

# Born to Take the Highway: Women, the Automobile, and Rock 'n' Roll

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In a *Washington Post* feature article from a few years back, popular music critic J. Freedom du Lac laments the death of the car song. Du Lac attributes the demise of the car song—a musical phenomenon that peaked in popularity during the 1950s and 1960s—to the current crop of automobiles. He contends that the quiet, safe, economical, and eco-friendly cars of today provide little inspiration for music about cars. While he acknowledges that contemporary music often references the automobile, as du Lac remarks, “they aren’t actually car songs at all.”

The classic car song to which du Lac refers—and to which music journalists and scholars most often address—is that intertwined with the automotive culture of the post-World War II era. The jet-inspired automobiles of the 1950s and the noisy and powerful muscle cars of the 1960s and 1970s, writes du Lac, were “objects of lust, symbols of liberation and power, and the center of the youth movement’s sexual universe.” These big, loud, and powerful automobiles were an integral component of teenage culture and inspired the music of a generation. As Jack DeWitt, in “Cars and Culture,” suggests, the automobile’s influence on popular music was evident not only in the names of fledgling singing groups (Vettes, Deuce Coupes),

but also in the profusion of auto-themed songs about favorite cars (GTO, Barracuda), car engines (Chevy 409, Rocket 88), car parts (Four in the Floor, Stick Shift), and highways (Route 66, Thunder Road) (38). In addition, cars—as objects of desire, devotion, and obsession—were often linked through song with women (Maybellene, Mustang Sally), or given feminine personas (Betsy, She’s My Chevy). As du Lac writes, automobiles—in song and on the road—were not only good for getting girls, but were also “desirable girls themselves.”

The decades following the Second World War produced two exclusive male provinces—American car culture and rock ‘n’ roll—which serendipitously and successfully combined into a plethora of music about the automobile. The car song came to prominence at a time when men were in the driver’s seat of both the automotive and recording industries. The car song was produced and marketed by men for the consumption of the young white male driver. Whether expressed through the “country tinged” rhythm and blues backbeat style of Chuck Berry (Garofalo 99), the lush multi-part harmonies of the Beach Boys, or the rough working-class vocals and simple guitar riffs of Bruce Springsteen, the intention of the car song

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was to reflect a collective and exclusive male experience communicated through a masculine voice. While the classic car song, by du Lac's definition, may cease to exist, the automobile does, in fact, remain a recurring theme in popular music. Perhaps today's car song is unrecognizable to du Lac because it is often performed in a different—i.e., higher—pitch.

Contrary to du Lac's assertion, the passing of the classic car song is not due to changes in the automobile that inspired it, but rather, in the voices and experiences of those who sing about it. The female singer-songwriter—who came late to both automobility and rock 'n' roll—has infused the automobile and popular music with multiple new meanings. Women from a variety of musical genres—rock 'n' roll, R&B, country, and pop—have called upon the automobile as a vehicle of freedom, escape, recollection, and rebellion, performed through the voice of women's experience. In the process, they have reconfigured the car song from a recounting of the white teenage male's rite of passage into a metaphor for the multiplicity of women's lives.

This investigation focuses on music composed and performed by women of diverse social locations intersected by race, class, and sexual orientation to consider how women's experience has influenced and reconfigured the convergence of automobiles and rock 'n' roll known as the car song. Focusing specifically on the music of singer-songwriters Joni Mitchell, Bonnie Raitt, Tracy Chapman, Nanci Griffith, Toni Braxton, Lucinda Williams, Shania Twain, and soul legend Aretha Franklin, it examines how women's entrance into both the music industry and American car culture has altered the way we think about cars and popular music. It considers the car song not only as an expression of the various meanings women ascribe to cars, but also as a location for the examination of women's lives. Calling upon feminist standpoint theory, this investigation calls upon women's experience to uncover alternative relationships to the automobile as well as to suggest new possibilities for the woman behind the wheel.

## Car Songs, Women's Voices, and the "Woman Driver"

The classic car song has attracted a good amount of attention in the popular media, spawning numerous oldies CDs, Internet top 100 Car Song lists, and articles in popular music and classic car publications that reflect upon the greatest car tunes of all times. In terms of relevant literature, Paul Grushkin's *Rockin' Down the Highway: The Cars and People That Made Rock and Roll* is perhaps the most comprehensive popular history. *The Illustrated Discography of Hot Rod Music 1961-1965*, another important resource, concentrates primarily on the cars songs that emerged from the California car culture scene. In scholarship, Jack DeWitt provides a short history of the car song within the context of Whitman's *Song of the Open Road*. E. L. Widmer, in "The Automobile, Rock and Roll and Democracy," suggests both cars and rock 'n' roll were significant as liberating influences for the individual, allowing for unprecedented amounts of personal expression. In "Cars and Girls," Duncan Heining calls upon the car song to examine the early contributions of black artists to rock 'n' roll as well as to explore the ways in which masculinity is revealed in popular music. While the essays of DeWitt, Widmer, and Heining address the car song specifically, the primary references to the music-automobile relationship in academic literature are most often short blurbs in larger automotive texts. These include DeWitt's *Cool Cars, High Art*—which refers to the car song as "a much underappreciated subgenre of rock" (23)—and Tim Falconer's *Drive*. In regard to the car song and the female singer-songwriter, a few sources make reference to Joni Mitchell, but other female recording artists are rarely, if ever, mentioned. While there is not a great deal of scholarship devoted to the car song, the available resources focus almost exclusively on music produced and performed by men in which the automobile is constructed as a vehicle of male identity, experience, rebellion, and power. The myriad of meanings the automobile holds for women, as voiced through the popular car song, is

generally absent in analyses of the relationship between the automobile and music.

Women's problematic entry into rock 'n' roll and American car culture has attracted the notice of feminist scholars over the past three decades. The original objective in both arenas was to make women visible through the reconfiguration of music and automotive histories. In music scholarship, Aida Pavletich, Lucy O'Brien, and Charlotte Greig were instrumental in reclaiming the female voice that had historically been silenced. Feminist music scholars such as Gillian Gaar were particularly interested in the strategies called upon by female recording artists as they negotiated male dominated rock 'n' roll culture. Studies of women and music produced by Sheila Whiteley and coauthors Simon Reynolds and Joy Press focused on particular artists to suggest how music opened up a particularly fruitful space for female resistance. More recently, scholars such as Mina Carson, Tisa Lewis, and Susan Shaw have attempted to identify and celebrate how female artists have distinguished themselves from their male counterparts through the creation of a recognizable "women's" music (Mitchell 548). This project adds to the literature by focusing on a specific location—the car song—in which the female singer-songwriter considers the automobile not through a historical or cultural framework, but rather, her own experience. In doing so, she alters perceptions of what women can sing about as well as how and why they drive.

Automotive scholarship has also experienced a feminist intervention. Feminist historians have brought attention to the auto industry's determined efforts to construct the woman driver in a particular gendered way. As the scholars attest, these industry objectives were undertaken not only to reaffirm the association of automobile with masculinity, but also to effectively "shape" women's automobile choice and driving practices (Seiler 51). In *Taking the Wheel*, Virginia Scharff examines how automakers and marketers employed separate sphere ideology as a marketing strategy to divide automobile use by gender. Ruth Schwartz Cowan, in her study of "the industrial revolution in the home," reflects upon auto indus-

try efforts to market the automobile to women as a time saving domestic technology. In her documentation of women's automotive use over the past half-century, Margaret Walsh argues that although women increasingly rely on the automobile for work transport, popular representations continue to focus on the "woman driver" in her domestic role ("Cars"). The purpose of past and present automaker strategies, argue Scharff, Cowan, and Walsh, was not only to construct women as a separate consumer base with different automotive needs and desires, but also to reinforce and maintain prescribed gender roles in home and on the road. Recent scholarship within multiple disciplines has made note of women's resistance to pervasive woman driver stereotypes through the assumption of new driver identities associated with the "chick" car (Lezotte, "Chick"), the classic muscle car (Lezotte, "Muscle") and racing (Pflugfelder, Sloop). Attention to alternative woman driver positions demonstrates that, despite the efforts of automakers to shape women's driving habits and automotive choices, women continue to make informed and independent decisions on the cars they drive and how they use them. Car songs based on women's experience—automotive and otherwise—also suggest new possibilities for the woman driver as they contest the exclusive relationship of the automobile to masculinity as well as provide alternative and multiple ways to consider the meanings women ascribe to cars.

## The Car Song and Women's Experience

The car song, in du Lac's construction of it, derives its meanings from the young-white-heterosexual-male culture that consumed it. Despite the passage of time, dominant readings of the car song often remain unquestioned. As feminist theorist Sandra Harding suggests, when the dominant group is homogenous, "its shared assumptions stand little chance of identification" (Alcoff and Porter 6). The car song was constructed from

a specific masculine location—the intersection of the automobile and rock ‘n’ roll—at a time when the possibility of women’s intrusion into either culture was rarely considered. It is not surprising, therefore, that the car song continues to be defined through a particular male-centric sensibility.

Standpoint theory provides the opportunity to consider the car song from alternative positions. It is centered in the premise that not all social groups experience the dominant culture in the same way. It suggests that those who observe from the margins—individuals whose intersection of gender, race, class, and sexual orientation locate them outside the mainstream—can help create a more objective account of the world, a notion Sandra Harding defines as “strong objectivity” (49). Men and women experience cars differently. Gendered expectations of driving behavior and automobile use influence how men and women think about cars. While women have, in the twenty-first century, become “as, if not more, wedded to the car than their male counterparts” (Walsh, “Automobility” 395), the reasons they value cars often differ considerably from those of male drivers. Integrating women’s standpoint into an examination of the car song shifts the perspective, thereby offering the opportunity to view a very different picture of the automobile and the woman who drives it. Such a perspective uncovers new meanings of the automobile based on women’s individual and collective driving experiences. It disrupts dominant perceptions of the automobile and car culture; it helps to “discern patterns others have ignored and to question assumptions that have gone unnoticed and unchallenged” (Jaggar 306). Examining the car song through the lens of feminist standpoint theory not only underscores the role of the automobile in women’s lives, but also suggests new possibilities for all drivers regardless of gender.

Standpoint theorists argue that women’s social location is a resource for “the construction of a uniquely feminist perspective on social reality” (McCann & Kim 9). While the female recording artists cited in this project do not uniformly identify as feminists, they inadvertently become

part of the feminist project as they reconfigure the car song—a historical location for the production and performance of white-heterosexual-teenage masculinity—into a vehicle of women’s experience.

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## The Automobile and Rock ‘n’ Roll

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The evolutions of American car culture and rock ‘n’ roll occurred almost simultaneously. The era following World War II was a time of great promise in the United States. After twenty years of hardship and conflict, prosperity and the growing economy suggested to many that the American dream was possible. And the symbol of that dream was often a new automobile. Auto factories, converted to wartime production during the 1940s, fervently began producing stylish and often outrageous new cars to fulfill the pent-up demand. The music of the war years, from the likes of Benny Goodman and the Andrew Sisters, gave way to a new sound of rebellious youth, strongly influenced by the once forbidden blues and jazz of black America. And as Richard Peterson asserts, the large number of young people born after World War II—whose affluence and expectations greatly exceeded those of the previous generation—demanded music [and cars] that “spoke to their own condition” (98). The response to the new youth culture demands were automobiles and music characterized as sexy, exciting, unconventional, and altogether masculine. Men assumed ownership of both the auto industry and the recording industry; they manufactured the cars and produced the songs to appeal to an eager and sexually aware white male youth market. As Widmer writes, “seeming to suggest the forbidden mysteries of sexuality, both the new music and the new type of automobiles found easy, if not aggressive, acceptance in the concupiscent universe that was 1950s teenage America” (68). Rock ‘n’ roll and the American car were each imagined through a male perspective, as tools for growing up, getting the girl, and keeping her in her place.

Before the onset of World War II, only one quarter of American women were drivers (Walsh, "Cars" 296). Women's wartime participation in the work force often required a driver's license; thus women learned to drive the cars men left behind. As women got behind the wheel of the automobile, many for the first time, they not only experienced financial independence but also the freedom of movement driving provided. In the years preceding the rock 'n' roll revolution, women were an integral component of the popular music industry. At that time, writes Reebee Garofalo, "female vocalists accounted for as many as one-third of the best selling artists in a given year" (84). However, once wartime evolved into peacetime, men, in both the music and auto industries, replaced women as singers and drivers. Women were strongly "encouraged" to return to the domestic sphere and assume the gendered roles temporarily abandoned during the war years. And the rock 'n' roll revolution quickly eliminated women from the ranks of best-selling recording artists.

American car culture and rock 'n' roll evolved at the same moment in time to appeal to the same individual: the rebellious teenage boy eager for good times, adventure, liberation from restrictive home environments, and sex. Not surprisingly, a good number of the earliest rock 'n' roll songs were directly linked to such an automotive experience. In fact, many popular music historians, as well as the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame (Rock Hall), cite "Rocket 88" as the very first rock 'n' roll song. The 1949 Oldsmobile Model 88, reputed to be the fastest car on the street, served as the inspiration for the 1951 hit record. Paul Grushkin declares, "'Rocket 88' is the prototype for all rock—and automotive—songs in style, sound, and attitude" (26). Written by Ike Turner, and performed by Jackie Brenston and his Delta Cats, "Rocket 88" extols the virtues of the automobile and the man who drives it, with the intent of attracting pretty young women to ride along. The possibilities available to the driver of the "Rocket 88" are suggested through the lyrics—"goin' on the corner and havin' some fun; takin' my Rocket on a long, hot run"—as well as the

revolutionary and controversial musical style. As Grushkin writes, "Turner had cooked up a mellow, cruising boogie with a steady-as-she-goes back beat that, married to Brenston's enthusiastic, sexually suggestive vocals, spoke of opportunity, discovery and conquest" (26).

The role of the woman in the car song reflects women's position in both the car culture and music industry during the postwar era. As the leaders of the automobile industry, white male decision makers not only controlled the manufacture of cars in terms of style and performance, but also defined driving through hegemonic masculine values. As Cotten Seiler argues, postwar anxieties concerning the feminization of American culture created a need to "resuscitate" masculinity (89). This was effectively accomplished through the renewed association of the male driver with automobility; automotive marketers strongly "suggested" that men could and should reassert authority and self-expression through their cars (Walsh, "Review" 89). Consequently, characteristics linked to a particular construction of rugged white working-class masculinity—"steady nerves, aggression, and rationality"—became associated with the male driver, attributes that, not coincidentally, were considered lacking in women (McShane 156). Female traits such as "emotional instability, physical weakness, and intellectual deficiencies" were cited as evidence of women's inferiority at the wheel (Scharff 26). Inherent differences in driving ability were explained by biology in order to constrain women's automobility and to retain male control of the automobile. Thus the car song's function was not only to celebrate the automobile, but also to validate the "authentic" driver as male.

Preserving and reinforcing gender distinctions and hierarchies was also standard practice in the rock 'n' roll industry. Race was not a significant barrier to entry; as rock 'n' roll was heavily influenced by black music, African-American men were granted conditional access. However, since its earliest incarnation, rock has been considered a male domain. This was initially achieved through the association of the electric guitar, the most easily identifiable sound in the rock 'n' roll genre,

with masculinity. As a symbol of phallic power and physical prowess, the omnipresent guitar, as Sheila Whiteley writes in *Sexing the Groove*, “remains the most significant of all instruments in establishing male autonomy” (xix). The industry worked diligently to maintain this association as a way of preserving the gender order, both within the industry and society at large. It is not surprising, therefore, that during the early days of rock ‘n’ roll, the guitar-playing woman was not welcome. And as women were denied access to the music-making process, they had little opportunity to influence the content of popular songs. In the car songs of the 1950s and 1960s, not only do lyrics reinforce male dominance behind the wheel, but liberal use of the electric guitar strongly reinforces rock ‘n’ roll and cars as exclusive male provinces as well. With control over the automobile and the rock ‘n’ roll industries, men were granted exclusive permission to drive the cars as well as to sing about them.

The social movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s sparked new opportunities for women, people of color, and the LGBT community; consequently, members of these groups soon found it possible to enter arenas previously unavailable to them. The call for equal rights within the Women’s Movement and the subsequent rise in women’s salaries provided many women with the resources to drive automobiles of their own choosing. The anti-Vietnam war movement witnessed the rise of the protest song, most often voiced through folk music. Many female musicians claimed the instrument of that genre, the acoustical guitar, as the means to enter the male rock ‘n’ roll bastion. The second wave of feminism was certainly instrumental in instigating the changes that allowed women to enter male domains. However, perhaps more important was the notion, revolutionary at the time, that female, rather than male, experience was a valid source of knowledge, not to mention musical inspiration. As Carson, Lewis and Shaw suggest in *Girls Rock*, “while the Women’s Movement first collectively asserted the ‘personal is political,’ many folk, rock and pop singer-songwriters of the 1960s instinctively interwove public life and private experience

in their music and musical performances” (53). Women endeavored, as Greig remarks, “to write about the particular experiences in their lives that differ from those of men” (168). Female singer-songwriters called upon female experience to ascribe new meanings to ideas, images, and material objects previously considered masculine. Joni Mitchell was not only one of the most influential female singer-songwriters of this era, but interestingly enough, she was the first woman to use the automobile as a metaphor for female experience. Joni Mitchell was, in fact, the composer of the first contemporary woman’s car song.

## The Automobile as Independence

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“Born to Take the Highway,” an unreleased recording of 1967, was the first of many car songs in Joni Mitchell’s repertoire. “All I Want” followed in 1970. In these early recordings, Mitchell reconfigures the road, typically male territory, for the female traveler. She imagines it as a site for the possibilities of women’s newfound liberation, as well as a location for the loneliness that accompanies that freedom. The road for Mitchell is also, as music critic Sam Sutherland remarks, “a source of anonymity and acceptance” (qtd. in Grushkin 139). The car on the road offers Mitchell sanctuary; it is a temporary respite from everyday responsibilities and a quiet place for reflection. As a mobile “room of her own,” the automobile provides a space for Mitchell to search for inspiration in her work, as well as answers in her life.

As Mitchell sings, “I was born to take the highway, I was born to chase a dream,” she is portending the direction her life and career will soon take. From this song comes the understanding that Mitchell is not content to live the life prescribed to her. Rather, in order to pursue a career as a musician and performer, Mitchell must leave the women of provincial Saskatchewan, Canada, and the life they represent, behind. She must leave her young husband of two years, who has become increasingly angry, resentful, and insecure over

her rising success. Mitchell endeavors to seek her identity, as well as her fame and fortune, far from the community and cultural mandates she has known and was expected to follow. The automobile provides her with the opportunity to do so.

Separate sphere ideology, in which men work in the public sphere, while women attend to domestic matters of house, husband, and children in the home, was strongly reinforced in North America during the years following World War II. The freedom women experienced while men were off to war was strictly curtailed upon men's return. In "Born to Take the Highway," Mitchell recognizes that her own dreams and desires, as well as those of women of her generation, often exist outside of the home. As Pavletich asserts, "The idea of a woman's place in the world was changing in the sixties. Mitchell only had to look around her with her normally clear intelligence to recognize this fact" (218). Men have always had the ability to seek power, adventure and opportunity away from home in the public sphere; women, on the other hand, have been historically and culturally homebound by domesticity. As historian Martin Wachs suggests in *The Automobile and Gender*, "the automobile presented an opportunity for women to break out of the social roles that linked them almost exclusively to home and nurturing" (105). In "Born to Take the Highway," the automobile provides Mitchell with the means to pursue a course of her own direction. And as the events of Mitchell's life also suggest, the automobile offers the possibility of escape from male control. The automobile as an agent of flight from relationships is a common theme in Mitchell's many car songs.

In "Born to Take the Highway," Mitchell anticipates the possibilities of the road. By 1970, she recognizes the personal sacrifices a life of constant travel demands. Unlike the lyrical vocals on the earlier recording, in "All I Want," Mitchell's voice contains determination and exasperation, no doubt born from the itinerant existence she has chosen. The repetitive phrases of "traveling, traveling" and "I want, I want" not only reinforce the sensation of movement, but also suggest that success is not enough for the singer-songwriter;

Mitchell desires love and commitment as well. Mitchell's life, which was to become a series of passionate yet ultimately unfulfilling love affairs, is reflected in the conflicted feelings the artist projects throughout the song. Mitchell not only gets in the car to discover meaning in her life, but also to search for commitment and understanding in the form of a relationship.

In recordings such as "Born to Take the Highway" and "All I Want," Mitchell reclaims a traditional male trope—the car song—to reflect women's experience. As Pavletich remarks, Mitchell is not only speaking for herself, but "she is amplifying an inner feeling of her listeners who are silent [...]" (220). She does not use the automobile to describe feelings of power, status or control, nor does she call upon the genre to reflect upon her conquests and successes, sexual or otherwise. Rather, Mitchell's songs most often concern themselves with the small things that constitute women's lives. She speaks of the conflicts between independence and belonging, work and home, and love and pain. Grushkin writes, "travel and love, travel because of love, travel to sort out love, and of course, travel to escape love—Mitchell examines all at length" (139).

Yet what is most significant about the road songs of Joni Mitchell is that, in each and every one of them, she is the driver. The songs are in her own voice, in her own words, and under her control. Sheila Whiteley, in *Women and Popular Music*, remarks, "Mitchell is the lonely traveler, but she is the one who is there by choice" (1). As a singer-songwriter, Mitchell drives the story and determines exactly where it is going. Mitchell's reimagining of the automobile as a metaphor for female experience not only challenges gendered expectations, but enables her to solidify her position as a singer-songwriter of importance—a woman with the ability and power to steer and control her own musical compositions and productions—in the male dominated industry of rock 'n' roll. Mitchell's exploration of the female traveler, and the metaphors she constructs for the car and the road, have since been reclaimed and reconfigured by a number of female recording artists in a variety of musical genres. The road as

self-realization and independence, and the car as place, escape, empowerment, and as a receptacle for memory and loss, have all made their way into women's car songs.

As automotive journalist Lesley Hazleton asserts, cars offer women the independence men take for granted. Hazleton writes, "Our own car means freedom. It means control of our own lives. It means, in short, far more to us than it does to most men" (3). This sentiment is often expressed in women's car music. In the rock 'n' roll songs of the 1950s and 1960s, women were literally and figuratively going along for the ride. In early rock 'n' roll, Garofalo asserts, "women did not sing; they were sung about" (84). As passengers rather than drivers, they went where men wished to take them. Dependent on men for support and transportation, women often lived the lives chosen for them rather than those of their own making. While early car songs often depicted girls as having "fun-fun-fun" (Wilson and Love), it was fun contained within boundaries constructed by husbands, boyfriends, and fathers. However, as Joni Mitchell opened the road, and the contemporary music world, to women, the keys to the car became women's keys to independence.

Bonnie Raitt entered rock 'n' roll through the blues, the electric guitar, and the car song. As Pavletich suggests, blues provided an entryway for women into rock 'n' roll through its association to blues mammas of the past—e.g., Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey—as well as its "declamatory" style (124). Blues also provided Raitt with a location in which to perfect her slide guitar technique. Her "acoustic, bottleneck steel and twelve-string guitar playing" was the most advanced of any female musician at that time (Pavletich 70). When questioned about her early career, Raitt confesses, "I wasn't much motivated to be a songwriter" (Sculley). Thus Raitt's breakthrough album in 1971—a combination of pure blues, rock classics, and Motown—was composed primarily of songs written by others. One of those was "Big Road," a classic Tommy Johnson blues ballad, which Raitt adapted to her newly developing style and rechanneled through a woman's perspective. As she admonishes her lover for leaving her, she warns

him that she's going to "get me someone else" as she "ain't goin' down that big lonesome road" alone. She reminds him, "it ain't like I'm a woman who ain't got no place to go." While Raitt voices the words and makes the song her own, she is still, in many respects, a passenger. The lyrics suggest that while she has someplace to go, she is unwilling to take the keys of the car and go it alone; she requires a man to make her "blues go away." Raitt is not singing her own song, but that written by a man some fifty years prior. And despite Raitt's electric guitar expertise, she was advised by the record company to refrain from playing guitar tracks on her own album. The message conveyed in "Big Road" is, in many ways, representative of 1971 women's experience. While women often had the desire to go it on their own, they had neither the impetus—nor cultural permission—to do so.

Nearly twenty years later, after a drinking problem affected her ability to attain mainstream success, Raitt discovered she had something to say. In 1989, at the age of 40, Raitt called upon her own life experiences to assert her independence, have a little fun with gender roles, and connect with other women through a car song of her own creation. In "The Road's My Middle Name," written by Raitt and included on the Grammy award-winning *Nick of Time* album, Raitt is no longer the passenger, but is the driver who determines the course of her career and her life. Raitt reverses the gender expectations of the 1971 "Big Road" recording; rather than admonishing her man for his abandonment, Raitt takes the keys to the car and leaves him behind. When Raitt states that the road is in her blood "because I'm my daddy's kid," she is referring to her father—Broadway star John Raitt—and his frequent absences from home. In this song, she forgives her father as she acknowledges that the life of a musical artist and performer—regardless of gender—requires sacrifice. When Raitt sings, "just have to learn how to let me go, just like my momma did," she is telling her lover that if he wants her, he must conform to her life, not the other way around. It is Raitt, not the man in her life, who is driving the relationship. After forty years of sitting in the



passenger seat, Raitt has taken the wheel of the car, her recording career, and her life.

As music journalist Alan Sculley writes, the truisms reflected in Raitt's songs place the singer-songwriter as "something of a spokesperson for a generation of women who have been bruised by life—and perhaps had dreams unfulfilled—but carry on and survive." In "The Road is My Middle Name," Raitt does not attempt to relate to the teenage listener—as was common practice in the old car songs—but rather, to adult woman who have experienced hardships but are not yet ready to give up. Raitt encourages the women of a common age to grab the wheel and go forward; as she asserts, to the generation of women who believed they could do anything, "the time is now" (Sculley).

## The Automobile as Liberation

Female recording artists often call upon the automobile as a metaphor for escape, not only from relationships, but also from domesticity, poverty, abuse, or a dead-end life. In these contexts, the car is not a material object but is a promise of something better; it represents hope as well as the possibilities that are not always evident in a woman's everyday existence. The automobile is often called upon in music written and performed by women to provide a commentary on social issues framed by the intersection of gender, race, and class. Tracy Chapman provides an astute and troubling first person insight into urban poverty and generational alcoholism in "Fast Car."

Chapman calls upon personal experience of deprivation, racial discrimination, and humiliation to craft her story. "Fast Car" speaks to the countless women who find themselves in untenable situations with little hope of relief or redemption. Chapman positions herself as the subject in her narrative to speak of her own experiences as well as to "draw attention to a country shaped by racism, observing from the sidelines the anomalies [and] the inequalities" (Whiteley, "Women" 173). The car, which belongs to the man with whom the

narrator lives, is continually evoked by Chapman as the means to break away from a life in danger of repeating itself. However, when Chapman pleads, "you got a fast car; I want a ticket to anywhere," she is not asking to escape with her boyfriend, but is pleading him to leave without her.

Sheila Whiteley writes, "'Fast Car' moves from the documentary to the personal in a song which tells of the need to escape and the hopelessness of knowing that it is simply a dream" ("Women" 176). Chapman understands that as long as she remains with her alcoholic boyfriend, she will be unable to "be someone." As he is the one with the automobile, she urges him to "take your fast car and keep on driving." Chapman recognizes that the only way she can escape the cycle of poverty exacerbated by her boyfriend's heavy drinking is to be left behind. As the song progresses, Chapman alters the refrain from "*we* gotta make a decision" to "*you* gotta make a decision, leave tonight or die this way." By pleading with her boyfriend to leave, she holds onto the hope that the "fast car" will drive away the source of her helplessness, and allow her to rely on her own inner strength and resourcefulness to build a better life for herself and her children.

While black recording artists were instrumental in the development, production, and performance of early car songs, they did so with the understanding that the targeted audience was young, male, and white. The refusal of many radio stations to broadcast "race music," i.e., rhythm and blues, compelled many black artists to minimize racial inflections in the recording process. Popular music writers have suggested that the early success of Chuck Berry, whose 1955 hit "Maybeline" is widely regarded as one of the first car songs, can be attributed to his "raceless" enunciation (Grushkin 39). While black men penned and performed many of the early car songs, they are often cited as influential contributors to the "evolution of white rock" (Grushkin 39).

Whiteley asserts, "[Chapman's] socially conscious songs make her an icon for, and part of the self-defining presence of, contemporary black women" (17). While black recording artists were often required to mitigate racial identity in the

production of early car songs, Chapman consciously and deliberately situates herself at the intersection of gender, race, and class as she constructs a narrative from her experience as a poor black woman in America. Classic auto-inspired songs have traditionally relied upon the relationship between men and “fast cars.” Chapman compellingly illuminates how the meanings surrounding this timeworn association can be altered, if not transformed, based on the standpoint of the individual who uses it.

As a recording artist, Nanci Griffith draws inspiration from the Southern literary tradition through a musical genre defined as “folkabilly.” Rather than placing herself in her songs, Griffith remains an astute observer, often combining and recreating lives and experiences of other women to create a musical narrative. In “Ford Econoline,” a song from her first breakthrough album, Griffith calls upon the life events of two fellow singer-songwriters, Kate Wolf and Rosalie Sorrels, to weave a tale of escape and liberation. While the subject is serious, Griffith takes a light-hearted approach in order to imbue the story with the character and attitude of her protagonist. “Ford Econoline” is the chronicle of a controlling and abusive husband who buys his wife a car, only to watch her drive off with five children in pursuit of a singing career. As Griffith remarks, “I’ve known what it’s like to need that vehicle and I wanted to write something that is reinforcing to people who are considering leaving an abusive situation. It’s my way of giving them keys to the ignition” (Interview).

Rather than a song of despair over a troubled life, “Ford Econoline” is filled with hope and happiness. The protagonist, while “having a husband on her bumper” and “five restless children” in the backseat was “singing as sweet as a mockingbird in that Ford Econoline.” While the two women who served as inspiration for the song had lives filled with tragedy and sorrow, Griffith is more interested in calling upon their collective courage, determination, and sense of humor in the singular quest for a more rewarding life.

In the years following the Second World War, automakers divided cars by gender not only as a

means to sell more cars, but also to designate appropriate automobile use and driving behavior for male and female drivers. While men were assigned the big, powerful and stylish cars, women were encouraged to drive a “family” vehicle to aid in the performance of domestic duties. The woman’s car—a household appliance that often took the form of a nine-passenger station wagon—not only aided the suburban housewife in performance of daily tasks, but also defined her cultural role. Rather than grant her mobility, it effectively confined the suburban housewife to a life of domesticity and serving others within a prescribed area.

While the “woman’s car” has been reincarnated in numerous forms throughout the past half-century—station wagon, hatchback, minivan, and small SUV—its meaning has remained constant. The Ford Econoline in Griffith’s musical narrative—purchased by a controlling husband for his wife’s use—was no doubt intended to serve the same purpose. Recognizing the significance of the Econoline, Griffith turns its cultural meaning on its head so that rather than keeping a woman close to home, it provides her with the means to escape domesticity and assume a travelling life. As Reynolds and Press contend, “for women, a wanderer’s life can be even more alluring than it is for men. Women have even stronger reasons for wanting to escape domesticity, since the home is where they are supposed to end up” (364). Griffith calls upon her own experiences, as well as those of her musical associates, to construct the family van as a vehicle of women’s liberation.

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## The Automobile as a Container of Memories

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The car has always fulfilled a romantic function. As historian David Lewis writes, “[cars] permitted couples to get much farther away from the front porch swings, parlor sofas, hovering mothers, and pesky siblings than ever before” (123). Thus the automobile often holds memories of love affairs and relationships. A car interior is

an intimate space; whether driving in the dark or parked along the side of the road, the inside of an automobile provides the opportunity for private and personal conversations of shared hopes and dreams. As Hazleton remarks, “enclosed moments of intimacy—of frank revelation as opposed to the comforting chitchat that takes up most of our talk—often happen in a car because it is a small, defined space that enfolds its occupants safely against the world” (30). It is not surprising, therefore, that the female singer-songwriter often calls upon the car to invoke past relationships.

In her songs about love, betrayal, and infidelity, R&B artist Toni Braxton, writes *Rolling Stone* music critic John McCalley, establishes her image as a “feisty survivor in the face of heartbreak.” In her first breakout single, “Another Sad Love Song,” Braxton constructs the automobile as a space in which such heartache happens. As she tries to escape a past love affair by getting into her car, Braxton finds it holds too many reminders of the relationship. The interior space of the automobile is a container of memories; as Braxton sighs, “a song comes on the radio, and there you are baby once again.” Rather than a means to escape the past, the automobile holds the past within it and keeps it close. The radio on the dashboard is not merely an accessory, but in its ability to evoke the past becomes part of the collective memory of the car. “Only takes one note from that radio,” declares the lovelorn Braxton, and “I’m back in love sugar once again.”

Grushkin writes, “long before the car radio evolved into car stereo, it was also clear to people of taste that any car [...] drove a lot better with rock ‘n’ roll swirling around the front seat” (7). What Grushkin fails to mention, however, is that songs on the radio become integrated into the collective memory of the automobile and those who drive it. Thus the definition of a car song is not only a tune that addresses the automobile, either literally or metaphorically, but also includes music played in and that becomes part of the car.

Singer-songwriter Lucinda Williams spent much of her childhood looking at life from the backseat of an automobile. Her father, a poet and

transient college professor, moved his family from one Southern college town to another in search of work and inspiration. “Car Wheels on a Gravel Road” recalls the many years of Williams’ young life spent looking out the back window with a “little bit of dirt mixed with tears,” listening to Loretta Lynn on the radio, and passing by unending cotton fields. The song is a stark and emotional narrative of rural rootlessness and interrupted youth told through a plaintive voice, sparse lyrics, and musical repetition. It speaks from a young girl’s perspective—“child in the backseat about four or five years”—in language marked by uncertainty and longing. As music journalist Eileen Drennan writes, “[Williams is] the spirit in transit, always writing from the rear window about what she’s left behind.”

To Williams—whose style has been described as a “well-travelled intersection of folk, blues, and country” (Drennan)—the automobile serves as a container of memories for a restless yet ultimately impressionable childhood. The constant moving and interminable drives, while exhausting and disconcerting, provided Williams with long stretches of time to get to know her father better. The relationship developed with her poet father over thousands of miles of highway not only served as inspiration for Williams’ powerful lyrics, but also served to legitimate Williams’ own transitory lifestyle. As her life and music suggest, the only constant in Lucinda Williams’ life has been the inside of a car; it is from that location she recalls and retells her story.

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## The Automobile as Empowerment

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Automobiles and rock ‘n’ roll evolved as masculine enterprises. Women’s entry into both arenas is a relatively recent experience. It is not surprising, therefore, that female singer-songwriters often call upon the car as a symbol of empowerment. In *Taking the Wheel*, historian Virginia Scharff writes, “Control over an automobile [...] signified new and flexible possibilities for

women's independent entry into the public realm, a spatial and cultural innovation that seemed, to many, at once inconsequential and revolutionary" (171). In her examination of contemporary women's literature, Marie T. Farr asserts, "[male writers] accept the popular myth that identifies the automobile with male sexuality, power and control" (157). Farr suggests that female writers also identify the car with power, but of a different sort. Rather than a symbol of power as control, the car in women's fiction often becomes associated with autonomy, freedom and control over one's life. Deborah Pas de Barros, in her analysis of woman-car connection in film, constructs the female driver as a nomadic subject and transgressor. As Pas de Barros argues, the automobile in the film road narrative serves as vehicle and voice for women who ignore the well-traveled path. Female singer-songwriters call upon the automobile in similar fashion, reflecting on how the automobile and driving experience provide women with a measure of control often missing in other areas of their lives. While female recording artists certainly understand the significance of taking the wheel, musical odes to the female empowerment linked with cars are often performed with a sense of humor.

Shania Twain became a country/crossover sensation because of her appeal to the female audience. In her music, James Dickerson writes in *Go Girl Go!*, Shania has "continued to stress the appeal of rock-tinged, high-voltage country music and the blinding power of womanhood (one of her favorite themes from day one)" (131). As an accomplished singer-songwriter, Twain often calls upon the shared experiences of women to connect to her female fan base. Male-female relationships are therefore a common theme. While Twain has been described as "pro-woman," her songs are not overtly feminist. When she addresses conflicts between men and women in her songs, it is with lighthearted attitude. As Twain remarks, "[...] I'm having fun with my songs. It's not rebellious or a negative point of view" (226).

Windsor, Ontario, Twain's birthplace, is not only the "nerve center" of the Canadian auto

industry, but is also only a bridge length away from Detroit (Williams 4). Because of the link—culturally and physically—to the auto industry, writes Dallas Williams, "Windsorites can't help but see Motowners as a kind of extended family" (4). The significance of the automobile is not lost on those who reside on the Motor City border; growing up in Ontario, Twain no doubt developed insight into the role of the automobile in women's lives. As Farr attests, women have always recognized the "link between male control and access to transportation" (158).

During a performance in Chicago, Twain discloses to her primarily female audience that while she is willing to make concessions to the men in her life, "I need at least one place that I can go to where I have control completely, where nobody interferes. For me, it's always my car" (Concert). Twain's hit single, "In my Car," reflects this sentiment. As Twain insists, while her man can "choose the channel when we're watchin' the TV," his meddling is not welcome when it comes to her automobile. As Twain sings, "In my car, I'll be the driver, In my car, I'm in control" she exhibits self-determination and autonomy. By constructing the automobile as a specific location for female agency, Twain suggests the possibility of empowerment in other areas of women's lives. While she encourages compromise in relationships, Twain argues for the necessity of a private woman's space for contemplation, escape, and freedom from domestic demands and responsibilities. In her performance, Twain calls upon women's shared experience not only to connect with her audience, but to suggest that women's ability to take control of the car will provide them with the power to take control of their lives as well.

In *She Bop*, music journalist Lucy O'Brien writes, "Gospel is the great Mother, the church a repository of women's memory, nurture, liberation and catharsis. [...] it is a place where women feel safe in a full expression of self" (86). The strength, conviction and agency that female gospel singers experience in the church often follow them into the world of popular music and rock 'n' roll. Aretha Franklin began singing in her father's

church, New Bethel Baptist, in Detroit. As Carson et al., assert, “[Franklin’s] hit tunes were essentially gospel, bringing all of its passion, strength, and soul to earthy love and black women’s self-determination” (27).

During the turbulent 1960s, as music became a vehicle for rebellion, identity, and cultural consciousness, Franklin was on the forefront of the transformation of gospel into soul. Like gospel, Pavletich suggests, soul reaches for what life could or should be. Soul songs, Pavletich writes, “were on the march for change; give me what is rightfully mine: respect, freedom, love, the pursuit of happiness” (100). Not only did soul fulfill a need for black cultural awareness, but also provided a voice through which the disenfranchised could be heard. Through Aretha Franklin, soul also became a medium for women’s agency. As Pavletich remarks, “Aretha was a protest singer, although the protest was lodged in her voice, not in her lyrics” (114).

Franklin led the soul genre into the seventies. However, as the concept of soul began to disintegrate, so did Franklin’s career. It wasn’t until the mid 1980s, and the release of *Who’s Zoomin’ Who?*, that Franklin’s career was invigorated. The biggest hit on the 1985 album was a car song, set in Detroit and performed by one of Detroit’s own. In “Freeway of Love,” Franklin calls upon her gospel-soul roots to claim the automobile as a vehicle of women’s empowerment.

As an individual with an intense fear of flying, it should not be surprising that Franklin awards particular importance to the automobile. It not only serves as her primary mode of transportation, but also as a personal refuge from fame, fright, stress, and the complications of a celebrity life. As a black woman from Detroit, Franklin is particularly aware of the status the automobile confers upon its driver, as well as the autonomy it provides women behind the wheel. In “Freeway of Love,” Franklin expounds upon these automotive characteristics with authority, humor, and a little bit of what Craig Werner describes as “gospel pop” (260).

In classic car songs, writes *Rolling Stones* music critic Gerri Hirshey, “girls were rarely in the

driver’s seat.” In “Freeway of Love” Franklin reverses the traditional narrative by inviting her man to jump in and “take a ride in my machine.” Franklin wants love, but on her own terms. As Franklin drives the pink Cadillac along the “Freeway of Love,” the singer and driver determines the speed—“drop the pedal and go, go, go”—and the route her relationship will take.

The make of the car is significant in this context. Mary Pattillo-McCoy argues that historically, material items have always held emotional importance within the African-American community. During the 1950s and 1960s, ownership of an expensive and prestigious automobile demonstrated a black man had made it; possession of a Cadillac, therefore, often served as a “symbolic affront” to the power of whites (147). Throughout the postwar years, writes historian Thomas Sugrue, “for many blacks, owning a car became a powerful status symbol [...] The Cadillac assumed iconic status among the black elite.” As a black woman from Detroit, Franklin’s choice of the Cadillac as her musical mode of transportation holds multiple meanings. The vehicle not only reflects Franklin’s significant status and success, but her position as driver rather than passenger marks her as an individual with a great amount of power and control.

Franklin wrote many of her early songs, and was never passive in the production process. As music producer Jerry Wexler states, “She remained the central orchestrator of her own sound” (Werner 136). While Franklin was not the composer of “Freedom of Love,” she had tremendous influence not only over the recording process, but also in the production of the music video. Under Franklin’s insistence, her on-screen vocals were filmed in the car-themed Detroit restaurant Doug’s Body Shop; other scenes—shot in automotive locations throughout the city—reflect Detroit’s auto heritage as well as Franklin’s own connection to the Motor City. Angela Davis, writing about women’s agency and the African-American female performer in the blues genre, argues that the issue is not always who wrote the song, but how women artists “used them to bring women’s issues into the public sphere” (qtd. in

Pough 42). As Pavletich remarks, Franklin challenges listeners to hear her message; she “could rally a crowd, she had truth and conviction, she sang with faith, she personified the spirit of soul” (114). Through her appropriation of the car song, Aretha Franklin emboldens women to take control of the car, relationships, and their lives.

## Conclusion

E.L. Widmer writes, rock ‘n’ roll is “one of the few art forms that we can call genuinely American in its origin, and the automobile continues to stand out as a pivotal subject” (73). As this investigation suggests, the car song has metamorphosed from a repeated recounting of the white male teenager’s rite of passage into a metaphor for the experiences of all drivers, regardless of race, sexuality, class, or gender. The female singer-songwriter and driver—who came late to both automobility and rock ‘n’ roll—has infused the automobile and popular music with multiple new meanings. Female recording artists from a variety of musical genres and social locations have called upon the automobile as a vehicle of freedom, escape, recollection, and rebellion, conveyed through the voice of women’s experience.

Looking at women’s car songs through the framework of standpoint theory provides the opportunity to consider the circumstances under which the classic car song was produced, as well as to question assumptions regarding the automobile and rock ‘n’ roll that have gone unnoticed or unchallenged (Jaggar 307). The musical selections cited here—which represent only a handful of car songs produced by female recording artists—indicate there are alternative relationships to the automobile worthy of consideration. This has significance not only in popular music, but also in all arenas in which women’s relationship to the automobile has been belittled or ignored. Attention to alternative woman driver identities demonstrate that, despite the efforts of automakers to shape women’s driving habits and automotive

choices, women continue to make informed and independent decisions on the cars they drive and how they use them. Car songs based on women’s experience—automotive and otherwise—also suggest new possibilities for the woman driver as they contest the exclusive relationship of the automobile to masculinity as well as provide alternative and multiple ways to consider the meanings women ascribe to cars.

Literary scholar Deborah Clarke writes, “women’s relation to cars serves as an important site in which issues critical to twentieth-century American culture—technology, mobility, gender, domesticity and agency—are articulated” (3). Feminist scholars in history, literature, and popular culture have made significant inroads into such an investigation. The examination of the intersection of the automobile and rock ‘n’ roll—through the vehicle of the woman’s car song—provides an additional location in which to consider how the automobile impacts women’s lives, as well as how women’s experience has influenced rock ‘n’ roll and American car culture.

Despite du Lac’s pronouncement to the contrary, the passing of car song is not due to changes in the automobile that inspired it, but rather, in the voices and experiences of those who sing about it. The car song has changed because the two industries that inspired it—automotive and rock ‘n’ roll—are no longer the exclusive provinces of men. As women entered the rock ‘n’ and automotive arenas, as singer-songwriters and drivers, they altered the meaning of the automobile to reflect their own experiences. Thus, J. Freedom du Lac’s lament over the demise of the car song is misguided. For the car song is not dead. Rather, it is reimaged through the voice of the woman behind the wheel.

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