeners to “make the necessary transfers”, so that for example, women in a lesbian bar can listen to allegedly “sexist” music and make use of the adherent pleasures (Bradby, 1995) (39). From this, she suggests that, “the actual identity of the performer is not what is important, but the ability to create fantasies around that identity” (Ibid. 41). This does not mean that identity is unimportant, but, rather, that it does matter who is singing, but “not in any one, straightforward way” (Ibid. 43). This is not too far removed from Susan Fast’s investigation into Led Zeppelin’s concert film, *The Song Remains The Same*. Fast analyses the visual pleasure a female fan takes in watching the guitarist Jimmy Page in performance, and, reading this in the light of both Laura Mulvey’s and Judith Butler’s theories, makes valid points about how this situation reverses the gaze and also, notably, how “the guitar and Page’s relationship with it may not be perceived strictly as a metaphor for the male sex: the very sight of guitar and body rubbing together is sensuous, regardless of whether one construes the guitar as phallic or Page as a man” (Fast, 2001) (186, emphasis in original). These examples highlight the fluidity of the construction of Larsen’s persona, a construction that, lest we forget, goes on “both from the point of view of the originator, for example the musicians themselves, but also from the receiver, for example us as the audience” (Steinskog, 2008) (159). From this, it becomes apparent that neither artist nor audience can be fixed, nor restricted to any one exhaustive understanding.

I would also maintain that Larsen’s distance to her fans via her persona allows for countless other readings, as there are no discernible personal traits in her

URL: <http://jetgirl78.livejournal.com/54531.html> (accessed 15 December 2013). While this may not tell us anything other than how the Internet offers ample opportunity to stage one’s self in any desirable way, these examples support the suggestion that Marit Larsen’s persona may have a broader appeal that is not confined to the unambiguously heteronormative listener.

persona that give us cause for drawing conclusions about the person behind the mask. This is of vital importance to myself as a listener, spectator, and researcher. During my analysis of Larsen, I am always in the position of the male spectator. Therefore, envisioning other subject-positions than my own obvious one is not only useful, but also necessary, in order to avoid fixing and essentialising Larsen's persona in any way.

The lure of banality: "Under the Surface"

In closing, I want to turn to one of the most interesting traits of Larsen's music, namely that of banality. For all intents and purposes, I propose a close reading of the title track from *Under the Surface*, one of Larsen's most widely known songs, and also one of the richest examples of banality in her work.

As a central component of Larsen's persona, banality emerges through the effort she makes in portraying herself as a "perfectly normal" person, one example being her characterisation of herself as "having no image", but just "being who she is". She has also declared herself to be quite a "nerd", who takes delight in reading textbooks on old Norse languages rather than cultivating a rock star lifestyle on the road (Gonsholt, 2006); what is more, she depicts this nerdy quality as a salvation at the end of the day – the nerdy ones "were not the coolest kids in school, but we are victorious in the end" (Ibid.). Here, she portrays nerdiness not only as a central facet of her own rise to stardom, but also as a universal quality that supposedly anchors her as a "normal", principally insignificant person who just happens to have made it in the music world. This quality also becomes a fairy-tale aspect that justifies her own trials and tribulations in the "fake" world of teen pop stardom with M2M, an experience that is also employed to put her solo artist persona in a favourable light.

Clearly, the girl-next-door role adds a dimension to this aspect of Larsen's persona. By emphasising her purported ordinariness, Larsen portrays herself as a type of young adult woman which can be found virtually anywhere in the Western world. The visual presentation of the pop artist, as documented in the

videos for “Don’t Save Me” and “If A Song Could Get Me You”, underpins this point. Here, we see both the supposedly unglamorous young woman and a lack of any stylised choreography, a lack that in turn opens for everyday situations that make Larsen appear so “normal” as to be bordering on the banal.

The absence of flamboyant or spectacular conduct in the music, as well as the visuals, further sustains this point. Larsen’s singing voice and the influence of stage musicals and Hollywood film scores in her string arrangements generate a reassuringly predictable musical output, which is made accessible to the listener through simple, deceptively banal melodies. Rather than hampering the listening experience, however, this may just as well enhance the pleasure for the listener. As Stan Hawkins suggests in his studies of the appeal of the Pet Shop Boys, pleasures are made available to us as listeners through “banal features, such as easily memorable arrangements, simple chord progressions, overkill glittering orchestral arrangements, catchy bass lines and flirtatious rhythmic and lyrical hooks that really capture the thrill in their expression” (2002: 141). This is especially applicable to understanding the appeal of Larsen’s music. While Larsen and the Pet Shop Boys might employ musical codes of banality to quite different ends, all the above characteristics, identified by Hawkins, apply to Larsen’s music as well.

Thus, I want to start by suggesting that it is precisely the banality of Larsen’s persona that generates its appeal. Global popular culture regularly provides its audiences with spectacular, larger-than-life Anglo-American female artists – think of Beyoncé, Rihanna, and Lady Gaga, not to speak of Britney Spears, Christina Aguilera, or Madonna. In such a spectacular musical context, the audience can easily take a fancy to the artist who appears as “ordinary”. On the one hand, Marit Larsen, with her employment of traits such as the nostalgic housewife, the quirky girl next door and the girl-child, is a pertinent example. On the other hand, this figure is by no means new to the pop music world, as we can identify a strand of the “ordinary” in popular music performers at least since the Beatles, who cultivated an image as working-class boys from Liverpool while rising to global fame in the 1960s.

As a component of performance, banality plays an important part in the construction of illusions, such as in pop songs about love. Frith suggests a basic difference between accounts of love and lyrical realism: “‘Standard’ lyrics, ‘sentimental’ and ‘banal’ words, are routinely measured against ‘realist’ lyrics, against songs which deal with the actual world and lived emotions” (1996: 161). I do not necessarily agree with Frith on this, as I interpret the lyrics of an artist like Larsen as attempting to erase this difference by creating the illusion of love as realism; in this sense, she draws on Allan F. Moore’s first person authenticity, asserting that her songs tell of her own experiences in unmediated ways.

One of the most compelling examples of this in Larsen’s entire career entails the furore that surrounded the title track of *Under the Surface* in 2006. Appearing on the popular TV talk show *Først & sist* as part of the promotional strategy for the album, Larsen appeared to candidly disclose her own jealousy as uncontrollable. Referring to her then-boyfriend’s past, she bluntly stated that she struggled to cope with the idea of his having had girlfriends prior to her, and that whenever they were out walking and ran into one of his ex-girlfriends, she had to run for cover (Gonsholt, 2006). In a later interview, she supplied the story with the information that people had written to her and thanked her for “saying what they had attempted to say”, which she took as a sign of the universality of her own sentiment: “I am jealous, I really am, but so are many others as well” (Ibid.).

While the story apparently reveals a straightforward honesty, it is also a prime example of what I have referred to as Moore’s first person authenticity, which he also calls “authenticity of expression”, characteristic of the situation “when an originator (composer, performer) succeeds in conveying the impression that his/her utterance is one of integrity, that it represents an attempt to communicate in an unmediated form with an audience” (2002: 214). In a recent study, Moore has formulated the concept of integrity as the view that “authenticity is assured at the point where the identities of *persona* and *performer* are co-extensive”; consequently, “there is no gap between the identity presented ‘on stage’ and that presented ‘in real life’” (2012: 263).

On the one hand, this invokes Frith's view of the pop singer as actor, simultaneously playing the star personality and the song personality (1996: 212), and Auslander's advancement on this theory with the trisection of the (real) person, the (performance) persona and the (song) character (Auslander, 2009) (305). As a result, "[the] real person is the dimension of performance to which the audience has the least direct access", as "[public] appearances offstage do not give reliable access to the performer as a real person", since it is highly likely that "interviews and even casual public appearances are manifestations of the performer's persona rather than the real person" (Auslander, 2006) (5-6). In short, we cannot infer from the persona to the person, regardless of whether the persona is styled as an early-1970s singer-songwriter or a glam rocker.

On the other hand, this does not stop an audience from unashamedly inferring from the persona to the person. On the subject of integrity, Moore also states, "an expression is valued because its production appears to rest on the integrity of the performer, an integrity that is read as secure and in some sense comfortable" (2012: 262). Further, he adds that he finds it fascinating that "the notion of integrity still has such power to address listeners" (Ibid.). I would argue that this power is prevalent because of the audience's ability to oscillate between Moore's first person authenticity and his model of second person authenticity or "authenticity of experience", in which a performance "succeeds in conveying the impression to a listener that that listener's experience of life is being validated, that the music is 'telling it like it is' for them" (2002: 220). Larsen's claim to universality, ostensibly telling a truth about her that is subsequently confirmed and saluted by her audience, is a prime example of this, as it seemingly allows her audience to simultaneously have a piece of her "true self" and identify with her. In a virtuoso move, she creates the illusion that the audience is granted access to the person behind the persona.

Larsen's statement is arguably embellished by the resemblance to Jewel's professed "bonding to the underdog", which she justifies with the assertion that, "I think everyone feels like an underdog" (L. O'Brien, 2012 [1995]) (379). Here,

Jewel attempts a similar masking of her star persona by claiming to be an underdog just like the others, or at least to have a hair of that dog. One important difference is that, while Jewel's story never rises above telling, Larsen's connection of her song lyrics to a purportedly universal sentiment would indeed appear to many viewers as a genuine showing of the real person, cleverly diverting attention from the fallacy of inferring from persona to person.

Dwelling on this point, I will now turn to the song in question. One of Larsen's best-known songs and the title track and centrepiece of her first album, "Under the Surface" invites the listener in by invoking a range of pleasures: an endearing theme played by a string section, an equally loveable young woman's voice, a waltz-like metre, a piano-driven backing by a band playing solely acoustic instruments (bar electric bass), and lyrics that both make intertextual references to 1960s and 1970s popular music and treat the ostensibly universal subject of love and jealousy in a simple and accessible manner. In combination, these traits make the song an especially pertinent case for analysis, as Larsen displays strategies of both banality and fake naivety.

Under the Surface

[Verse]

It's such a funny sensation to be
So happy that you wanna die
Promises always were crazy to me
But never was I so surprised

Minutes are longer when we are apart
Your presense [*sic*] more than I can handle
It's come to the point where I wonder if I
Could ever be luckier when

[Chorus]

Suddenly I'm back at the core
Thinking of her who had you before
Were you as good
As good as we are
Do you remember
Did you love her the way you love me
Is there a chance that there might be
Traces of her that you carry under the surface

[Verse]

Lend me your ears I would like to confess
I'm doubting that you can be real
By your side wearing a beautiful dress
I celebrate how good it feels

Say that you love me, say that it's true
I know that I want to believe you
But somehow silence speaks louder than words
I'm worried she's still on your mind

[Chorus]

[Bridge]

I know that I'm selfish
I know that it's bad
I know but it's driving me mad
It's driving me mad

[Chorus]

Arguably, the prominent element of the song is the theme, a deceptively simple two-bar melody in D Major consisting of four sets of quavers in a descending figure from F sharp down to D, with a leap up to B in the second bar creating the smallest bit of tension on the second chord (F sharp minor) (figure 3.7). In a subdued, false start, the first bar of the theme is played on glockenspiel before the band enters on a sweeping upward glissando, which leads directly into the main theme, arranged and conducted by multi-instrumentalist Lars Horntveth of the progressive jazz/rock band Jaga Jazzist and performed by an eight-piece string section.



Figure 3.7. String theme in "Under the Surface".

Convincingly disguising the song as a waltz (what might appear to be 3/4 time is actually 6/4 time), the musicians usher in the theme before the first verse begins. In a very effective gesture, the strings and bass then disappear, and Larsen's voice carries the first half of the verse supported by a sparse backing of guitar, piano, and drums. The resulting contrast to the swelling string theme is most

effective, aptly illustrating the confusing array of feelings that Larsen portrays in the lyrics.

In a gesture that gives the theme its particular uplifting feeling, the song oscillates between two tonics: D major for the theme and verses, and C major for the chorus and ending. In the main, the verses with more upbeat lyrics are in D major, while the chorus where the protagonist voices her (self-)doubts are in C major; the alternation between keys neatly illustrates the protagonist's oscillation between joy and anguish.

Movement between tonics, possibly symbolic of a certain doubt on the part of the narrator, is made more intriguing by the chord progression in the verses. From D Major, the melody moves to F sharp minor, a logical harmonic step, but followed by a move to F Major, where Larsen's vocal melody touches on E, the major seventh that creates tension. The subsequent move from F Major back to D Major is suitably impressionistic, but also oddly illogical, unless we read the music as part of a narrative that is more ambiguous than it first appears.

In both verses, the second occurrence of A minor signals both a change of key and a turning around of the protagonist's outlook. The minor chord in the verse leads to G major, which then takes on the role of dominant in the new tonic of C major. In the final chorus, the *ritardando* in *tutti* signifies banality in the form of grandiose pathos.

Alluding to both the Beatles' "With A Little Help From My Friends" and Joni Mitchell's "River" in the lyrics, Larsen references particular moments in the canon of popular music, enabling the listener to hear her work in a context of popular music history. The phrase "Lend me your ears", which starts the second verse, recalls the Beatles' "With A Little Help From My Friends", whereas the short bridge just before the final verse contains the lines "I know that I'm selfish / I know that it's bad / I know but it's driving me mad", which clearly resemble Mitchell's "River", from *Blue*: "I'm so hard to handle / I'm selfish and I'm sad".

This situates Larsen in an ideal context, of both famous tunesmiths and allegedly mercilessly honest singer-songwriters.

The word “When” that bridges the first verse and chorus is invested with an extra urgency in that Larsen pronounces it in a terse, clipped way. Rather than changing the singer’s temperament in any way, though, the gesture injects the lyrics with just enough theatricality to keep the listener alert of the protagonist’s change of mood.

Above all, the song is significant when it comes to Larsen’s strategies of distance and banality. The protagonist seems devoid of agency, wearing a beautiful dress and wishing to be seen by the antagonist; but there is no evidence in the lyrics of the “you” ever paying attention to the protagonist, thereby suggesting that the narrative may well be little more than the song personality’s reverie, a soliloquy: the subject looks on, but does not partake. In this respect, the song arguably resembles a Joni Mitchell composition; as Charlotte Greig observes, Mitchell’s songs typically seem to be “less a message to someone else than a conversation with herself” (Greig, 1997) (174). The imploring request to “say that you love me, say that it’s true” could thus be directed at an apparition of love, from the safe distance of “the core” where the protagonist can dream safely. Most tellingly, the protagonist is intensely preoccupied with “her who had you before”, suggesting an absence of experience that recalls the girl-child. In this respect, recalling Frith, the song seems to be neither a love song nor a song about “lived emotions”, but rather like a diary entry, an unrealised fantasy that assumes its poignancy precisely because of the distance to any lived emotions or consumed love. As such, it can be interpreted as a metonymy for Larsen’s persona.

In concluding this chapter, I return with a repetition of Frith’s assertion about language:

There are clearly ways in which rock musical conventions, in terms of melodic form, use of verse/chorus, mode of vocal attack, and so on, reflect – or at least gesture at – patterns of Anglo-American and Afro-American speech [...]. *These musical conventions may not be appropriate for other languages.* (Frith 1996: 175, emphasis added)

In his statement, Frith says nothing about how or to what ends the language is used. I suggest, then, that this assertion takes on significance in the discussion of banality in popular music. The language that becomes a carrier of meaning by these musical conventions is also arguably a vehicle for banality, as evidenced in the abundance of what Paul McCartney once called “silly love songs”.⁹⁶ Ultimately, I consider Frith’s tenet as exemplary of a song such as “Under the Surface”, which is likely to depend on Larsen’s use of banal English-language phrases such as quotations and pleas to be told that, “I love you”, in order to function. And lest we forget, the use of English by a Norwegian artist also provides the artist with a much-needed distance that enables her to say banal things about banal subjects (love). In that respect, Larsen keeps her distance while retaining the ability to make statements that appeal to listeners’ illusions of the pop star.

⁹⁶ Wings, “Silly Love Songs”, *Wings At The Speed Of Sound* (MPL Communications, 1976). Words and music by Paul McCartney.



Figure 4.1. Front cover for Marion Ravn's first solo album, Here I Am (2005).

Chapter 4

“Who Does That Girl Think She Is?": Marion Rav(e)n and Subjectivity through Excess

Introduction

In this chapter, I focus on Marion Ravn and the early stages of her solo career. As Marit Larsen's former partner in the duos Marit & Marion and M2M, Ravn provides a contrast to Larsen in a number of ways. One salient starting point is the story of the dismissal and consequent dissolution of M2M as it is told through interviews and newspaper articles, as this dovetails with Ravn's solo career and provides a fundament for her to reconstruct her persona as an artist in her own right. In the present chapter, then, I take up how these contrasts can be seen to inform her subjectivity as an artist, and how they have informed her music and persona during the first phase of her solo career, which includes the release of her first solo album, *Here I Am*, the EP *Heads Will Roll*, and her duet with Meat Loaf, “It's All Coming Back To Me Now”.

As part of my analysis, I argue that we may identify a number of *excesses* in Ravn's persona and musical production. These are framed by her past in M2M and by the surrounding discourses on female artists, with several examples hinting at inauthenticity: Notable ones are the artist's name change from Ravn to Raven, which took place as early as with the release of M2M's first album and was also the moniker she chose to employ for her own *début* album; her work with Swedish producer Max Martin, who was arguably best known at the time for his work with Britney Spears; the melodramatic background for the first album; Ravn's duet collaboration with Meat Loaf, “It's All Coming Back To Me Now”, which became a Top Ten hit in several countries and was included on Meat Loaf's third album in the *Bat Out Of Hell* trilogy; and her work as a judge on the Norwegian variants of the televised talent contests, *Pop Idol* and *X Factor*. In

order to locate Ravn in this intersection of discourses, then, I map what I see as the most central elements of excess in her project, and read this as a backdrop for her present, more versatile and “mature” persona as a pop artist.

One of the central elements in Ravn’s strategy of excess is her confidence as a performer in the public eye. In 2013, Ravn’s appearances, under the glare of the spotlight, have included her role in the popular “artist reality” TV series *Hver gang vi møtes*, her extensive touring as part of the line-up of the commercial hit-list road-show *VG-lista Topp 20*, and numerous interviews in tabloid newspapers. Several of these can be perceived as conforming to the idea of Ravn as an artist who has now received absolution for her inauthenticity after years of excessive star behaviour. Opposed to such assertions, I argue that, especially in the case of *Hver gang vi møtes*, we have witnessed a re-invention of Ravn’s persona and music, which includes a toning down of the temperament of her previous persona.

Several of Ravn’s excesses, which I refer to, can be identified as transgressing common-sense limits for femininity and gendered behaviour. A case in point, taken up in this chapter, is the video for Ravn’s single “Heads Will Roll” in 2006. The video, arguably characterised by images that draw on soft-core pornographic aesthetics, was initially launched with a marketing campaign that included the publication of the video on the alt.porn web site Burning Angel, a move that caused controversy among unsuspecting fans and journalists alike. The fact that Larsen released her first solo album the same year, and launched her more “demure” persona to critical acclaim, exacerbated the media noise, contributing to what I see as a “double excess” that pushed Ravn even further into the margins.

Consequently, her move back to Norway in 2010 after several years in the USA could be interpreted as the beginning of a new phase in Ravn’s career, a strategy that resembles Larsen’s example of creating a disciplined persona with a broad appeal. This might suggest that the two artists, while different in background and approach, are also alike in their quest for sustained popularity.

A reverse success story: *Hver gang vi møtes*

As a point of entry, I would like to return briefly to the 2002 episode of *Dawson's Creek* that featured M2M's cameo appearance. As mentioned previously in Chapter 2, the episode contains both M2M's performance of their then-current single, "Everything", and a small speaking role for Marion Ravn, in which she engages the character Pacey (Joshua Jackson) in conversation just before the performance. In the short space the conversation takes up, we see Pacey and Marion in the audience pit in front of the stage. The conversation starts with Pacey saying, "I appreciate your offer, but I'm here with somebody;" the jump-cut, *in medias res* quality of the line suggests that Marion has attempted to pick him up. "I don't see her next to you right now," she replies in a breezy voice. "Occasionally, I actually let her mingle with the people. I'm good that way," says Pacey by way of merry banter. The sound of the song's intro catches Marion's attention. "Don't leave. I'll be right back. I have to do something," she says, gently placing her hand on his shoulder before walking past him. Frustrated, Pacey turns to a young black man next to him: "Women, right? They just will not take no for an answer. I mean – who does that girl think she is?" Cut to Marion on stage, in front of the microphone, as she shouts out "Hello, Miami!" and shakes her right fist in the air while the music gains momentum. Pacey is caught off guard; enlightened, he says to the black man: "Oh, that's who she is." Perfectly in sync both with the music and the conversation, Marion enters into the first verse of the song.

I have chosen to dwell on this scene again as it bookends the first decade of Ravn's solo career in a way that is fruitful for the objectives of this thesis. The other bookend I have chosen comprises the second season of the Norwegian reality television show *Hver gang vi møtes* (which roughly translates as "Every time we meet"). The Norwegian franchise, which has its origins in the Dutch TV show, *De beste zangers van Nederland*, proved very successful in its first season, which was aired on the commercial channel TV 2 in early 2012. Unlike its Dutch counterpart, the Norwegian version does not entail a competition, but is

marketed as “a gathering of friends”, where seven artists spend a week together in a remote, luxurious resort and interpret each other’s songs in an intimate setting. On the back of the successful first season, TV 2 aired a second season in 2013. In both series, seven merited Norwegian pop stars pay tribute to one another by playing cover versions of each other’s songs, with one episode dedicated to each artist. Airing in prime time at 8PM on Saturday evenings, the second season became a smash hit, with an average of 900.000 viewers per episode – a considerable number in a Norwegian context – and thus surpassing the first season with more than 200.000 viewers on average.⁹⁷

Marion Ravn was one of the participants in the 2013 season. Other guests included solo artists, Lene Marlin, Morten Abel, Anita Skorgan, Ole Paus, and Kurt Nilsen, as well as Magnus Grønneberg, the singer and frontman of the time-honoured rock band CC Cowboys. Success, by various criteria, ties these artists together, either in the form of distinctions and awards (all, bar Ravn, have won the Norwegian *Spellemannpris* at least once), song writing (Paus, born in 1947, is lauded as one of Norway’s greatest living singer-songwriters, and several of his songs are perceived as part of a national heritage of popular music), sales figures (Abel and Nilsen have both achieved the remarkable feat of six-figure sales of English-language records in their domestic market, the latter selling 180.000 copies of his debut album, *I*), or international success (Marlin’s first album, *Playing My Game*, sold close to two million copies world-wide; the single, “Sitting Down Here”, reached number 5 in the charts in Britain).

The episode that aired on 9 February 2013 was billed as “Marions dag” (“Marion’s day”), and features a combination of performances of Ravn’s songs by the other artists and mandatory leisure-time activities of her choosing; these include embroidery and half a day’s shop-keeping in a nearby supermarket. During the performance section of the episode, Anita Skorgan plays Ravn’s composition “For You I’ll Die”, from *Here I Am*. Skorgan, herself no stranger to success (she earned a *Spellemannpris* in 1979 for “best pop vocalist”, sold

⁹⁷ Farestvedt, Hanne: “Topper suksessen fra i fjor”, *Bergens Tidende* 4 February 2013, URL: <http://www.bt.no/bergenpuls/Topper-suksessen-fra-i-fjor-2838989.html#.UYkh34WbMmE> (accessed 6 May 2013).

120.000 copies of her duet album *Cheek To Cheek* with then-husband Jahn Teigen in the early 1980s, and contributed several songs to the international Eurovision Song Contest during the same period), also makes a remark in the episode which can be interpreted as a poignant summary of the effect the TV series had on Ravn's standing in Norway. Skorgan sums up her meeting with Ravn with the simple statement: "I was wrong about you," and goes on to praise Ravn for her qualities, both musical and personal ones.

With this compliment, Skorgan echoes the sentiments voiced by the other participants about "finally getting to know" Ravn as a person. Furthermore, in the context of the TV show and Ravn's taking part in it, this comes across as a form of redemption or perhaps even absolution: Ravn, who has been much maligned in Norway by press and public alike throughout her solo career in the long aftermath of the break-up of M2M, is seemingly cleared of all charges. Skorgan's subsequent live performance of "For You I'll Die" moves Ravn to tears.

Aptly, these two TV appearances frame the subject in question. The story of Ravn as we may trace it between M2M's appearance on *Dawson's Creek* and Skorgan's tribute to Ravn on *Hver gang vi møtes*, can be interpreted as a success story in reverse, where the international magnificence of Ravn's recording contract with Atlantic Records in the US and the global hit single "It's All Coming Back To Me Now" with Meat Loaf stand in sharp contrast to the seemingly unanimous condemnation of her music *and* persona by the Norwegian press and public during the mid-2000s. The subsequent termination of her recording contract, coupled with failed attempts at releasing new material, notably the abandoned album project *Nevermore* in 2010, has repeatedly provided the press with fodder for creating a story of an Icarus-like downfall. What is more, regular comparisons with former singing partner Marit Larsen, whose career trajectory has commonly been depicted by the media (and subsequently perceived by the public) as the polar opposite of Ravn's, have contributed to a definitive sense of inauthenticity in Ravn's project, a trait which has certainly been reinforced by Ravn's work as a judge on the Norwegian versions of *Pop Idol* and *X Factor* on Norwegian television starting in 2010. In the setting of *Hver gang vi møtes*, on the

contrary, everything from the location to the artists' emotional reactions spells out authenticity, evocative of Allan F. Moore's first person authenticity or *authenticity of expression*: "This is what it is like to be us" (Moore, 2002) (214). In the perfect construction and spotless choreography of the TV show, Ravn's "true" self appears to be brought to the fore, and she comes into her own as she is, ostensibly, finally allowed to tell her side of the story.

Who, then, does this girl think she is? The question triggers a number of debates concerning Ravn's solo career, not least the transcultural persona she has cultivated as a recording artist for the Atlantic Recording Corporation and as a duet partner with Meat Loaf, both on his successful 2006 album *Bat Out Of Hell III: The Monster is Loose* and as a warm-up act on his subsequent world tour. What is more, the question makes the case for a scrutiny of Ravn's music and persona with regard to the development of her pop subjectivity through moves and choices that fans and press may deem excessive. As a solo artist, Ravn is intriguing because she appears seemingly unambiguous and straightforward. Such an assertion is made on judging the tone in her early interviews and her debut solo album, *Here I Am*, where making the choices that the situation demands and claiming authenticity and realness is verified by the explicit link between the song lyrics and autobiographical events. Thus, her pop subjectivity is never static, but disclosing a performative trait that comes into existence over time. I am referring to a subjectivity that signifies continuity with her M2M persona as well as a break with the teen-pop past.

Different strategies underlie the careers of Marit Larsen and Marion Ravn. As I argued in Chapter 3, the initial success of Larsen's solo project rests in part on her ostensibly taking a "three-year sabbatical" from music-making after the dissolution of M2M. During this time, Larsen not only "granted herself a break" (Olsen, Bakke, & Hvidsten, 2009) (363) and "returned to real life",⁹⁸ but also thoroughly revised her persona and her music in anticipation of her new career as a solo artist. By contrast, Marion Ravn's career has developed virtually under the stage lights ever since M2M disbanded. The official story, which Ravn herself

⁹⁸ Tjersland, Jonas: "Nå lever jeg et ordentlig liv", *Verdens Gang* 10 January 2006, p. 32.

has confirmed in several interviews during the promotion campaign for *Hver gang vi møtes*, is that after M2M's US tour with Jewel in the summer of 2002 was cut short and the duo was sent home, Atlantic Records approached Ravn with the offer of a solo recording contract. This was reportedly leaked to the press and published as a news item by Norwegian newspapers the day after Ravn herself received the offer.⁹⁹ Despite theories that Atlantic Records had already decided to "dispose of M2M and retain Ravn"¹⁰⁰ – a version of events that is clearly in Larsen's favour – the fact remains that Ravn's career as an Atlantic recording artist was, in hindsight, neither a long-lived nor a happy one, but also that the high-profile nature of her early solo career shaped her pop subjectivity in important ways.

Ravn's story with Atlantic Records, as an apt metonymy for her career at large, is characterised by highs and lows. Her period with the company certainly started on a high note, with Ravn receiving a substantial advance for signing her solo contract¹⁰¹ and the president of Atlantic Records, Craig Kallman, personally overseeing the project (Hansen, 2002). In interviews and TV appearances in the autumn of 2002, Ravn would talk freely about her new contract with Atlantic. Her appearance on the TV talk show *Torsdagsklubben* later that year has gone down in history as particularly notorious: When the host asked her about her plans for the future and whether she would have to consider taking a part-time job as a shop assistant, she bluntly replied that with her "20 million advance", she obviously had the wherewithal to be able to concentrate on her music. The statement elicited boos (albeit jovial) and jeering from the audience. This episode was repeatedly brought up in discussions on various Internet sites in the following years, as viewers took Ravn's statement both as indicative of her

⁹⁹ See e.g. Spets 2013, Hansen 2013. This was also one of the core points in Ravn's own narrative about her life and career in *Hver gang vi møtes*. The leakage to the press is partly confirmed as early as Espen A. Hansen's interview with Ravn in *Verdens Gang* on 24 September 2002 (Hansen 2002). Here, the journalist states that Ravn received the offer of "a multi-million recording contract" the preceding Saturday.

¹⁰⁰ Tor Milde hints at this version of the story in his interview with the then-18-year-old Ravn in *Mann* (Milde 2002). Later versions have included the apocryphal theory that Jewel "demanded the cancellation" of M2M's opening slot on her tour because she "felt threatened as an artist" by the duo (Hansen 2005), a small but significant detail that may also have contributed to the discourse on Ravn as "the greedy one who dumped her best friend for a solo contract".

¹⁰¹ Winterkjær, Ståle: "Signerer millionkontrakt med Atlantic", *Verdens Gang* 23 December 2002, p. 40.

corruption by the record industry and as a sign of her inherent “falseness”.¹⁰² This incident has also most likely contributed to a general perception of Ravn as shallow and inauthentic, traits that in turn have reinforced the division of Larsen and Ravn into a stereotypical good girl/bad girl dichotomy.

The idea of a “grand advance” as part of the recording deal with a major label is also part of the mythology of the pop artist. Mavis Bayton points out: “To a new band, signing to a record company implies financial solvency: you receive a ‘big advance’ and your troubles are over. In most cases, however, this is a delusion since costs escalate” (Bayton, 1998) (158). We may add that such an advance hardly reflects the effort on the part of the label to accommodate the artist; quite to the contrary, a band or artist may just as well feel neglected – “They’ve got a hold of you, but they don’t actually think of doing anything” (Ibid. 159). This is in accordance with Ravn’s own experience with Atlantic Records, where the release of her first album was delayed and eventually limited to a small number of territories (Gran, 2006), and also with her subsequent contract with an independent record company that allegedly went bankrupt before Ravn’s planned release of her second solo album proper in 2010. Lest we forget, the story of Ravn is inextricably tied to the upheavals of the record business throughout the first decade of the new millennium (I. Tennfjord, 2013; I. W. Tennfjord, 2010).

Such narratives underpin Ravn’s construction of her subjectivity as a high-profile media actor, that is, how she handles “the spectacularity of the artist within a

¹⁰² The clip of Ravn’s appearance on *Torsdagsklubben* was included in the episode dedicated to her on *Hver gang vi møtes*. Ravn explained her statement as an example of what she had been taught to say by her American record company. She has also referred to it as “an ironic comment which was taken literally” (Norli, Camilla: “Folk kastet ting etter meg”, *Verdens Gang* 8 February 2013, pp. 38–40), and to herself at the time as a young artist without proper guidance: “I was so young, and I had no one to turn to for advice ... Both my manager and the record company were in the US. My parents ... knew nothing about how the media worked. I had no strategy” (Spets 2013). The idea that Ravn – already an experienced artist at 18, with three albums and several international tours to her credit – should “know nothing about how the media worked”, is relevant in a Norwegian context. We need to consider that M2M had their primary fan base in the Far East and never catered to a Norwegian audience in the same way. This strengthens Ravn’s assertion that she was indeed unfamiliar with the minute workings of the Norwegian media and the unspoken rules and regulations of the general public at the time she entered the limelight as a solo artist.

media-saturated arena” (Hawkins, 2009) (37). This spectacularity is characteristic of her every move in the spotlight, and arguably of her every transformation as an artist. In a career arc that spans the *je-ne-regrette-rien* attitude of the solo artist in 2002 – a figure that drew on her latter-day M2M persona, as seen in their appearance in *Dawson’s Creek* – and the repentant “real me” of her appearance on *Hver gang vi møtes* a decade later, Ravn negotiates a pop subjectivity that tries and errs without once losing its spectacularity. I wish to investigate into how this subjectivity is, at any given stage in her solo career, theatricalized so as to appear “natural” in the context of her music and persona. I also want to explore how Ravn’s persona is, at any given time, shaped by the excess of such trial-and-error, and how this positions her as a surprisingly accessible counterpart to the disciplined subject of Marit Larsen’s persona.

Disentangling the dichotomy: Ravn and Larsen as fixed counterparts

As I took up in Chapter 3, Atlantic’s decision to dissolve M2M was met with disapproval by the Norwegian media, especially in the music press. The view that Larsen had been unceremoniously dumped by the record company, which also inevitably entailed speculations that Ravn had “dumped Larsen for the sake of a solo contract”, led to an early controversy instigated by the music journalist Geir Rakvaag. In a commentary in *Dagsavisen*, Rakvaag drew comparisons to Atlantic’s choice of prioritising Ravn with the much-maligned dream of starry-eyed Norwegian record labels to launch local artists to international stardom. Effectively taking Larsen’s side in the presumed conflict, he berates Ravn for her swift decision and “lack of hesitation” to remain in the corporate system; comparing the two artists’ web sites, he clearly prefers Larsen’s strategy of putting up posts about “concerts she has attended”, communicating with fans about M2M songs, and her subtle message of “big changes ahead” to Ravn’s publishing of photographs of herself. “According to some people in the Norwegian media, Marion Ravn is going to be one of the biggest pop stars in the world,” Rakvaag writes caustically, adding: “We are more excited to see what Marit Larsen will choose to do.”¹⁰³

¹⁰³ Rakvaag, Geir: “Med stjerner i øynene”, *Dagsavisen* 28 September 2009, p. 20.

Rakvaag's eagerness to promote Marit Larsen, which had nothing to do with her music (as she had not yet released anything under her own name), thwarts his otherwise valid point about the media's eagerness to bang the drum for any and all Norwegian artists who wish to try their luck in international markets. Duly, this would be picked up by the journalist Håkon Moslet, then head of music for the Norwegian Broadcasting Company, who was also one of the first journalists to write about Larsen and Ravn in 1998. In his swift retort to Rakvaag, Moslet asserts that any chance of success on Ravn's part depends equally on the promotional muscle of the record company; in other words, Ravn certainly has the qualities required to succeed. More importantly, Moslet addresses Rakvaag's rhetoric on Marit Larsen, which he finds reactionary: "It is kind of cute to see Rakvaag so impressed by the fact that [Larsen] tells us [on her web site] of how she has discovered Radiohead [...] But then, old-school music journalists are always caught in this trap: the artists that look down, smile demurely and sort of really burn for their music represent genuine talent and the good forces of the music business. Those who look straight into the camera with their head held high and act like pop stars before they have become one, strictly speaking, represent plastic and inauthentic feelings – pure evil."¹⁰⁴

While Moslet is certainly justified in telling Rakvaag off for what he sees as a display of narrow-mindedness and a reactionary attitude to pop stardom and female artists, he also inadvertently supports a dichotomy that has since been prevalent in the discourse on Larsen and Ravn: *you either like one or the other*. As I discussed briefly in Chapter 2, this explicit parsing of the former members of M2M as one talented/intellectual/musical individual and her counterpart arguably rests on ideas of authenticity, notably in rock music. Here, the exchange between Rakvaag and Moslet also indicates that gender plays a part in this bifurcation of the former M2M partners.

Another example from Chapter 2 needs to be further nuanced here. In his interview with Larsen in 2005, Sven Ove Bakke quotes the US artist Jewel's

¹⁰⁴ Moslet, Håkon: "Heia, Marion!", *Dagsavisen* 1 October 2002, p. 22.

observation about M2M that, “they [Atlantic] gave one of the M2M girls a contract, but it is the other one who’s got the talent, isn’t it?”¹⁰⁵ Larsen’s reply in the interview is one of muted appraisal, displaying a “youthful demureness” in response to what she perceives as a great compliment. When Ravn is asked about Jewel’s statement in a later interview, she simply replies: “That was a nasty thing to say, but I am sure she said it” (Spets, 2013). Jewel here makes a crucial contribution to the good girl/bad girl dichotomy of Larsen and Ravn; adding to the highly problematic statement is the fact that she is not quoted as saying this in the original 2003 interview, thus in effect making it the journalist’s opinion rather than Jewel’s.

This point can be clarified further given Jewel’s expressed support to what she sees as an underdog mentality. Lucy O’Brien has quoted Jewel as stating that, “I have a real bonding to the underdog”; to embellish the point, she says that, “I think everyone feels like an underdog. Even if you’re the most popular girl in school there’s always some sense of not being good enough at a deeper place” (L. O’Brien, 2012 [1995]) (379). This observation bears a resemblance to Larsen’s own invoking of the universality of jealousy. Even so, the fact that the journalist brings “her” statement into play aligns him with Rakvaag as one of the journalists who take Larsen’s side early on, to Ravn’s disadvantage.

One recent example of this attitude towards the artists is found in the revised edition of *Norsk pop & rock leksikon*. The 2005 edition does not contain individual entries on Larsen or Ravn. In the 2013 edition, the editor Jon Vidar Bergan has revised the entry on M2M to include a section on Ravn. In addition, he has included a separate entry on Larsen. These entries are marked by an obvious difference in tone. On the one hand, the section on Ravn says that, “Marion has repeatedly stated that she intends to become a global star in the vein of Madonna. Nevertheless, in the years following the dissolution of M2M it is Marit Larsen who has clearly had the biggest solo success – both at home and abroad” (Eggum & Bergan, 2013) (440). On the other hand, the entry on Larsen is characterised by descriptions of the artist’s records as “critically acclaimed”

¹⁰⁵ Bakke, Sven Ove: “marit larsen”, *Dagbladet* 7 January 2005, p. 16.

and “chart-topping”, and Larsen herself as “a skilful live artist” (Ibid. 375). Notably, this type of favourable terminology is absent from the entry on Ravn, who is described as having “recently struggled to get her musical career on track, and in recent years she is best known for having participated as a judge in *Idol* and *X Factor*” (Ibid. 440). While the difference in description may be unintended, it certainly adds to and reinforces the well-worn dichotomy of Larsen and Ravn as intrinsically different, and static, individual artists.

The deeply problematic binary opposition of Larsen and Ravn as “good female artist” and “bad female artist” renders Bergan’s rhetoric quaint, not to say outdated; a trait that is further complicated by the adherent logic of essentialism that fixes both artists as individuals. More problematic, this fixing also adumbrates the complex construction of their respective personae, and also misses the target by catering to a reactionary understanding of female artists.

Two important points arise from this. First, we cannot read Marion Ravn’s persona as in any way less constructed than Marit Larsen’s persona. Both artists have the pop star as their *métier*. The function of the pop star persona rests on the division between persona and person (Auslander, 2006, 2009; S. Frith, 1996), and must be interpreted accordingly. Thus, there is (in principle) no more “truth” or “authenticity” to Ravn’s persona than to Larsen’s, or vice versa.

Second, contrary to a common dichotomy among Larsen’s fans and proponents, we cannot deem Ravn as a less successful artist than Larsen in any way. On the contrary, we need to interpret both artists as extraordinarily successful in a Norwegian context, and arguably internationally as well (both artists have fan bases abroad, as evidenced by Internet fan sites and commentaries on YouTube videos). Neither chart placings nor notions of authenticity or honesty can be used as valid arguments for any contention that one is more or less successful or popular than the other.

Despite this apparent dichotomy of either/or in the media, and the negative bias towards Ravn and in favour of Larsen peddled by members of the press, the

dichotomy of Larsen and Ravn is always in danger of locking both parties in a static position. As we see from the above examples, this view has put Ravn in an unfavourable position from an early stage, a position that is probably exacerbated by Ravn's own stylistic choices and the traits of excess in her persona.

“Who framed Marion Ravn?”: Constructing Excess

In order to further conceptualise excess, I want to attempt to delineate the phenomenon. The act of delineation is of vital importance here, precisely because the very act of excess presupposes that there is a space that can be exceeded. When this space is exceeded, then, the excess is also framed, meaning that we make sense of it in relation to that which it exceeds. In her chapter on the musical representation of madwomen in *Feminine Endings*, Susan McClary suggests that, “madwomen are ‘framed’ in the sense of constructed” (McClary, 2002 [1991]) (85), which I find most useful for the present discussion. McClary cites Elaine Showalter's analysis of how madness came to be regarded as “a peculiarly feminine malady” in the nineteenth century, “usually as a manifestation of excess feminine sexuality” (Ibid. 81); thus, the socially perceived differences between male and female were “often mapped onto the differences between reason and unreason” (Ibid.). This illuminates not only the dynamics of excess as becoming excess at the precise moment when it exceeds something, but also how ideas of gender and reason play a crucial part in this process. In the light of the discourse I have been developing, a first contention could be that excess is linked to ideas of gender, with excess defined as that which exceeds normative or accepted behaviour at any given point. Excess can therefore be analysed both as *contextual* and *performative*, always contingent on the frames that delimit that which is exceeded.

Addressing the phenomenon of excess also demands the important observation that excess is always in the eye of the beholder as much as in the artist as spectacle. McClary spells this out in her reminder that the musical representations of madwomen that she analyses – Monteverdi's nymph in

Lamento della Ninfa, Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*, and Strauss's *Salome* – are “first and foremost male fantasies of transgression dressed up as women. Real women – mad or otherwise – do not enter into this picture at all” (Ibid. 109–110). This can be useful for understanding how conceptions of normative gendered behaviour can play a central part in ideas of excess. In her analysis of how Tina Turner's on-stage persona could be perceived as transgressive in the 1960s, Susan Fast sees Turner as cultivating “an image of the ‘tough girl’ in an era when black women musicians were generally refining their sound and image to assimilate into white culture, or were gaining respect through the cultivation of ‘serious’ music derived from black gospel (i.e., Aretha Franklin)” (Fast, 2010) (209–210). This indicates that the normative state or normality for pop singers at the time rested on assumptions of whiteness, a state that Fast links to gender by making the valid point that “normative femininity – softness, passivity – is associated with middle-class whiteness; it is a fantasy of femininity constructed by middle-class white men for middle-class white women. It is this normative white femininity that is being transgressed in the tough girl images we get in the media” (Ibid. 232). As Marion Ravn can certainly be said to cultivate such a “tough girl” image on *Here I Am*, the idea that a normative white femininity is being transgressed – exceeded – also takes on relevance in this thesis.

Another useful inroad is to consider excess as framed by genre. Linda Williams links specific bodily displays to film and television genres or categories, notably the genres of melodrama, horror film, and pornography. Interpreting these genres as contingent upon “the gross display of the human body” in various situations, she suggests that the body spectacle – or, I would add, the body *as* spectacle – is featured “most sensationally in pornography's portrayal of orgasm, in horror's portrayal of violence and terror, and in melodrama's portrayal of weeping” (Williams, 2007) (25). From this trisection, she proposes an investigation into visual and narrative pleasures as residing in the portrayal of “three types of excess” each linked to a specific genre, and also places them in an internal hierarchical structure with regard to cultural esteem: “Pornography is the lowest in cultural esteem, gross-out horror is next to lowest” (ibid.). Placing melodrama at the top of this hierarchy, she nevertheless points out what could

be seen as the cultural shortcomings of this genre as well: “[Melodramas] are deemed excessive for their gender- and sex-linked pathos, for their naked displays of emotion” (Ibid. 24) – traits that exceed or go against reason, rationality and, in the case of Western music since 1600, theoretical control (McClary, 2002 [1991]) (82). This prompts Williams to emphasise the importance of a genre criticism that would “take as its point of departure – rather than as an unexamined assumption – questions of gender construction, and gender address in relation to basic sexual fantasies” (2007: 25).

In any discussion of genre in popular music, it is important to bear in mind that the concept of genre is itself performative, for it is always subject to renegotiation and change. Robert Walser takes up this point, arguing that genres “are never *sui generis*; they are developed, sustained, and reformed by people, who bring a variety of histories and interests to their encounters with generic texts” (Walser, 1993) (27). Similarly, Fast observes that genres likewise are “socially situated and contingent; they exist only within the context of human interaction, not as fixed and culturally transcendent categories” (Fast, 2009) (173). This provides an interesting point of departure for investigating into the *framing of excess* as a game that moves as you play, rather than an employment of fixed categories of norms and deviances from these.

The excess of personality: *Here I Am* (2005)

Bearing this in mind, I now turn my attention to Marion Ravn’s first solo album, *Here I Am*. She released the album under the stage name Marion Raven, which Ravn had utilised as a performer since the first M2M album, *Shades of Purple*, and that has since become a trait of her persona that she can assume when needed. Released by the Atlantic Recording Corporation in June 2005, the album heralds a departure from the sound and style of M2M with its emphasis on hard rock. At the same time, it is clearly a record that continues the M2M persona of Ravn in equal measure, showcasing her as a songwriter and artist situated in a North American context of producers and songwriters. It is also a record that amply displays its singer’s agency, through a series of markers that range from the

close-up portrait of Ravn on the front cover (figure 4.1) via the statement in the booklet of “Marion Raven: piano and guitar” significant of her skills as a musician to the persona’s poise in the lyrics, with the active “I” present in the lyrics’ narratives of most of the songs.¹⁰⁶ With this gesture, she simultaneously sets the stage for her persona/star personality/performance persona and the protagonist/song personality/character of her songs (Auslander, 2009; S. Frith, 1996) in the new context of the proper solo artist.

Through the employment of the stage name Raven, the artist displays a continuity between M2M and her solo album which, arguably, should both be interpreted as the products of Ravn’s overall Atlantic Records persona. As an artist now in her own right, the Raven persona assumes the function of gathering the three aspects – the persona/star personality/performance persona, the protagonist/song personality/character, and the “real person” behind these – in one seemingly seamless entity that is Marion Rav(e)n. The parentheses are deliberate, as they suggest that a plurality of subjectivities make up the Raven persona that Ravn displays prominently on *Here I Am*, but that she has since toned down in connection with her second solo album, *Songs From A Blackbird*, and her TV appearances on *Idol*, *X Factor*, and *Hver gang vi møtes*.

Here I Am also bears a resemblance to *Shades of Purple* in the multiple origins of the recording. The album was made under the guidance of two separate producers: on the one hand, the American producer and remixer Steve Thompson, who had previously worked with artists including David Bowie, Whitney Houston, and Blondie, as well as Guns N’ Roses and Metallica; on the other hand, the Swedish producer and songwriter Max Martin, whose production credits at the time included Bryan Adams, Céline Dion, *NSYNC, and Kelly Clarkson, and notably Britney Spears, for whom he wrote and co-produced hit singles such as “... Baby One More Time” and “Oops! ...I Did It Again”. Of the fourteen songs on the album, seven were recorded with Thompson at Longview Farm Studios in North Brookfield, Massachusetts, and seven with Martin and

¹⁰⁶ It is worth noting that the first song on the album, “Get Me Out Of Here”, starts with the pronoun “I” (the line is “I am serious”).

Rami Yacoub (a.k.a. Rami) at Decibel Studios in Stockholm, with local session musicians making up the band in each case.¹⁰⁷ This multiplicity reinforces the impression of the record as a modern urban product (notwithstanding the lack of urban clout of suburban North Brookfield) by a cosmopolitan artist who effortlessly travels between the continents. Such a view would, I argue, also expose the deliberate construction of the transcultural pop star, Marion Raven, as simultaneously building on and different from her M2M persona. The cover photograph, title, and musical representations of anger and heartbreak in the songs might just as easily be taken as excessive elements that deliberately create a distance to the teen-pop past of the burgeoning adult artist, elements that also contribute to the establishment of an amplified version of Raven's M2M persona, both literally (via electric guitars) and figuratively (through vocal production, lyrics, and visual presentation).

It is worth noting that Rav(e)n is listed as sole writer of two of the album's songs, "For You I'll Die" and "Let Me Introduce Myself", and co-writer on all other songs except one ("Break You", written by the song's producers, Max Martin and Lukasz Gottwald a.k.a. "Dr. Luke"). Raven's song-writing collaborators on the portion of the album that is produced by Thompson, include several prominent North American music industry actors, such as producer Greg Kurstin ("Get Me Out Of Here"), producer and singer-songwriter Danielle Brisebois ("Crawl"), Mötley Crüe bassist Nikki Sixx ("Heads Will Roll"), and Canadian singer-songwriter Chantal Kreviazuk and her husband, Raine Maida ("13 Days"). Of the songs recorded with Max Martin, Raven co-wrote the material with Martin and Rami, with the aforementioned exception of "Break You".

Despite the potential schism between the producers' styles, the record as a whole sounds coherent, with both Thompson and Martin utilising drums and guitars to create an in-your-face, rock music platform for the negotiation of the singer's headstrong subjectivity. Ranging from the upbeat, hectic power-pop of "Get Me Out Of Here" to the post-grunge, loud-quiet-loud dynamics of the title

¹⁰⁷ One example of the continuity between M2M and Raven's early solo career is the drummer on *Here I Am*, Kenny Aronoff, who was also a member of M2M's backing band on *The Big Room*.

track and the single, “Break You”, the hard rock style of the album is contrasted and nuanced by the inclusion of ballads such as “For You I’ll Die” and “In Spite Of Me”. In a song such as “Crawl”, a mid-tempo hard rock song with a catchy “yeah, yeah” chorus, the guitars complement the presence of piano and violin, and Ravn’s use of creaky voice both here and in “Six Feet Under” is indicative of her versatility as a singer. In the title track, live strings and heavy electric guitar work together as harbingers of the chorus, and guitar feedback is used strategically throughout to create tension and release.

The voice, a signifier of the persona’s subjectivity, is up front, concise (in this, it clearly mirrors the cover portrait) and multifaceted, suggestive of the multiple layers of the song’s protagonist. The opening track, “Get Me Out Of Here”, exemplifies this, with a total of three layers of vocals, where two backing voices characterised by a “telephone” aesthetic (distortion, treble, and lack of bottom tone) are placed in the margins of the sound-box, complementing the main voice, which is firmly placed front and centre. In the song’s bridge, Ravn negotiates a fast-talking persona that sings the lyrics syllabically: “Don’t wanna stay so I’ll leave with you / Had a thought in my mind of a game for two / Do you know what I want, do you want it too / Tell me, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah”, crossing a pop sensibility that harks back to the “yeah, yeah, yeah” of The Beatles with the hectic delivery of an assertive protagonist. The emphasis on the first word of each line – “Don’t”, “Had”, “Do”, “Tell” – syncopates the musical narrative and adds to the fast pace and hectic drive of the song.

Musically, Ravn operates at an interesting intersection with this album, situating herself as much in a lineage of post-grunge singers such as Tracy Bonham and Meredith Brooks as with (allegedly) confessional North American rock singers in the vein of Alanis Morissette and Avril Lavigne. None of the songs lend themselves readily to autobiographical interpretation, not least because of the arguably non-committal turns of phrase that characterise the English-language lyrics. Notwithstanding, I propose that the elements of excess on the album are found partly in the vocal arrangements, and in what one might describe as the melodramatic narrative of the lyrics. The experimental division of the

performance persona in “Get Me Out Of Here” is employed in several songs including “End Of Me” and “Let Me Introduce Myself”; in the latter case, this layering hints at a playfulness on the part of the performer, with the distorted “telephone” voice possibly supplying an inner dialogic voice for the protagonist, interjecting the song’s title in the chorus in gaps created by the absence of the band.

The sense of melodrama is strong throughout the album. In “Break You”, Ravn’s protagonist scolds the song’s antagonist from an after-the-fact perspective (“I was your girl”), gleefully stating that “you never thought that I could break you” and asking rhetorically, “Tell me who’s the one who’s crying now?”. Drawing the listener’s attention to a professed autobiographical link, Ravn stated in interviews at the time that several of the album’s songs were inspired by a break-up with “a boy”. Allegedly, this fuelled the writing of “a bunch of angry and sore songs that the record company did not expect”, which in turn resulted in “a dark and dramatic album about heartbreak, betrayal and revenge” (Hansen, 2005). Even though the emotion may have been real enough, the narrative of love and loss comes across as youthfully dramatic (we need to recall that Ravn was a mere 21 years old at the time of the album’s release) and suitably banal for the words to catch on with young listeners.

Several of the songs reinforce the sense of melodrama, for example through the sense of despair in the lyrics of the title track (“Now I’m standing in the cold / Atomic winter in my soul”), the display of anger and notions of absolutes such as “nothing” and “never” in “Little By Little” (“A mean reply, so I scream / Another fight about nothing at all / And then we cry and forgive / promising that we will never fall again”), and in song titles such as “For You I’ll Die” and “Six Feet Under”. The latter song’s intertextual reference to the eponymously titled TV series is indicative of a fruitful, subtly humoristic contrast in the musical arrangements of several songs, such as “End Of Me”, where the deconstructed acoustic guitar in the introduction, reminiscent of artists such as Beck and Gorillaz, hints at a certain playfulness; electric guitars also create amusing effects, such as the twangy chord redolent of the soundtrack to *Twin Peaks* just

before the lyric line “Hey, stay with me / As I’m getting naked” to a full band backing.¹⁰⁸

The point I am arriving at is that, despite the displays of humour in some songs, the album’s overall character of serious melodrama gives it a poignant sense of urgency and gravity. In turn, this may have come across as excessive for journalists and reviewers who were accustomed to the arguably more wholesome style of M2M at the time. This recalls Linda Williams’s suggestion that melodramas in film are often “deemed excessive for their gender- and sex-linked pathos, for their naked displays of emotion”: the idea, or rather ideal, of emotional honesty in popular music may also well be framed by a normative conception of disciplined femininity that Ravn exceeds with her purported album about “heartbreak, betrayal and revenge”, ending instead with a display of melodrama that grated against reviewers’ and fans’ sensibilities (thus exposing the performativity of categories and genres) and was deemed especially unsuitable in the light of Larsen’s burgeoning solo career.

Melodrama and/as spectacle: “For You I’ll Die” and “Let Me Introduce Myself”

The two songs that list Ravn as sole songwriter, “For You I’ll Die” and “Let Me Introduce Myself”, convey this sense of professed serious melodrama that characterises the album, in various ways. Running the gamut from strains to whispers, Ravn displays her broad range of voice and vocal techniques throughout both songs, from creaky voice and breathy high register to a powerful chest tone. This variation theatricalises the voice in altogether different ways than Larsen’s thoroughly disciplined and seemingly even-tempered vocal costume does. In Ravn’s case, we are reminded that musical performance is

¹⁰⁸ The displays of humour on the record are kept at a particularly subtle level. One pertinent example is the presence of enigmatic keyboardists Pelé Snoop and Baal E. Fiong in the credits for the title track. These names are oddly reminiscent of the fake toponyms Pillesnoppvägen and Ballefjongberga in the 1990s radio skit “Ett Västeråsnummer” by the Swedish comedy troupe Hassan. The connection to Sweden via Ravn’s collaboration with Max Martin supports this interpretation. As Ravn has obviously allotted this inside joke a place in the booklet for an otherwise “dark and dramatic” record, this bears testimony to a lighter, humorous side to her persona (Kristiansen, 2013) that may not yet have come through at the time other than in below-the-radar hints such as this one.

about “sustaining an emotional reality that prioritizes fidelity and solidarity, hence giving audiences a sense of the ‘real self’” (Hawkins, 2009) (62). The impact of the self as it is staged and performed out on *Here I Am* is certainly made out to be informed by personal experience, and expressive of such an emotional reality on Ravn’s part.

In “For You I’ll Die”, melodrama is employed to great effect in the death motif of the lyrics, situating the song in a lineage of such defining stories about star-crossed lovers as William Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* – and, in the context of Ravn’s age group, certainly Baz Luhrmann’s 1996 film version as well. The naked displays of emotion, to coin Williams’s phrase again, are similarly constructed and negotiated through a combination of old and new traits of popular culture. Effectively, Ravn straddles a divide, contrasting the seemingly time-honoured aristocratic pathos of rock lyrics through the use of ceremonious, “outdated” syntax (“My life for you I’ll waive”, “My soul he wants to buy”, “For you I’ll die”) with references that bring the song into postmodern present time: “Oh this is the end / My only friend the end / Are words from our favorite band”. The American style that signifies the spelling of words such as “favorite” and “color” in the booklet, meanwhile, aligns Ravn to the North American “rock chick” aesthetics of her collaborators as well as her contemporaries, signalling that American English is legal tender in any transcultural context of popular music.

The instrumentation, consisting of vocals accompanied by piano, strings (real or programmed), and synth bass, provides a contrast to the rock band instrumentation that characterises most of the songs on the album. This is significant for at least two reasons. First, the piano-and-strings template has since become a common trait in Ravn’s songs, and also provides a musical environment she is comfortable with, as evidenced by her 2006 duet with Meat Loaf. Second, the absence of generic “rock” elements such as guitars and drums in the music gives Ravn more space for her voice and thus allows her to create a sense of intimacy. This second reason also enables her to mask any streamlining features of the recording process, and thus to “unmask” (read: construct) authenticity through vocal features.

One pertinent example is the delivery of the lines, “It’s been a year that’s gone by / And you don’t know the color of my eyes” in the bridge, where the final word, “by”, of the first line falls on the fourth beat of the bar, and the word “know” of the next line on the first beat of the following bar. As a consequence, Ravn is forced to sing the words “And you don’t” as a rapid triplet between these beats and sustain her voice for almost as long as the full lyric line, gasping for breath before delivering the word “eyes”, where the voice strains on the high C of the song’s ambitus. The hasty, deliberately clumsy delivery indicates a seemingly indisputable urgency of emotion. Hawkins has suggested that such vocal straining is “paramount in connoting effort and elation, where the refusal to temper pitches precisely and embellish tones in a ‘trained’ manner is an integral part of the aesthetic” (2009: 49). The sum of the song’s elements, then, makes up a whole that should not leave the listener in any doubt that Ravn’s song personality as well as her star personality – and hence the persona as a whole, which conveys the illusion of authenticity – is serious about this.

In “Let Me Introduce Myself”, Ravn employs a similar strategy of melodrama in order to stage her persona as spectacle. Against the background of a chromatically descending chord progression of E-G-F#-F, with sampled, slightly off-key strings that lend the song an ominous-sounding vibe, Raven tersely states that, “the fight’s begun” before launching into the chorus, still in E, but now in triumphant major mode:

I’m not blind you see
And you’re not fooling me
You’ve stepped into my territory
Let me introduce myself
Your enemy

By introducing the acoustic version of the song on the *Heads Will Roll* EP as being about “my ex-boyfriend’s new girl”, Ravn frames the narrative as one resembling a personal vendetta, a song of revenge; the reference to stepping into her “territory” makes this seem like an animal’s instinctual reaction (which cunningly hints at a “natural” sexual agency with the protagonist). This sits well

with the staging of anger as the driving force behind the bulk of the songs, opening for a series of variations on the final line of the chorus. In the subsequent choruses, Ravn refers variously to herself as “your reality”, “your morality” and, in the final chorus, “his fantasy”, ensuring that not only the antagonist, but also the object of desire (the ex-boyfriend) “see” her. The spectacularity of Ravn’s protagonist is made to work both ways already in the first line of the chorus, in the possible division of the line into two sentences: “I’m not blind / you see”. The implication is that the protagonist who has had to see her former love fall in love with a new woman, in turn asserts her agency by facing the new girlfriend to settle the score (i.e., to win the boyfriend back). Pandering to the antagonist’s gaze, Ravn’s song personality is also imbued with the right dose of agency to regain control. This has the added bonus of turning her persona into both spectacle and fantasy, characteristics that she employs to even greater effect on the song that arguably created the greatest controversy of her early career, “Heads Will Roll”.

Excess and Spectacle: “Heads Will Roll”

Contemplating the pop star persona as spectacle would suggest an inextricable connection between the audio and the visual where one illuminates and reinforces the other. In the early phase of her solo career, Marion Ravn played on this connection in a number of ways, both as a means of creating continuity between her band persona as a member of M2M and her solo career and as a part of her identity politics as a solo artist who had by now put the relative innocence of teen pop behind her, one trait of which was to exceed the boundaries of the teenage pop star as a means of entering the adult world where sexuality is not bound up in taboos.

Rather than easily pigeonholing Ravn’s persona and the strategies behind it, this should enable us to interpret her joint project of continuity and emancipation as an attempt at re-negotiating her project to accommodate the spectacle of the body, so as to interrogate how “the gendered connotations of vocal and instrumental expression constitute the discursive context for understanding the roles of artists in musical performance” (Hawkins, 2002) (50). This is

particularly fruitful when making sense of the possible variants of excess found in Ravn's song "Heads Will Roll".

Initially written and recorded for *Here I Am*, and later re-recorded for the eponymously titled EP the following year (figure 4.2), "Heads Will Roll" is a product of Ravn's collaboration with Nikki Sixx, the bassist and mastermind of 1980s glam rock band Mötley Crüe, and Sixx's longtime collaborator James Michael. In its original album version, the song is characterised by a particularly playful use of electronic manipulation in the studio, in effect creating a sound that would not be possible to recreate in concert without the use of samples.

Unlike the 2006 version, several of the song's sounds are heavily manipulated in the mix. Consequently, several instruments sound "unlike themselves" when understood along the lines of rock authenticity: For instance, the bass and drums are deconstructed and complemented by what could pass for analogue spaceship sounds from a 1950s sci-fi TV series. Ravn's voice, in similar fashion, is fragmented and made plurivalent. As an example of a song written in collaboration with a musician whom Frith and McRobbie would undoubtedly have called a proponent of "cock rock" (S. Frith & McRobbie, 1990 [1978]), then, the song is removed from this frame and made to function within the framework of Ravn's solo project. This break-up of the monolithic masculinity of cock rock thus gives way, to quote Barbara Bradby, "not to the reconstitution of an equally monolithic female or gay subject centre stage, but to a multiplicity of more partial, ironic, sexual subjectivities, celebrating artifice, not authenticity, as Frith puts it [...]" (Bradby, 1993) (158). Bradby's astute observations of both multiplicity and artifice can apply to Ravn's song, notably through the voice. There are two or three layers of voices at any given time in the song, which makes the subject correspondingly hard to pin down.

Heads Will Roll

[Verse 1]

There's a taste in my mouth that I never had before
To be a cheater, defeater, are things I won't ignore
Like a rat in a trap your head got in the way
Nothing left of you but a memory of a bad lay

[Chorus]

Heads gonna roll (Heads gonna roll)
I'm back in control (back in control)
It's a jungle out there it's gonna eat you up and strip you bare
I'll swallow you whole (swallow you whole)
Then spit out your soul (spit out your soul)
I wanna make this clear, my dear, that heads will roll

[Verse 2]

There's a look in your eyes, am I the one you dread?
You make me wonder what's going on inside your head (inside your head)
You lie and you slither like a cold-blooded snake
I'll make you pay for your big mistake

[Chorus]

Heads gonna roll (Heads gonna roll)
I'm back in control (back in control)
It's a jungle out there it's gonna eat you up and strip you bare
I'll swallow you whole (swallow you whole)
Then spit out your soul (spit out your soul)
I wanna make this clear, my dear, that heads will roll

[Bridge]

When I think of you, I think of this
And then it turns to bitterness
I'm praying for amnesia, I beg for anesthesia
Forget the lies, and numb the pain
If this don't stop I'll go insane
The more I hurt, the more I curse your name

[Chorus]

Heads gonna roll (Heads gonna roll)
I'm back in control (back in control)
It's a jungle out there it's gonna eat you up and strip you bare
I'll swallow you whole (swallow you whole)
Then spit out your soul (spit out your soul)
I wanna make this clear, my dear, that heads will roll
(Repeat and fade)

A swirling electronic ambient sound transports us into the first verse, where an ominous fuzz bass line on F and G is accompanied by a drum pattern augmented by samples. Ravn's voice, in the low register and placed front and centre in the sound-box, is treated in a similar fashion as the bass, sounding like it is performed via a distorted telephone line. Adding an ethereal voice in head-tone an octave above, Ravn intones the line "Nothing left of you but a memory of a bad lay" to a sharp snare drum hit on the word "bad" which opens up the sound and takes the song into the chorus: guitars, bass, and drums go into rock mode,

accompanying Ravn's voice in full chest tone as she sings the chorus to backing vocals that repeat the messages that the protagonist is "back in control" and promise that heads are "gonna roll". An ascending vocal line on "heads gonna roll" from the third up to the tonic fortifies the impression of the protagonist's having the upper hand in the story, while the voice on Bb above a C major chord with a lowered 7th on the line, "It's a jungle out there it's gonna eat you up and strip you bare", reinforces the tension and traits of anger in the lyrics.

Ravn's voice is double-tracked for the first part of the second verse, further confusing the antagonist as to who is talking. This ambiguity is amplified by the guitar playing a figure in G major while the vocal line is sung in minor mode on G and Bb: clearly, the protagonist refuses to be pinned down. Assuring the obviously hapless antagonist that "I'll make you pay for your big mistake", Ravn takes us into the second chorus, once again to a full-blown backing of heavy guitars and rhythm section; there is no mistaking the song personality's agency here.

A short interlude of grinding, deconstructed guitar and free-form drum break takes us to the bridge section. This section, in the relative minor key (e minor), contrasts with the processed, studio-generated sound of the verses and choruses, where acoustic guitar, piano, and a subdued rhythm section replace the electric guitars and dissonant processed electronics. Ravn's voice is translucent in its presence, with an added harmony part entering in the line "I'm praying for amnesia, I beg for anesthesia". The music ends on C major, but with Ravn intoning the final word, "name", on the major seventh note of B. The assertive "I'm back in control" of the chorus is thus rendered ambiguous by the bridge, evidently disclosing the protagonist's self-doubt. The sampled "ping" sound that appears just before the final chorus arguably sounds like something borrowed from a computer, and brings us back to the heavily electronic style and self-confident voice(s) of the chorus.

Exemplary of Ravn's description of *Here I Am* as "a dark and dramatic album about heartbreak, betrayal and revenge", the song works both as a revenge

fantasy and a platform for her persona's agency. Through a series of fantastic and seemingly unambiguous images, the protagonist appears to be getting back at a former lover. In obvious contrast to the strategy Larsen employs in principally similar songs such as "Only A Fool", Ravn's protagonist here sounds bent on revenge – "I'll make you pay for your big mistake" – and asserts her control of the situation, manifested in images that stage Ravn's protagonist as a raving giant who swallows her opponent whole; a relevant comparison would be PJ Harvey's "50 foot queenie", who asserts that "nothing can stop me".¹⁰⁹

Hard-nosed descriptions of revenge are not unambiguous, however, as the bridge section demonstrates: bitterness and hurt are also parts of the mix of feelings that informs the narrative, and the section indicates that the hurt is infinitely worse for being inflicted by a loved one. This opens for an understanding of the song as primarily a narrative of fantasy, where the resolve to take a just vengeance may simply be part of the slow healing process. In the light of this, Ravn's depiction of revenge may be read as more nuanced, and indeed as less excessive, than the angry poise suggests at first sight.

Cleverly, the song utilises biblical allusions: the "cold-blooded snake" may refer to Eve's encounter with the snake that brought about the fall of man, and the image of heads rolling provides a possible connection to the story of Salome. Taken together with the overt, and certainly excessive, imagery of sexual acts (a case in point is Ravn's reducing the antagonist to merely the memory of "a bad lay"), this adds an intertextual layer that also highlights Ravn's struggle to make the transition from teenybopper to young adult.

The most striking rhetorical trait of the song, I would argue, is that of Ravn's powerful reversal of the opponent's gaze in the second verse. In the line "There's a look in your eyes, am I the one you dread?", the protagonist identifies the gaze of the antagonist and turns it around, transforming it into a look of dread in her adversary's eyes. In the structure of the narrative, the line can be interpreted as Ravn's protagonist taking back the narrative voice, subsequently objectifying and

¹⁰⁹ PJ Harvey, "50ft Queenie", *Rid of Me*, Island Records 1993.

rendering the antagonist passive. This strategy can be seen to project the protagonist as spectacle even more powerfully, allowing her to control the gaze as part of the display of Ravn's emerging persona.

Excess and Solidarity: "Heads Will Roll" – the video

In the wake of my musical analysis, the video that accompanied the re-recorded version of "Heads Will Roll" for the 2006 EP release can be interpreted as an extreme version of Ravn's control of the gaze. Set in a parking lot at night, the video has two main narrative strands. The first strand shows a sealed cubical chamber in the middle of the darkened space. The cube has several observation holes, through which the diegetic spectators can see Ravn, dressed in only a miniskirt, lying on her back among a group of writhing, similarly almost-naked women. Interspersed among these images are glimpses of the dumbfounded spectators on the outside; clearly, the dazzling display of femininity has a breathtaking effect on them. The second strand is a seemingly conventional display of the musicians behind the song, notable for chiefly portraying Ravn more as a member of the band than as a solo artist with backing musicians.



Figure 4.2. Front cover for the Heads Will Roll EP (2006). The cover image is taken from the video for the title track.

The video's display of female nudity, which includes Ravn herself appearing virtually undressed, sparked controversy in the Norwegian press and puzzled fans as to Ravn's motivation for such a move. The logic of excess was taken one step further by the press launch of the video. Through an apparently shrewd marketing ploy, the video was made available to the public via the American web site Burning Angel (www.burningangel.com), an alternative music/pornography site exemplary of the phenomenon referred to as "alt.porn". This genre has been described as "defined through its exhibition of non-standard subcultural styles, community features and interaction possibilities", and has emerged through web sites such as SuicideGirls (<http://suicidegirls.com>), which "mesh the pornographic with the subcultural" (Paasonen, 2010) (1299). These sites display amateur, user-generated pornography within the frame of subcultural styles such as goth and punk, mostly with a soft-core content and a more or less direct goal of "countering the porn industry's images, ethics, and business practices" (Ibid.), notably in their combination of publishing the members' blogs and discussions of interests such as music in tandem with pornographic elements.

As such, sites like Burning Angel attempt to bridge the gap between subcultural interest in music and popular culture and so-called alt.porn, thus signifying both the ostensible free-for-all space of the Internet and an attempt at renegotiating and disciplining a platform for pornography outside and independent of the mainstream industry. What distinguishes Burning Angel in this context is the regular display of hard-core pornographic films and images. Albeit created and published by amateurs and thereby invoking aesthetics of authenticity through the promotion of pornographic films and pictures made by “real people”, the contents of the site goes against the soft-core pin-up pastiches that characterise a site such as SuicideGirls, which has a pronounced policy of promoting “the understated beauty of the demure”, in part as a reaction against “the proliferation of hardcore pornography and graphic sex all over the internet and cable”.¹¹⁰ While this is arguably indicative of a conservative streak in the editors’ view of women, it also illuminates how a site such as Burning Angel may have problems aligning the promotion of young people’s subcultural individuality with explicit sex acts.

Ravn herself cited the “rock” style of the web site as a primary reason for choosing to publish her video on Burning Angel. In a move that simultaneously ties in with such subcultural practice and places Ravn at a distance from it, she stated that she chose the web site because “there are so many rockers who frequent it”, adding that, “it really has nothing to do with me”.¹¹¹ Nevertheless, the video’s release via Burning Angel exacerbated the short but considerable controversy in the Norwegian press, causing such headlines as “Marion’s porn stunt”¹¹² and “Naked Marion launched on porn web site”.¹¹³

As an example of excess, this case is particularly appropriate because of the association with pornography, bringing to mind Williams’s description of porn as

¹¹⁰ Missy Suicide (ed.) (2004): *SuicideGirls*, Los Angeles: Feral House, pp. 7–8.

¹¹¹ Nakkim, Frode: “Marion liker å være sexy rock-chick”, *Verdens Gang* 2 August 2006, pp. 30–31.

¹¹² “Se Marions pornostunt”, *Nettavisen/Side 2*, n.d. URL: <http://pub.nettavisen.no/nettavisen/side2/musikk/article691476.ece> (accessed 10 February 2014).

¹¹³ Nakkim, Frode: “Naken-Marion – nå lanseres hun på pornonettside”, *Verdens Gang* 23 July 2006, pp. 38–39.

“the lowest in cultural esteem” in the hierarchy of melodramatic portrayals in popular culture. Despite at least one journalist pointing out that the video does not show any private parts, disguising any pornographic displays beneath miniskirts and strategically placed hair, the general impression of the “Heads Will Roll” video, which the journalist also voiced, was that this was a blatant display of Ravn’s lack of good taste.¹¹⁴

In her first major interview as solo artist, Ravn seems to foreshadow the controversy of such a position by stating that she enjoys being regarded as sexy, and tentatively defining “sexiness” as “self-confidence that does not tip over into self-centredness” (Milde, 2002). This is a point she later laboured in connection with the release of the video for “Heads Will Roll”, emphasising the fun of “being a bit womanly and a bit sexy” (Gran, 2006). Two points arise from this: First, we need to remember that statements such as these do not necessarily reveal anything about the artist’s motivation for choosing such images. Rather, as Andrew Goodwin reminds us, such statements become part of the metanarrative of the pop star set up within the music industry (Goodwin, 1993) (110) and open the video to interpretation as building on “characterisation already established in a star-text” (Ibid. 111). Second, recalling the influence of an artist like Madonna on Ravn, we should see the tactic behind such statements as engaging with and hyperbolising the discourse of femininity (Lewis, 1993) (142). This opens for an understanding of the excess of a music video such as “Heads Will Roll” as part of Ravn’s efforts to renegotiate her persona in an adult world.

How is this carried out as part of the spectacular display of femininity in the video? After all, at first sight, the display of semi-naked women is a blatant pandering to the male gaze, generating only a prurient interest in Ravn’s persona. But is there indeed more to this? I would propose an interpretation of the video as symbolic of Ravn’s development and performance of the persona as spectacle – one that ultimately leaves her in control.

¹¹⁴ Mandelid, Birgitte H.: “Pop og sex”, *Dagbladet* 25 July 2006, p. 41.

To start with, there is the actual situation with the cube. Even though the women are indeed on display in a confined space, Ravn's persona as spectacle maintains a distance to the onlookers, reducing them to "peeping Toms" who remain outside the box, ultimately left to their own devices. This distance robs the (mainly) male "audience" of their power of definition and agency; all they can do is look. As such, Ravn performs out the spectacle from a safe distance – the audience can, literally, only gaze at her. The way Ravn returns the camera's gaze can thus equally signify pleasure in being looked at and an emerging subjectivity that resists complete objectification. The community of women inside the cube, then, none of whom seems interested in putting on a performance for the audience on the outside, can just as well be interpreted as forming a supporting community for Ravn – she is not alone in her being-looked-at-ness, and retains control by keeping her distance in a room of her own.

Unlike Alanis Morissette, who has employed nudity on screen to different ends by appearing undressed in her video for the song "Thank U" (1998), Ravn does not project vulnerability, but assertive agency – albeit an agency that is made visible framed in a context of naked female bodies. In contrast to a website such as SuicideGirls, though, she does not pander to the camera with displays of demureness; to the contrary, the video juxtaposes the images of her among writhing women, her look by turns sultry and self-confident, with scenes of Ravn with her band, straddle-legged and playing electric guitar, showing mastery of the ostensibly masculine-coded instrument. Equally important are the scenes of solidarity between Ravn and her band. The three male musicians are portrayed both from afar, surrounding Ravn and in close-ups singing backing vocals; these are images that situate her firmly within the community of her fellow musicians. A particularly relevant moment is to be found in the second verse, where Ravn stands face to face with the lead guitarist, engaging him in the performance of the lyrics (figure 4.3). This move confirms her place within the context of the rock band, as a musician among equals rather than as a (female) solo artist backed by random (male) musicians.



Figure 4.3. Ravn interacting with the guitarist of her band in the video for “Heads Will Roll”.

The reception of the video is contingent on a confluence of several factors, notably the sense of continuity of Ravn’s work as a recording artist working for Atlantic, her effort to negotiate the passage from teen pop star to adult artist,¹¹⁵ her recent work with Meat Loaf in the bestselling global popular music league,¹¹⁶ and Ravn’s employment of the acting skills and the flamboyant persona she

¹¹⁵ On this point, Mandelid hits the nail on the head when she notes that, “even though ... the video resembles a commercial for lesbianism, the most shocking aspect is likely to be the fact that the former child star performs as adult and sexy” (Mandelid, “Pop og sex”, *ibid.*).

¹¹⁶ Ravn’s performance on “It’s All Coming Back To Me Now” was seemingly reciprocated by Meat Loaf, who endorsed Ravn’s video in an interview as early as August 2006. Here, he referred to the artist as “a true rock chick” and stated that she was poised to become “a huge star” in the USA. This support comes across as a double-edged sword, however, as Meat Loaf also turned to reactionary rhetoric in his praise for the video: “Already halfway through [the video], I said that this worked out very well. I also liked seeing Marion naked, and the other women in the video too. It’s not a bad thing, after all” (Nakkim, “Rock-chick”, *ibid.*). This reduction of Ravn to chiefly an object of desire for the male gaze undermines her agency, and certainly contributed to the impression of her at the time as more interested in bodily display than in “making good music” – an all-too-common critique against female artists who do not toe the line that delimits acceptable gendered behaviour.

cultivated in the second-album phase of M2M, as displayed in their appearance on *Dawson's Creek*. Taken in context, the song, video, and EP must certainly have come across as the antithesis of Larsen's solo project, which was well underway at this point. At any rate, Ravn's employment of excessive displays of femininity in the video cannot be reduced to a mere objectification of the artist, but must perhaps equally be perceived as Ravn's attempt to "undermine the discourse of femininity" (Lewis, 1993) (142), meaning a challenging of the restrictive confines of normative gendered behaviour, which at that time and in that particular context certainly included the frame that Larsen's identity politics set for female artists in general.

Pleasure in Excess: "It's All Coming Back To Me Now"

The notion of excess is framed to different ends in Ravn's 2006 collaboration with Meat Loaf, "It's All Coming Back To Me Now". Written by Jim Steinman and originally recorded in 1989 by Steinman's protégée group Pandora's Box, the song became a worldwide hit for Céline Dion in 1996, helping her album *Falling Into You* become a global bestseller.¹¹⁷ Meat Loaf included the song on his album *Bat Out of Hell III: The Monster is Loose* (2006), the third instalment in his *Bat Out Of Hell* trilogy, where, for the first time, the song appears as a duet. According to Ravn's story as told in *Hver gang vi møtes*, she heard of the audition for duet partners through her song-writing collaboration with the album's producer, Desmond Child. Based in Los Angeles at the time, she attended the audition, which she subsequently passed. The song was released as a single in October 2006, preceding the album's release the same month; the single became a chart-topper in Norway and reached the Top 10 in several countries, including Britain and Germany.¹¹⁸ Ravn also joined the promotional tour for the album in territories including Europe and North America as the support act for Meat

¹¹⁷ Sources disagree on the precise sales figures of *Falling Into You*; however, according to Sony USA's official web site, the album has sold more than 30 million copies on a global basis. URL: <http://www.sony.com/SCA/company-news/press-releases/sony-columbia-records/2013/celine-dions-acclaimed-new-studio-album-loved-me-b.shtml> (accessed 1 February 2014).

¹¹⁸ Hansen, Espen A.: "På topp etter massiv Meat Loaf-kampanje", *Verdens Gang* 25 October 2006, p. 35.

Loaf,¹¹⁹ and also appearing on stage for the performance of “It’s All Coming Back To Me Now” during the main show.

Several factors in Meat Loaf’s musical project, and certainly that of Céline Dion, can be said to signify excess in terms of a transgression of the limits of taste. In the latter’s case, characteristics such as voice, production, arrangements, and pathos are easily understood as signifying all-out commercialism, rubbing against the sensibilities of any person of good taste from its location in what Carl Wilson, invoking art historian Clement Greenberg, calls “‘middlebrow culture’, the politely domineering realm where Céline Dion is queen, unattached to any validating subculture” (Wilson, 2007) (86). Consequently, the massive sales figures of albums such as *Falling Into You* and *Bat Out Of Hell III: The Monster is Loose* can lead any believers in rock authenticity to add the stamp of banality to both albums. The idea that this music appeals to so many million people across the globe would alone turn this music into a lowest common denominator for these millions of listeners, stripping the albums of their credibility, in line with Warwick’s description of rockism as “wary of commercial success” and disdaining “artists who demonstrate too keen an interest in the business of music and entertainment” (Warwick, 2012) (242). Even so, when we consider the fact that Meat Loaf’s original *Bat Out Of Hell* album has also passed the 30-million mark in terms of worldwide sales,¹²⁰ it is obvious that Ravn took a step up, albeit a temporary one, into the multi-million selling league of global pop artists with her participation on “It’s All Coming Back To Me Now”. In this context, the collaboration with Meat Loaf on a version of a smash hit by Céline Dion also sat well with Ravn’s own position at the time, with her contract with Atlantic Records and the release of her first solo album the year before adding to the cosmopolitan flair of her solo project.

¹¹⁹ As part of her story on *Hver gang vi møtes*, Ravn recounted that, because of insufficient funds to bring a band on the road, she played these warm-up shows as a solo act, accompanying herself on guitar and piano.

¹²⁰ URL: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio2/soldonsong/songlibrary/indepth/batoutofhell.shtml> (accessed 1 February 2014).

The three versions of the song are all of considerable length, with the version by Pandora's Box running at 8:24, and Dion's album version clocking in at 7:37. Meat Loaf's version, by comparison, is approximately one and a half minutes shorter than Dion's – the album version runs at 6:05 – partly because of the omission of such elements as the prolonged introduction before the appearance of the theme in Dion's recording, and a slightly edited ending. Otherwise, as a rule the versions are quite similar, with regard to overall song structure as well as the inclusion of narrative musical effects, such as the single stroke four figure in percussion that illustrates the lyric line "But you were history with the slamming of the door" (3:10–3:16). Also, in the version by Pandora's Box, the use of rubato as a narrative means in the music does not really occur until the chorus at 6:54. Both Dion and Meat Loaf/Ravn utilise rubato to a far greater extent throughout their recordings, thus amplifying the pathos of the narrative in order to take the melodrama to new, unprecedented heights.

What most distinguishes Meat Loaf's version is, of course, the inclusion of a second voice. Ravn's performance is afforded ample space both on its own and together with Meat Loaf. The two singers share the lyric lines in different ways in the various parts of the song: they divide the verses between them, with his singing the first half and her singing the second half; they sing the bridges in two-part harmony; and in the second chorus, she sings the title while he follows with the regular lyric lines, before they end each line in two-part harmony again.

Arguably, the striking trait of this re-working of the song for two voices is found in the chorus. Here, Ravn repeats the original lines sung by Meat Loaf, adding a voice that functions both as a ghost of a past love and as a sounding board: Ravn's vocal melody descends from the major third to the tonic interjected between the song's original chorus phrases which rise from the dominant to the tonic, thus meeting Meat Loaf's ascending melody on the tonic that, as a consequence, assumes the function of safe common ground. She also ends the lyric lines with an added second part to create a two-part harmony once again. Thus, Ravn and Meat Loaf sing every occurrence of the title's hook together in the chorus, heightening the level of affect; the blending (or, rather, union) of

their voices certainly brings the ingenuity of the song to the fore. In Céline Dion's version, she sings all these parts herself, practically accompanying herself in a soliloquy, notably in the song's closing segment; the polyphony is created by one voice alone. By comparison, Meat Loaf and Ravn turn the song into the protagonist's conversation with the ghost of a loved one, creating a dialogue that resembles grandiose cinematic moments such as Ewan MacGregor and Nicole Kidman's love duet, known as the "Elephant Love Medley", in the 2001 film *Moulin Rouge!*.

This association with *Moulin Rouge!* suggests a link to the genres of stage and film musicals. In turn, this opens for a look at the effective employment of tragedy as part of a storyline, such as the pastiche on the tragic death of The Lady of the Camellias in *Moulin Rouge!*, or the nostalgia for a time now past in Andrew Lloyd Webber's "Memory" from the 1981 stage musical *Cats*. What is more, the interpretation of Ravn's character in the song as a ghost (which is amply supported by her role in the accompanying music video) provides an important connection to "For You I'll Die". In this song, Ravn's protagonist strikes a deal with the devil to prove to her antagonist that "for you I'll die". In a broader context of melodrama, her character in "It's All Coming Back To Me Now" has already died, but lives on in the song as a spectral representation of undying love. The obvious link here is Ravn's own training as a child actor in stage musicals. Given that Meat Loaf's *Bat Out Of Hell* album trilogy, with its recurrent theme of death and resurrection projected via a series of highly theatrical rock songs, plays out not unlike a jukebox musical, Ravn can thus be seen to invest her role in "It's All Coming Back To Me Now" with her own theatrical experience while also drawing on her work as a solo artist. This arguably indicates that her subjectivity complements Meat Loaf, as well as vice versa, and thereby also shows the dexterity with which she employs strategies of excess in her music.

Initially, the addition of a second voice in the song did not necessarily sit well with listeners who were accustomed to hearing, and savouring, Dion's voice

alone.¹²¹ One way of grappling with this problematic is to see it as an example of what Allan F. Moore has called friction, meaning the tension that operates “between the expectations listeners can bring to a track, on the basis of normative assumptions, and a track’s frequent refusal to conform to those assumptions” (Moore, 2012) (163). Without a doubt, fans of Céline Dion are in principle no less interested in being pulled out of their comfort zone than are fans of any other music. In this respect, the second voice may seem to unnecessarily crowd the song – adding an element of *excess* – and engendering friction “between the norms of a track’s (apparent) style, and what it actually does” (Ibid. 177). However, I argue that the presence of a second voice is precisely what Ravn needs to make her mark on the song. The addition of the second, echo-like voice (which, incidentally, has a grounding in the version by Pandora’s Box, where a chorus sings a more subdued variant at 5:58; still, this is a noncommittal choir backing up the lead singer, but providing a melody that Ravn builds on to create a proper duet) allows her to circumvent any accusations of merely copying Dion, and instead to add a touch of her own – namely the descending vocal melody from major third to tonic interjected between the song’s original chorus phrases sung by Meat Loaf, meeting Meat Loaf’s ascending melody on the tonic before the two voices reach closure in unison.

One further aspect of the song worth mentioning is that of *schmaltz*, a musical aesthetic that in many ways is the most effective strategy for capturing and displaying excess, a vehicle for conveying truly grandiose feelings in music. Tracing the history of schmaltz through the development of nineteenth-century parlour music and Italian opera, and these genres’ attendant effects on 20th century American popular song, Country & Western music, and rock singers such as Elvis Presley, Wilson formulates a theory of Céline Dion’s music as extracting “all the most concentrated emotional elixirs, from opera to parlor song to arena rock” and blending them into “a recipe for hyperschmaltz, a Frankenggenre of sentimental intensity” (Wilson, 2007) (60). Traits of schmaltz in “It’s All Coming Back To Me Now”, such as the combination of “operatic” voices with a rock band, have possible ties to kitsch in the presumably “unclean” mix of elements of stage

¹²¹ I am grateful to Mari Barwin for this observation.

musicals and MOR/AOR music – what Wilson refers to as “the Eurotrash hash of schmaltz and rock in Andrew Lloyd Webber” (Ibid.) – maybe in part precisely because of the song’s connection to Céline Dion. Excess, in this case, can be located as an unashamed, melodramatic mix of rock and opera and the employment of blatantly obvious musical means (e.g., drums illustrating a door slamming shut), and thus of banality, but also as the strong element of theatricality in the music. Voices and musicians perform in virtuosic manner, with no expense spared (but, lest we forget, with an efficacy that is also wholly dependent on the singers’ ability to discipline and control their voices). As a rock performance, then, Meat Loaf and Ravn’s version of the song sits comfortably in the lineage from the original recording by Pandora’s Box, but turns the comparatively pedestrian original into a considerably more magnificent piece of music by cleverly playing on the grandeur of melodrama.

Interpreting schmaltz as just a “Frankenggenre” would be to miss the point of musical meaning. An understanding of “It’s All Coming Back To Me Now” as exemplary of schmaltz also highlights the use of the pleasures in the music of artists such as Dion and Meat Loaf. As a discourse on the disciplining function of authenticity, schmaltz can be interpreted as shameless excess, not adhering to the strict ideological rules of realness and honesty. Consequently, this opens for an understanding of schmaltz as itself a frame and thereby a site of meaning production. As Wilson puts it:

[Schmaltz] is not firmly a genre – it’s a descriptor, or an adjective (‘schmaltzy’) or a verb (‘schmaltz it up’), applied to any musical moment of saturated, demonstrative sentiment. But when you come to Céline [Dion’s] American hits, ‘Because You Loved Me’ or ‘It’s All Coming Back To Me Now’ or ‘My Heart Will Go On’, schmaltz seems less a quality exhibited than the essential terrain being worked – it functions as an organizing system, as a genre does. (2007: 53)

On these grounds, the ostensible excess of Ravn makes sense as a part of her repertoire – a repertoire broad enough to take on the music of Céline Dion and Meat Loaf, as it is made available on multi-million selling classic albums, as well as both her M2M past and the rock aesthetics of her first album.

Excess Disciplined: “Casanova”

There can be no doubt that the combination of factors that determined such artistic choices as the duet with Meat Loaf and the video for “Heads Will Roll” had an effect on the Norwegian audience’s perception of Ravn at the time. This was, however, also compounded by the lack of new musical product in the following years. Ravn’s sole musical output in the four years following the *Heads Will Roll* EP in the autumn of 2006 was the album *Set Me Free*, released by Eleven Seven Music in 2007 and marketed as her European and North American debut. The album contained six songs from *Here I Am* and one from *Heads Will Roll*, including “13 Days”, which was consequently released for the third time, having been included on both previous releases as well. In the same period of time, Ravn toured as a warm-up act for artists such as P!nk (I. W. Tennfjord, 2010; Åmotsbakken, 2012).

During this time, Ravn kept a low profile in the Norwegian media, a strategy that reinforced the local audience’s impression that she had blackened her reputation with her excessive choices in the first phase of her solo career, and that this and other factors led to a decline in record sales.¹²² When Ravn resurfaced in the Norwegian public in 2010, as a judge on the TV talent show *X Factor*, it was arguably as representative of a more mature and considered persona that still retained the flamboyance of the pop star, as evidenced in the release of two singles for the Norwegian market that year: “Flesh and Bone”, which was largely panned by critics, and “Found Someone”, which met with considerably more optimism.¹²³

¹²² One journalist put this in a harsher light with his ironic remark on the work of the former M2M members towards the end of 2006: “Marion Ravn struggles to break through on the international pop scene, and has to resort to extreme necklines in order to be heard. Marit Larsen, meanwhile, has taken the home audience by storm, in a flowery dress and with songs she wrote herself, on jealousy and suchlike. That’s what we like the best.” (Pedersen, Bernt Erik: “Heim te mor”, *Dagsavisen* 2 December 2006, p. 38.)

¹²³ These two singles make up the entire released material from Ravn’s projected 2010 album *Nevermore*, which was ultimately shelved. Ravn has attributed this variously to “a record label that went bankrupt” (Tennfjord, 2013) and the loss of key people in the company, as well as the company’s owning the rights to the recordings (Kristiansen, 2013). In retrospect, the overall impression is that Ravn was not in control of the situation, e.g. not knowing anything about tentative release dates (Tennfjord, 2010). As such, the story is indicative of Ravn’s resolution to release her next album independently, forming her own label for this purpose.

This returns us to the question of Ravn's appearance on *Hver gang vi møtes*, where, in the show's first episode, the flamboyance of Raven's performance persona is given a further twist. In the dramaturgical context of *Hver gang vi møtes*, Anita Skorgan's performance of "For You I'll Die" may well be seen as a return favour for Ravn's performance of Skorgan's 1977 Eurovision Song Contest entry "Casanova" in the first episode. Here, Ravn's display of showmanship (or, rather, *showwomanship*) suggests that she is already way ahead of Skorgan, who, in choosing a melodramatic song from *Here I Am*, obviously pays tribute to the already past incarnation of Marion Raven. Ravn seizes the opportunity not so much to re-invent as to re-perform herself. Coming out in a nationally popular TV programme as a confident artist, she now commands the flamboyant humour of disco as well as the seriousness of the angry young "rock chick" singer-songwriter.



Figure 4.4. Ravn performing "Casanova" on *Hver gang vi møtes*.

Ravn's re-arranging of the song from the original major key and stomping, orchestral, almost marching-band-like style into a 1970s disco pastiche in a minor key, provides "Casanova" with an urban, electronic sense of style through the use of electric piano and guitar. Re-thinking the song's soundscape in this way lends to it a gravity that functions equally as a vehicle for Ravn's on-stage persona. Dressed in a blue two-piece outfit that resembles a jumpsuit, she works the audience through controlled yet ebullient gestures and looks. Through savvy

and craftsmanship, Ravn thus creates a version that borders on camp, but never exceeds the frames of family entertainment. All in all, her stage presence draws on her entire career, from her acting experience in musicals via her stage persona in M2M to her arguably intrepid appearance with Meat Loaf. This indicates a renegotiation and re-invention of the Ravn persona, most notably in her reverting to the Ravn name, discarding Raven as part of her work as a pop artist, at least for her home audience. The confidence she displays as a performer within the frame of well-oiled reality TV thus bears testimony both to her love of the limelight and to her ability to re-invent her persona without discarding her former strategies; instead, she maintains the continuity of Ravn/Raven by performing out a new variant that comes across as both new and experienced (figure 4.4).

Chapter 5

Conclusions

M2M

There can be no doubt that Marit Larsen and Marion Ravn's time as global teen pop stars in M2M made their adolescence radically different, not to say extraordinary. But does the extraordinariness start with M2M, and does it end there? In this thesis, I have suggested that Larsen and Ravn's "growing up in public" started with the musical training they received from early childhood, which was equally available to both despite differences in social background, and that this training – crucially, their acting and singing in local productions of internationally renowned musicals – provided them with tools for shaping their personae that both have employed during their careers, together and as solo artists. In closing I also wish to point out that, as a duo who achieved worldwide fame and opened up new spaces for female performers, the story of M2M impinges on both Larsen's and Ravn's histories as solo performers. Fans' perceptions are invariably influenced by the discourse of the other. This further supports my claim that the entire discourse on Marit Larsen is somehow contingent on perceptions of Marion Ravn.

The two girls of similar but different backgrounds are theatricalised as a strong unit with Marit & Marion and the first-album stage of M2M, performing out agency in their songs with "one voice" (cf. the interchangeability of "Don't Say You Love Me" and "Give a Little Love"). On the second album, they appear to already grow out of these roles, and the second-album phase indicates new and distinct subjectivities (cf. the video appearance in "Everything"). As a result of this, the division of Larsen and Ravn as artists has engendered stereotypical dichotomies, the most obvious being that Larsen, as the one who plays an instrument, is the "gifted" one. This way, we see how journalists, as agents in the media, contribute to upholding myths and slander that may be used against the one while purporting to support the other.

The difference in background of Larsen and Ravn, contrary to the popular belief that has arisen from such dichotomies, indicates that Ravn is in fact the underdog from the start. Her background looks more working class – large family, teacher and social worker as parents – compared to Larsen’s more privileged background – musician parents, small family. This would necessarily influence both taste and methodology. Ravn has had to “work her way up” in different ways than Larsen. She might also have been more influenced by contemporary popular music (Céline Dion, Mariah Carey, Spice Girls) than Larsen, who has for all intents and purposes grown up with a much closer proximity to music in general, and the discipline of classical music in particular.

As a consequence, Ravn may not have had access to the distinction and discipline of classical music that Larsen has had from the outset. Instead, she may have cultivated an even stronger love for show business and the glamorous and alluring life of the pop star. This is a possible reason for the discernible continuity from Ravn’s later M2M character to her solo artist persona. In turn, this may have influenced Larsen’s choice to create a persona for her solo career that differs from both her M2M character *and* Ravn’s project. Thus, the discourse on M2M is crucial for the understanding of Larsen’s solo project and the reception of her music.

Marit Larsen

In the course of her solo career, Marit Larsen has performed an impressive re-invention of her persona. One reason for this might be that, contrary to previous variants, such as the child star of the theatre, Marit from Marit & Marion, and the girl with the guitar in M2M, she is ostensibly “on her own” as a solo artist. In this sense, her persona is the product of several people’s efforts, including her producer Kåre Chr. Vestrheim and her manager Morten Andreassen, as well as a variety of journalists and reviewers who contribute to this persona through the media.

This persona may be read as Larsen's fictive, or rather fictionalised, version of her life, with herself as the protagonist. This mobilises her to stage her persona as an (ideal) image of her own life, notably via strategies of telling, such as her alleged disclosure of her own jealousy as part of the promotional campaign for her first album.

While such assertions may seem obvious, they certainly take on relevance in the case of Larsen. In the performance of her fictitious persona, she cannot at any point be perceived as honest or true. As an artist who makes a living from constructing and ostensibly selling a version of her own life via the persona, she cannot allow herself to be trapped by any element of this construction. This engenders and informs what I see as Larsen's near-complete control, not only of her persona, but also of how it is disseminated and comprehended via the media.

Control such as this is contingent on Larsen's employment of several factors in her persona, notably fake naivety, female stereotypes, banality, and strategies of distance. In Larsen's solo project, these traits all work together to ensure the accessibility of the music and arguably the persona, as well as the sustainability of uncontested notions of the artist's sincerity, honesty, and authenticity. Drawing on her lifelong experience as a performing artist, Larsen has also created a solo persona for herself that differs or signals distance from both M2M and Marion Ravn, a trait that has undoubtedly facilitated her transformation as an artist, from teen pop star to singer-songwriter.

Marion Ravn

In the immediate context of her solo career, Marion Ravn's employment of excess arguably starts with her being vocal about her ambitions at an early stage. As I have pointed out, this is not solely or even primarily her own doing, but the result of a confluence of factors such as the geographical location of the record company, the relative inexperience of Ravn's supportive persons, and Ravn's own handling of the contextual differences between the USA and Norway. We may add to this the dimension of media depictions, which tend to scramble the

message by adding or subtracting statements that may be read unfavourably and even as examples of her being arrogant about her status as a solo artist.¹²⁴ This would establish a framework that her music, as it sounds on *Here I Am*, operates within, but also exceeds – cases in point being the musical representation of anger on the album, as well as the cover image. Such excess, however, did not initially hamper the reception of the album, which was good overall. The reception also accommodated the song “Heads Will Roll” despite its presumably shocking lyrical content. To this end, “Heads Will Roll” may be interpreted as asserting agency and subjectivity in part through shocking effect; the subsequent re-release of the song with an attendant, intentionally controversial music video generated a form of excess that Ravn herself could not control.

Ravn’s duet with Meat Loaf also signifies the excess of her persona as comfortable with, even relishing, her “star” status. This reminds us that any suggestion of excess in Ravn’s music and persona is contingent upon the listener-spectator’s perceptions of Larsen. Arguably, displays of excess in the context of Ravn’s first album and in songs such as “Heads Will Roll” must be understood in the context of Larsen’s solo *début* the same year. This pertains not least to the image of Larsen as a disciplined, modest, and demure artist who prefers to stay out of the limelight when she does not have new music to share, an image that she mediates through statements such as “I am not a part of this circus ... I am an outsider, I always have been” (Hoffengh, 2009). Ravn’s subsequent participation as a judge on *Idol* and *X Factor* can here be interpreted as a combination of her love of the limelight and as a toning down of excess, of her taking steps towards respectability, yet also steps that would inevitably be perceived as inauthentic by rockists as well as by Larsen’s fans.

¹²⁴ An early example of this is found in the first major interview with Ravn after the break-up of M2M had been made public. The headline of the newspaper spread unequivocally states that Marion does not for a second grieve about M2M now being a thing of the past: “Marion føler intet vemod” (roughly, “Marion feels no trace of wistfulness”). As it turns out, this statement is not given by Ravn herself, but is a part of the interviewer’s question: “You are not wistful?”, to which she replies: “No, I have had four good years. There have been some disappointments, but there is no better school for artists [...] I take the positive aspects with me into my career.” (Hansen, Espen A.: “Marion føler intet vemod”, *Verdens Gang* 24 September 2002, pp. 38–39). The headline, however, can be interpreted as her own statement, and has possibly contributed to the media’s early impression and depiction of Ravn as arrogant and ruthless.

The familiarity with the medium of television that these assignments have given Ravn can be seen as a precursor for her appearance on *Hver gang vi møtes*. In the light of this, Ravn's participation and negotiation of honesty on *Hver gang vi møtes* signifies a move towards "mature" respectability – and, consequently, less a form of absolutism than a clever re-invention of Ravn's persona. Rather than disclosing any "truth" about Ravn, then, the performance on *Hver gang vi møtes* assumes the function of a summing up of her career so far; it suggests a gathering up of the thematic threads that enable her to capitalise on her skills as a singer and stage performer, which points ahead to the launch of her second album the same year.

I argue that, on her first album, Marion Ravn's subjectivity arises out of an intersection of multiple factors: on the one hand, traits that provide her with dominant identity (cisgendered,¹²⁵ able-bodied, moneyed, Caucasian, Western European, straight-identified, middle-class trappings), and on the other hand, traits that mark her as "minority" in the context of Anglophone popular music (female, Nordic). From this, she negotiates her subjectivity through her employment of rock music conventions (authenticity, production values, language) in a transcultural context, attempting to make an impression on an international audience. In addition to class and race, gender plays a crucial role as well, in how the female artist is presented.

In popular music, the authentic does not compute if it does not communicate, meaning that it does not come across as intelligible to the listening party. Thus, for both Ravn and Larsen, the emotional authenticity of their lyrical/vocal output depends upon their ability to communicate in a dominant language.

On the one hand, there are the identity-categories listed above. On the other hand, when we focus on the music, there are the multiple subjectivities that Ravn

¹²⁵ I use the term *cisgendered*, following Enke, as a term that designates staying within parameters for normative gendered behaviour (Enke, 2012) (61), and functioning as a binary opposition to a term such as "transgendered"; in doing so, a cisgendered person ostensibly stays in line instead of crossing the line, "as though we agree upon what and where that line may be as well as on what constitutes male and female" (ibid. 73). For the purposes of my argument, the term designates the stereotypical idea of "normality" that comes with heteronormativity, and the ever-increasing complexity of such normality.

negotiates as an individual making music: as a twenty-something adult who seeks to keep a distance to her teen-pop past; a solo artist who strives to reinvent herself after gaining world-wide fame as one half of a duo; a Norwegian artist who navigates international waters, namely Sweden and the US; and the experienced artist who is going up in the world of popular music, working with internationally renowned producers and songwriters.

Similar to Larsen, Ravn's use of the English language is part of her persona, in that it offers a distance that allows her to construct her star persona at a certain distance to herself. What is more, it informs her pop subjectivity insofar as it provides her with a platform for display of purported honesty and authenticity in a way that becomes culturally intelligible both abroad and, arguably, at home. On her first album, this is conveyed with the help of international (Swedish and American) producers as part of a style that is marketable across the platinum triangle (Laing 1997).

Performance strategies are bound up in questions of style. For artists such as Larsen and Ravn, these styles permeate their music and their personae. This does not result in any un-Norwegian pop products, but rather shapes and produces Norwegian artists as *transcultural constructs*.

Works cited

- Adorno, T. W. (1990 [1941]). On Popular Music. In S. Frith & A. Goodwin (Eds.), *On Record: Rock, Pop, and the Written Word* (pp. 301–314). London and New York: Routledge.
- Ahmed, S. (2010). *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Alberti, J. (1999). 'I Have Come Out To Play': Jonathan Richman and the Politics of the Faux Naïf. In K. J. H. Dettmar & W. Richey (Eds.), *Reading Rock and Roll: Authenticity, Appropriation, Aesthetics* (pp. 173–189). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Arntsen, E. O. (2008). Naive Larsen. *IKON* (5/2008), 32–35.
- Auslander, P. (2006). *Performing Glam Rock: Gender and Theatricality in Popular Music*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Auslander, P. (2009). Musical Persona: The Physical Performance of Popular Music. In D. B. Scott (Ed.), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Popular Musicology* (pp. 303–315). Farnham: Ashgate.
- Bakken, W. (1983). *Norge i rock, beat & blues* (Vol. 1). Oslo: Erik Sandberg as.
- Bannister, M. (2006). *White Boys, White Noise: Masculinities and 1980s Indie Guitar Rock*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Bayton, M. (1998). *Frock Rock: Women Performing Popular Music*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Booth, W. C. (1983). *The Rhetoric of Fiction. Second Edition*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Brackett, D. (2000 [1995]). *Interpreting Popular Music*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Bradby, B. (1990). Do-Talk and Don't-Talk: The Division of the Subject in Girl-Group Music. In S. Frith & A. Goodwin (Eds.), *On Record: Rock, Pop, and the Written Word* (pp. 341-368). London and New York: Routledge.
- Bradby, B. (1992). Like a Virgin-Mother? Materialism and Maternalism in the Songs of Madonna. *Cultural Studies*, 6, 73-96.
- Bradby, B. (1993). Sampling Sexuality: Gender, Technology and the Body in Dance Music. *Popular Music*, 12(2), 155-176.

- Bradby, B. (1995). Lesbians and Popular Music: Does it Matter Who is Singing? In W. Straw, S. Johnson, R. Sullivan & P. Friedlander (Eds.), *Popular Music – Style and Identity: International Association for the Study of Popular Music: Seventh International Conference on Popular Music Studies* (pp. 33–44). Montreal: The Centre for Research on Canadian Cultural Industries and Institutions.
- Bradby, B., & Torode, B. (2000). Pity Peggy Sue. In R. Middleton (Ed.), *Reading Pop: Approaches to Textual Analyses in Popular Music* (pp. 203–227). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Chaudhuri, S. (2006). *Feminist film theorists: Laura Mulvey, Kaja Silverman, Teresa de Lauretis, Barbara Creed*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Christie, N., & Bruun, K. (2003 [1985]). *Den gode fiende: Narkotikapolitikk i Norden*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
- Danielsen, H. (2002). *Husmorhistorier: Norske husmødre om menn, barn og arbeid*. Oslo: Spartacus.
- Dibben, N. (2009). *Björk*. London: Equinox.
- Dysthe, P. (2008). Snill pike? *Henne* (December 2008), 24–31.
- Eggum, J., & Bergan, J. V. (2013). *Norsk pop & rock leksikon: fra Abel til Aabel. Second Edition*. Oslo: Vega Forlag.
- Eggum, J., Ose, B., & Steen, S. (2005). *Norsk pop & rockleksikon: populærmusikk i hundre år*. Oslo: Vega Forlag.
- Endresen, R. T., Simonsen, H. G., & Sveen, A. (2000). *Innføring i lingvistikk*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
- Englis, B. G., Solomon, M. R., & Ashmore, R. D. (1994). Beauty Before the Eyes of the Beholders: The Cultural Encoding of Beauty Types in Magazine Advertising and Music Television. *Journal of Advertising*, 23(2), 49–64.
- Enke, A. F. (2012). The Education of Little Cis: Cisgender and the Discipline of Opposing Bodies. In A. Enke (Ed.), *Transfeminist Perspectives in and beyond Transgender and Gender Studies* (pp. 60–77). Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Falkenberg-Arell, R. (2012). Kaos under overflaten. *Kamille* (February 2012), 20–24.
- Fast, S. (2001). *In the Houses of the Holy: Led Zeppelin and the Power of Rock Music*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

- Fast, S. (2009). 'Girls: Rock Your Boys!': The Continuing Non-History of Women in Rock Music. In A. Kreutziger-Herr & K. Losleben (Eds.), *History/Herstory: Alternative Musikgeschichte* (pp. 154–172). Köln, Weimar, Wien: Böhlau Verlag.
- Fast, S. (2010). Bold Soul Trickster: The 60s Tina Signifies. In L. Stras (Ed.), *She's So Fine: Reflections on Whiteness, Femininity, Adolescence and Class in 1960s Music* (pp. 203–234). Farnham: Ashgate.
- Fløgstad, G., & Vaa, A. (2009). *Norsk er et lite språk som er i ferd med å dø ut: og andre myter om språk*. Oslo: Kagge Forlag.
- Fotland, M. G. (2011). Privatisten. *Dagbladet Magasinet* (19 November 2011), 48–51.
- Frankplads, P. C. (2008). Marit Larsen: Prosessen bak *The Chase*. *Musikkpraksis*, 25(5), 24–31.
- Frith, K., Shaw, P., & Cheng, H. (2005). The Construction of Beauty: A Cross-Cultural Analysis of Women's Magazine Advertising. *Journal of Communication*, 55(1), 56–70.
- Frith, S. (1996). *Performing Rites: Evaluating Popular Music*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Frith, S., & McRobbie, A. (1990 [1978]). Rock and Sexuality. In S. Frith & A. Goodwin (Eds.), *On Record: Rock, Pop, and the Written Word* (pp. 371–389). London and New York: Routledge.
- Førsund, J. (2011). Under overflaten. *ELLE* (12/2011), 48–52.
- Gaar, G. G. (2002 [1992]). *She's A Rebel: The History of Women in Rock & Roll. Expanded Second Edition*. New York, NY: Seal Press.
- Gebesmair, A. (2009). The Transnational Music Industry. In D. B. Scott (Ed.), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Popular Musicology* (pp. 467–483). Farnham: Ashgate.
- Giske, I. (2008). Redd for å bli for lykkelig. *VG Helg* (11 October 2008), 6–12.
- Gonsholt, S. V. (2006). Kvinne på randen. *Dagbladet* (22 July 2006), 24–25.
- Goodwin, A. (1993). *Dancing in the Distraction Factory: Music Television and Popular Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Gran, R. B. (2006). Ravn uten rede. *Spirit*, 13(9/2006), 38–40.

- Greig, C. (1997). Female Identity and the Woman Songwriter. In S. Whiteley (Ed.), *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender* (pp. 168–177). London and New York: Routledge.
- Grossberg, L. (1994). Is Anybody Listening? Does Anybody Care? On Talking about 'The State of Rock'. In A. Ross & T. Rose (Eds.), *Microphone Fiends: Youth Music and Youth Culture* (pp. 41–58). New York and London: Routledge.
- Gundersen, J. A. (2009). På ville veier. *Dagbladet Fredag* (24 April 2009), 28–31.
- Hansen, E. A. (2002). Marion føler intet vemod. *Verdens Gang* (24 September 2002), 38–39.
- Hansen, E. A. (2005). Folkene i dress skal forstå at jeg ikke må være som Britney. *Verdens Gang* (16 July 2005), 36–37.
- Hawkins, S. (1997). The Pet Shop Boys: Musicology, Masculinity and Banality. In S. Whiteley (Ed.), *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender* (pp. 118–133). London and New York: Routledge.
- Hawkins, S. (1999). Musical Excess and Postmodern Identity in Björk's Video It's Oh So Quiet. *Musiikin Suunta*, 21(2), 43–54.
- Hawkins, S. (2002). *Settling the Pop Score: Pop Texts and Identity Politics*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Hawkins, S. (2009). *The British Pop Dandy: Masculinity, Popular Music and Culture*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Hawkins, S. (2011). 'You Have Killed Me' – Tropes of Hyperbole and Sentimentality in Morrissey's Musical Expression. In E. Devereux, A. Dillane & M. J. Power (Eds.), *Morrissey: Fandom, Representations and Identities* (pp. 307–323). Bristol and Chicago: Intellect.
- Hawkins, S. (2012). 'Great, Scott!'. In S. Hawkins (Ed.), *Critical Musicological Reflections: Essays in Honour of Derek B. Scott* (pp. 1–20). Farnham: Ashgate.
- Hill, T. (2002). Why Isn't Country Music 'Youth' Culture? In R. Beebe, D. Fulbrook & B. Saunders (Eds.), *Rock Over The Edge: Transformations in Popular Music Culture* (pp. 161–190). Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Hinton, B. (1996). *Joni Mitchell: Both Sides Now*. London: Sanctuary Publishing Limited.
- Hoffengh, S. (2009). Snill og gal. *Dagsavisen* (24 January 2009), 29.

- Hvenegård-Lassen, K., & Maurer, S. (2012). Bodies and Boundaries. In K. Loftsdóttir & L. Jensen (Eds.), *Whiteness and Postcolonialism in the Nordic Region: Exceptionalism, Migrant Others and National Identities* (pp. 119–139). Farnham: Ashgate.
- Ingraham, C. (1994). The Heterosexual Imaginary: Feminist Sociology and Theories of Gender. *Sociological Theory*, 12(2), 203–219.
- Ingraham, C. (Ed.). (2005). *Thinking Straight: The Power, the Promise, and the Paradox of Heterosexuality*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Kassabian, A. (2001). *Hearing Film: Tracking Identifications in Contemporary Hollywood Film Music*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Kerton, S. (2006). Too Much, Tatu Young: Queering Politics in the World of Tatu. In S. Whiteley & J. Rycenga (Eds.), *Queering the Popular Pitch* (pp. 155–167). New York and London: Routledge.
- Korsyn, K. (2003). *Decentering Music: A Critique of Contemporary Musical Research*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kramer, L. (1990). *Music as Cultural Practice, 1800–1900*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Kramer, L. (2006). *Critical Musicology and the Responsibility of Response: Selected Essays*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Krims, A. (2010). The Changing Functions of Music Recordings and Listening Practices. In A. Bayley (Ed.), *Recorded Music: Performance, Culture and Technology* (pp. 68–85). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kristiansen, M. (2013). 100 % Marion. *Det Nye* (12/2013), 26–31.
- Kydland, E. (2011). Musikkens mysterier. *Aftenposten K* (December 2011), 72–77.
- Lacasse, S. (2010). Slave to the Supradiegetic Rhythm: A Microrhythmic Analysis of Creaky Voice in Sia's 'Breathe Me'. In A. Danielsen (Ed.), *Musical Rhythm in the Age of Digital Reproduction* (pp. 141–155). Farnham: Ashgate.
- Laing, D. (1997). Rock Anxieties and New Music Networks. In A. McRobbie (Ed.), *Back to Reality?: Social Experience and Cultural Studies* (pp. 116–132). Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press.
- Leppert, R. (1993). *The Sight of Sound: Music, Representation, and the History of the Body*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press.

- Leppert, R. (2008). Gender Sonics: The Voice of Patsy Cline. In S. Baur, R. Knapp & J. Warwick (Eds.), *Musicological Identities: Essays in Honor of Susan McClary* (pp. 191–203). Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Lewis, L. A. (1993). Being Discovered: The Emergence of Female Address on MTV. In S. Frith, A. Goodwin & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Sound and Vision: The Music Video Reader* (pp. 129–151). London and New York: Routledge.
- Lutz, H. (2011). *The New Maids: Transnational Women and the Care Economy* (D. Shannon, Trans.). London and New York: Zed Books.
- Mayhew, E. (2004). Positioning the Producer: Gender Divisions in Creative Labour and Value. In S. Whiteley, A. Bennett & S. Hawkins (Eds.), *Music, Space and Place: Popular Music and Cultural Identity* (pp. 149–162). Aldershot: Ashgate.
- McClary, S. (2002 [1991]). *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality. With a New Introduction*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.
- McClintock, A. (2004 [1993]). Maid to Order: Commercial S/M and Gender Power. In P. C. Gibson (Ed.), *More Dirty Looks: Gender, Pornography and Power. Second Edition* (pp. 237–253). London: BFI Publishing.
- McRobbie, A. (2009). *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*. Los Angeles and London: Sage.
- Melby, K. (2007). Disiplinering til reproduksjon. In T. Annfelt, B. Andersen & A. Bolsø (Eds.), *Når heteroseksualiteten må forklare seg* (pp. 47–65). Trondheim: Tapir Akademisk Forlag.
- Mercer, M. (2012 [2009]). *Will You Take Me As I Am: Joni Mitchell's Blue Period*. Milwaukee, WI: Backbeat Books.
- Middleton, R. (2003). Introduction: Music Studies and the Idea of Culture. In M. Clayton, T. Herbert & R. Middleton (Eds.), *The Cultural Study of Music: A Critical Introduction* (pp. 1–15). New York and London: Routledge.
- Middleton, R. (2007). O Brother, Let's Go Down Home: Loss, Nostalgia and the Blues. *Popular Music*, 26(1), 47–64.
- Milde, T. (2002). Den nye kvinnen. *Mann* (November 2002), 54–60.
- Milestone, K., & Meyer, A. (2012). *Gender and Popular Culture*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Mitchell, G. (2007). *The North American Folk Music Revival: Nation and Identity in the United States and Canada, 1945–1980*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

- Mitchell, T. (2004). Doin' Damage in my Native Language: The use of 'resistance vernaculars' in hip hop in Europe and Aotearoa/New Zealand. In S. Whiteley, A. Bennett & S. Hawkins (Eds.), *Music, Space and Place: Popular Music and Cultural Identity* (pp. 108–123). Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Moi, T. (1999). *What Is a Woman? And Other Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Moore, A. F. (2002). Authenticity as Authentication. *Popular Music*, 21(2), 209–223.
- Moore, A. F. (2007). Introduction. In A. F. Moore (Ed.), *Critical Essays in Popular Musicology* (pp. ix–xxii). Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Moore, A. F. (2012). *Song Means: Analysing and Interpreting Popular Recorded Song*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Moorefield, V. (2005). *The Producer as Composer: Shaping the Sounds of Popular Music*. Cambridge and London: The MIT Press.
- Moy, R. (2007). *Kate Bush and 'Hounds of Love'*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Mulvey, L. (2009 [1975]). Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema. *Visual and Other Pleasures. Second Edition* (pp. 14–27). Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Myrstad, A. M. (2012). *Husmora i fokus: Den norske husmorfilmen 1953–1972*. Trondheim: Tapir Akademisk Forlag.
- Negus, K. (1996). *Popular Music in Theory: An Introduction*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- O'Brien, K. (2001). *Shadows and Light: Joni Mitchell. The Definitive Biography*. London: Virgin Books Limited.
- O'Brien, L. (2012 [1995]). *She Bop: The Definitive History of Women in Popular Music. Revised Third Edition*. London: Jawbone Press.
- Oliver, E. J. (1956). *Coventry Patmore*. London: Sheed and Ward.
- Olsen, P. K., Bakke, A., & Hvidsten, S. (2009). *Norsk rocks historie: fra Rocke-Pelle til Hank von Helvete*. Oslo: Cappelen Damm.
- Paasonen, S. (2010). Labors of Love: Netporn, Web 2.0 and the Meanings of Amateurism. *New Media & Society*, 12(8), 1297–1312.
- Paasonen, S. (2011). *Carnal Resonance: Affect and Online Pornography*. Cambridge and London: The MIT Press.

- Pennay, M. (2001). Rap in Germany: The Birth of a Genre. In T. Mitchell (Ed.), *Global Noise: Rap and Hip-Hop Outside the USA* (pp. 111–133). Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Postrel, V. (2013). *The Power of Glamour: Longing and the Art of Visual Persuasion*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Rautiainen-Keskustalo, T. (2009). Pop Idol: Global Economy – Local Meanings. In D. B. Scott (Ed.), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Popular Musicology* (pp. 485–497). Farnham: Ashgate.
- Reynolds, S., & Press, J. (1995). *The Sex Revolts: Gender, Rebellion, and Rock 'n' Roll*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Richardson, J., & Hawkins, S. (Eds.). (2007). *Essays on Sound and Vision*. Helsinki: Helsinki University Press.
- Ringdal, S. (2002). *Det amerikanske Lista: Med 110 volt i huset*. Oslo: Pax Forlag.
- Roach, J. (2007). *it*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Rockwell, J. (2012). What Is Bluegrass Anyway? Category Formation, Debate and the Framing of Musical Genre. *Popular Music*, 31(3), 363–381.
- Rojek, C. (2001). *Celebrity*. London: Reaktion Books.
- Rosenberg, N. V. (1980). Bluegrass music. In S. Sadie (Ed.), *The New Grove dictionary of Music and Musicians* (Vol. 2, pp. 812). London: Macmillan.
- Rossi, L. D. (1975). The Whore vs. The Girl-Next-Door: Stereotypes of Woman in *Playboy*, *Penthouse*, and *Oui*. *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 9(1), 90–94.
- Scott, D. B. (2003). *From the Erotic to the Demonic: On Critical Musicology*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Scott, D. B. (2008). *Sounds of the Metropolis: The Nineteenth-Century Popular Music Revolution in London, New York, Paris, and Vienna*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Scott, D. B. (2009). Introduction. In D. B. Scott (Ed.), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Popular Musicology* (pp. 1–21). Farnham: Ashgate.
- Skårberg, O. (2003). *Da Elvis kom til Norge: Stilbevegelser, verdier og historiekonstruksjon i rocken fra 1955 til 1960* (PhD dissertation). Oslo: Det humanistiske fakultet, Universitetet i Oslo.
- Skårderud, F. (2004). *Andre reiser*. Oslo: Aschehoug.
- Solheim, J. (2007). *Kjønn og modernitet*. Oslo: Pax Forlag.

- Spets, K. (2013). Renvasket Ravn. *VG Helg* (23 March 2013), 54–60.
- Språkrådet. (2005). Norsk i hundre! Norsk som nasjonalspråk i globaliseringens tidsalder: Et forslag til strategi. Oslo: Språkrådet.
- Steinskog, E. (2008). Skeiv musikk – konstruksjon av kjønnsbilder. In A. Lorentzen & A. Kvalbein (Eds.), *Musikk og kjønn – i utakt?* (pp. 159–168). Bergen: Norsk kulturråd/Fagbokforlaget.
- Stewart, K. (1996). *A Space on the Side of the Road: Cultural Poetics in an "Other" America*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Stras, L. (2010). Voice of the Beehive: Vocal Technique at the Turn of the 1960s. In L. Stras (Ed.), *She's So Fine: Reflections on Whiteness, Femininity, Adolescence and Class in 1960s Music* (pp. 33–55). Farnham: Ashgate.
- Tasker, Y. (1993). *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Taylor, S. (2003). *False Prophet: Field Notes from the Punk Underground*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Tennfjord, I. (2013). Ny start. *Stella* (6/2013), 30–37.
- Tennfjord, I. W. (2010). Problemet med Marion. *Dagbladet Magasinet*, 4 September 2010(16–19).
- Walkerdine, V. (1997). *Daddy's Girl: Young Girls and Popular Culture*. London: Macmillan.
- Walser, R. (1993). *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender and Madness in Heavy Metal Music*. Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press.
- Warwick, J. (2004). "He's Got the Power": the politics of production in girl group music. In S. Whiteley, A. Bennett & S. Hawkins (Eds.), *Music, Space and Place: Popular Music and Cultural Identity* (pp. 191–200). Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Warwick, J. (2007). *Girl Groups, Girl Culture: Popular Music and Identity in the 1960s*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Warwick, J. (2012). "You Can't Win, Child, but You Can't Get Out of the Game": Michael Jackson's Transition from Child Star to Superstar. *Popular Music and Society*, 35(2), 241–259.
- Whiteley, S. (2000). *Women and Popular Music: Sexuality, Identity and Subjectivity*. London and New York: Routledge.

- Whiteley, S. (2005). *Too Much Too Young: Popular Music, Age and Gender*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Williams, L. (2007). Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess. In J. F. Codell (Ed.), *Genre, Gender, Race and World Cinema* (pp. 23–37). Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Wilson, C. (2007). *Let's Talk About Love: A Journey to the End of Taste*. New York and London: Continuum.
- Woolf, V. (1942). Professions for Women. *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (pp. 149–154). London: The Hogarth Press.
- Ytre-Arne, B. (2012). Positioning the self: Identity and Women's Magazine Reading. *Feminist Media Studies*, 1-16. doi: 10.1080/14680777.2012.713867
- Ålvik, J. M. B. (2008). *Modalities of Desire: Representations of Sadoomasochism in Popular Music*. Master thesis, Department of Musicology, University of Oslo.
- Åmotsbakken, T. K. (2012). Stjerne på vent. *Dagbladet Inne & Ute* (16 May 2012), 14–16.

Discography

Larsen, Marit (2006): "Don't Save Me". CD single. EMI Music Norway AS.

Larsen, Marit (2006): *Under the Surface*. CD. EMI Music Norway AS.

Larsen, Marit (2008): *The Chase*. CD. EMI Music Norway AS.

Larsen, Marit (2010): *If A Song Could Get Me You*. CD + DVD. Sony Music Entertainment Germany GmbH.

Larsen, Marit (2011): *Spark*. CD. EMI Music Norway AS.

Larsen, Marit (2011): *Spark*. CD + DVD. Sony Music Entertainment GmbH.

M2M (2000): *Shades of Purple*. CD. Atlantic Recording Corporation/WEA International Inc.

M2M (2002): *The Big Room*. CD. Atlantic Recording Corporation/WEA International Inc.

M2M (2003): *The Day You Went Away: The Best of M2M*. CD. Atlantic Recording Corporation/WEA International Inc.

Marit & Marion (1996): *Marit & Marion synger kjente barnesanger*. CD. EMI Norsk.

Meat Loaf featuring Marion Raven (2006): "It's All Coming Back To Me Now". CD single. Mercury Records.

Raven, Marion (2005): *Here I Am*. CD. Atlantic Recording Corporation/WEA International Inc.

Raven, Marion (2006): *Heads Will Roll*. CD EP. Eleven Seven Music.

Ravn, Marion (2013): *Songs From A Blackbird*. CD. Blackbird Music/Sony Music.