

Kristine Pettersen
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 Professor Hart

The Cultural Production of Singer/Songwriter Ani DiFranco: Feminist or Not?

There has been a lot of talk about whether feminist singer/songwriter Ani DiFranco has "sold out" on her ideals because she does not always write to please the lesbian and/or radical sector of her audience. DiFranco does not allow her bisexual rock idol status dictate her personal relationships with men. She is open about the fact that her current relationship to her boyfriend is neither a model radical feminist nor pro-woman one. She repeatedly tells us that she is a person just like everyone else and that she struggles with male dominance in her daily life despite the power she has as an independent artist and business woman.

In this essay I will explore some of the many possible meanings of her artistic production in the larger arena of feminist art and how those meanings may or may not contribute to a radical feminist project for lasting cultural change. I will use Alison Jaggar's description of radical feminism to evaluate DiFranco's art and production and to ultimately categorize her work as "anarchist-feminist" according to Jaggarian categories. I agree with Katie King's idea that the "...apparatus for the production of feminist culture'... is the site for the feminist proliferations of new political identities in the seventies, eighties and nineties through such 'writing technologies' as 'poem,' 'story,' and 'song.'"¹ In other words, a song is not just a song; it is a site for social change. In King's work she outlines *how* feminist culture is produced through these various mediums including music, but she does not include enough analysis of *what* feminist culture might be. She argues, and I agree, that these mediums ("song," "poem" and "story") chart and influence material

¹King, Katie. "The Politics of the Oral and the Written," in Theory in its Feminist Travels: Conversations in US Women's Movements. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 92.

movements of power in society, but she does not enter into a detailed account of what is or is not "feminist."

In contrast to King, I will emphasize *what* feminist culture may be and expand some of the boundaries of radical feminism to include DiFranco's messages that are not always pro-woman. I am less concerned with DiFranco's overt claims or intentions than I am with the possible impacts her music may have on certain sectors of popular culture. I will argue that by admitting her weaknesses as a woman, by being critical of herself and of other women and by avoiding radical feminist politics she paradoxically contributes to the empowerment of young women. I will look at ideals of "women's music" that both challenge and conform to patriarchal demands on art production and how DiFranco's music fits and does not fit into this cultural sphere. I will adhere to the radical feminist conception of "patriarchy" which postulates that the ruling class world-wide is dominated by men and defined by sex. My main objective is to explore the term "feminist culture" by using DiFranco's art as a backdrop and example of artistic production that contributes (intentionally or unintentionally) to Radical Feminist struggles against patriarchy.

A Brief History of DiFranco's Music

DiFranco's first album was released in 1990 by her then fledgling company Righteous Babe Records. The music and lyrics of that album are characterized by strong rhythmic playing in a "punk" style on acoustic guitar, and overtly political and feminist messages. The picture of her on the cover of the album shows her bald and sitting in a chair. In sharp contrast to this first release, her most recent production, Dilate, is about her undying love and obsession for a man who does not treat her very well. Not only does she refer to herself as his "mangy whore"² but we find a photo of her wearing a sexy dress inside the CD jacket. Gone are the lyrics

²Ani DiFranco, "Adam and Eve," Dilate. (Buffalo: Righteous Babe Records, 1996).

about her struggle to be a strong feminist woman at an abortion clinic³, the resolve to not be a "pretty girl,"⁴ and the openly feminist focus of her work. Many of the radical feminist fans in her listening audience accused her of "selling out" to patriarchal values and culture because of this album. She tells these fans that they are cool but that they've "got their panties on a little too tight"⁵ on her live album released in 1997.

The question I would like to explore first is the notion that DiFranco "sold out" by falling in love with a man and by writing about it in her music. According to Jaggar's account of radical feminism, radical feminists are concerned mostly with the previously dubbed "private" sphere of life. This distinguishing feature of radical feminism exposes personal relationships in order to make them a site for social analysis and change. For radical feminists "...there is no distinction between the 'political' and the 'personal' realms: every area of life is the sphere of 'sexual politics.' All relations between women and men are institutionalized relationships of power and so constitute appropriate subjects for political analyses."⁶

In Jaggar's chapter on the politics of radical feminism she outlines many of the ways this group has proposed to end the gender system of male domination that we find in public and private institutions. One such way is to refuse participation in heterosexual relationships.

The normative status of heterosexuality forces women to limit themselves sexually and emotionally to relationships with members of the caste that oppresses them, while denying them the possibility of establishing meaningful relationships with other women. Viewed

³Ani DiFranco, "lost woman song," Ani DiFranco. (Buffalo: Righteous Babe Records, 1990).

⁴Ani DiFranco, "Not a Pretty Girl," Not a Pretty Girl. (Buffalo: Righteous Babe Records, 1995).

⁵Ani DiFranco, Living in Clip. (Buffalo: Righteous Babe Records, 1997).

⁶Jaggar, Alison. "Radical Feminism and Human Nature," in Feminist Politics and Human Nature. (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1983), 101.

in this light the straight norm is not really a sexual norm at all, but a powerful instrument in the perpetuation of the power relationship between the sexes.⁷

Therefore, the only real way to be a radical feminist is to be a lesbian. Lesbians are more than just women who are sexually involved with other women, they are political activists in the sense that they are chipping away at one of the pillars of patriarchy: control of women by making them sexual objects for men's pleasure.

Another aspect of radical feminism and the "woman's culture" that they propose, is the idea that womanhood should be respected and enjoyed.

In addition, women's bodies are celebrated, particularly those aspects that have been devalued in male-dominated society. In conscious opposition to the stereotyped models of female beauty that are acknowledged under "the patriarchy," radical feminism glorifies the physical variety of women's bodies and gives special respect to those parts and processes that the male dominant culture has considered to be unclean. Rather than being "the curse" of God, for instance, menstruation is viewed as the blessing of the Goddess.⁸

DiFranco's earlier production certainly exemplifies this kind of adoration of the female body and its processes. She writes:

sitting in the boardroom, the i'm so bored room

⁷The Purple September Staff, "The Normative Status of Heterosexuality," p.83 as quoted by Alison Jaggar in Feminist Politics and Human Nature p. 272.

⁸Jaggar, Alison. "Radical Feminism and Human Nature," in Feminist Politics and Human Nature. (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1983), 95.

*listening to the suits talk about their world
 they can make straight lines out of almost anything
 except for the line of my upper lip when it curls
 dressed in my best greasy skin and squinty eyes
 i'm the only part of summer that made it inside
 in the air-conditioned building decorated with a
 corporate flair, i wonder can these boys smell me
 bleeding in my underwear*

*...every woman learns how to bleed from the moon
 and we bleed to renew life every time it's cut down*

*...i say it ain't no hassle no it ain't no mess
 right now it's the only power that i possess
 these businessmen got the money, they got the
 instruments of death, but i can make life, i can
 make breath⁹*

This particular song did not get very much air time on the radio for obvious reasons. DiFranco comments: "An acquaintance of mine called up some station in Boston and requested 'Blood in the Boardroom.' The DJ played up through verse two and a half and then cut it off. There's no swear words. It's completely a conceptual thing. What I really find amazing is that there's supposedly no rules or thought police and yet somehow people find the idea of menstruation offensive, and people won't play a song on the radio that has to do with that, or has the word

⁹Ani DiFranco, "Blood in the Boardroom," Puddle Dive. (Buffalo: Righteous Babe Records, 1993).

tampon in it."¹⁰ During this period of her production, she satisfied her almost all female and lesbian audience by remaining within the boundaries of radical feminism. All of this changed with the release of Dilate in 1996.

During the Dilate phase of her production, DiFranco clearly moves away from this type of radical feminist expression by engaging in a relationship with a man and writing songs about it. For this reason, some of her fans feel that she has turned her back on truly "feminist" song writing. I believe that she has made a move in favor of *her* particular type of feminism. Writing songs about how it feels to be in a relationship that is not always nurturing can be categorized as "feminist cultural production" if we are to look more deeply into that term and flesh out its possible meanings. DiFranco speaks to young women who struggle within their heterosexual relationships to be strong and powerful. One fan writes on her website: "What Ani says on Dilate is so true about love." The truth she is referring to is about the power struggle between a man and a woman, the ugly things of a relationship and the weaknesses that a woman may succumb to under patriarchy.

*tonight you stoop to my level
i am your mangy little whore
now you're trying to find your underwear
and then your socks and then the door
and you're trying to find a reason
why you have to leave
but i know it's 'cuz you think you're adam
and you think i'm eve*

¹⁰Ani DiFranco in an interview with Al Reiss. Article entitled: "Ani DiFranco - The Tazmanian Devil of Folk," 1995.

*...you put a tiny pin prick
 in my big red balloon
 and as i slowly start to exhale
 that's when you leave the room
 i did not design this game
 i did not name the stakes
 i just happen to like apples
 and i am not afraid of snakes
 i am truly sorry about all this
 i envy you your ignorance
 i hear that it's bliss¹¹*

She admits to playing a "game" that she did not invent but whose rules she and everybody understands well. Flippantly she writes "i just happen to like apples and i'm not afraid of snakes" which points to her own weakness in the face of this game. Even though she has a greater understanding than her boyfriend of the cultural and religious link to her personal situation, she is vulnerable to its power. In this way she is like the radical feminists with regard to seeing the "personal" as "political" and connected to larger cultural forces, but she differs from them when she writes about her willing participation in a patriarchal relationship.

She is referring to her emotional vulnerability when she writes: "and as I slowly start to exhale, that's when you leave the room." Even though it is a game, the real man leaves the real room and comes out ahead because the woman is abandoned and alone after giving of herself sexually to him. He experiences "bliss" because he is ignorant of the actual reasons behind his leaving: patriarchy starting with Woman's fall from God's grace in the person of Eve. "Feminist cultural

¹¹Ani DiFranco, "Adam and Eve," *Dilate*. (Buffalo: Righteous Babe Records, 1996).

production" should be expansive enough to include songs and stories about the real-life struggles women encounter in their relationships with men without proposing a solution or presenting a "fight back" attitude. In this sense, Ani DiFranco departs from what has traditionally been considered "women's music."

How DiFranco does and does not fit into the "women's music" scene

In her article entitled "Women-Identified Music in the United States," Karen Peterson maps out the birth and development of "women's music" in America. Originally, in the 1960's when the genre was forming, feminists and lesbians began making music that "...had as its self-conscious textual content the expression of women's oppression by men, the celebration of the beauty of women in their struggle to overcome this oppression, and the beauty of women loving women in a sexual relationship."¹² Most of the music was folk music and the style was soothing and melodic as opposed to angry and rebellious. There were exceptions to this style (one notable exception was Janis Joplin) but overall, women's music was a "softer" version of its male counterpart in popular rock and folk with lyrics that espoused radical feminist values.

There have been many complaints amongst music critics that "women's music" does not push form as well as lyrical content into new creative realms. One keyboardist and free-lance writer proclaims: "It's okay to be a nappy-headed Tracy Chapman or a hairy-legged Michelle Shocked, as long as you're a gentle folkie singing about moral integrity in a reassuringly feminine voice."¹³ Later on I will explore some political and economic reasons for the stagnation of women's music as well as to highlight how Ani DiFranco has moved out ahead in this area. For now, it is important to recognize that there is a call within the literature written about

¹²Petersen, Karen. "Women-Identified Music in the United States," in Women and Music in Cross-Cultural Perspective. Ed. Ellen Koskoff. (Chicago:University of Illinois Press, 1989), 206.

¹³Mifflin, Margot, "The Fallacy of Feminism in Rock," in Rock She Wrote. Ed. Evelyn McDonnell and Ann Powers. (New York: Dell Publishing, 1995), 77.

women's music for innovation and growth. The political implications of this growth, if it occurs and I believe that it does in DiFranco's case, will eventually free women musicians from patriarchal control of the music industry. It is threatening to the establishment to sing in a "different" style; in a style that moves away from what people expect from a "gentle folkie." Petersen comments:

The music's vitality demands further musical developments that will continue to correspond to the tremendous changes that continue to occur in women's lives today. Tremendous success has been achieved in musical promotion, but revolutionary lyrical content does not guarantee innovational musical content. Currently, many musicians have begun to "cross over" into other styles of music in order to further expand and add new dimensions to their music. As expected, this crossing over is either condoned as evidence of deepening musical creativity or rejected as a loss of focus on woman.¹⁴

It is clear that DiFranco's music does not neatly fit into the traditional category of "women's music." She plays with forms as well as lyrical content to create a style and message that is uniquely her own. After having seen and heard Ani DiFranco for the first time, my friend remarked that she "doesn't quite seem lesbian, but she's using masculine imagery and style in order to be powerful—her focus on self and her strong ego are refreshing."¹⁵ DiFranco's presentation is refreshing to some but threatening to others who like to see female musicians stay within defined gender boundaries; i.e.. "straight" or "lesbian." She is inspired by "women's music" and says: "We owe a big debt of gratitude to the women who

¹⁴Petersen, Karen. "Women-Identified Music in the United States," p.211.

¹⁵Tamara Joseph. Friend of mine.

went before us," but at the same time she is tired of the traditional lesbian folk music circuit. "Let's do something different now, girls!" she urges.¹⁶

DiFranco pushes musical boundaries claiming that being true to herself is the higher good. This moral stance is an integral part of her particular kind of feminism and makes her more of a social anarchist with radical feminist leanings than a dyed-in-the-wool radical feminist according to Jaggar's categories. These two groups overlap in that they want an end to patriarchy but some of the means that they espouse are different. Both emphasize social change through the building of alternative institutions, but social anarchy does not require its followers to participate in mass behaviors for social change. For example, some radical feminists believe that it is essential for all women to become lesbian in order to overthrow patriarchy. Social anarchy is critical of this kind of universal call to action.

Ani DiFranco and Social Anarchism

Social anarchists are skeptical of mass movements for social change and more interested in self development as a form of transforming social roles and eventually overturning the ruling class. The individual and their interests are highly important for both the liberation of the self and the eventual liberation of society. In fact, social anarchists believe that means and ends should not be distinguishable and that each individual should be true to their needs for liberation in their daily lives.

There can be no separation of the revolutionary process from the revolutionary goal.¹⁷

We have nothing but our freedom. We have nothing to give you but your own freedom. We have no law but the single principle of

¹⁶Ani DiFranco in an interview with Deneuve, February, 1995.

¹⁷Bookchin, *Post-Scarcity Anarchism*, p.45 as quoted in Feminist Politics and Human Nature by Alesion Jaggar, p.280.

mutual aid between individuals. We have no government but the single principle of free association. You cannot buy the Revolution. You cannot make the Revolution...You can only be the Revolution. It is in your spirit or it is nowhere.¹⁸

DiFranco strongly resists control of her music business which can be seen as a socialist anarchist position in the sense that she will not confuse the means and the ends of her production. Part of what she does is make records on her own terms; not just music. In addition to this, she is adamant about her own self-interests and liberation in her music. This also resembles the socialist anarchist ideology.

The self must always be *identifiable* in the revolution, not overwhelmed by it. The self must always be *perceivable* in the revolutionary process, not submerged by it. There is no word that is more sinister in the "revolutionary" vocabulary than "masses." Revolutionary liberation must be a self-liberation that reaches social dimensions, not "mass liberation" or "class liberation" behind which lurks the rule of an elite, a hierarchy and a state.¹⁹

DiFranco's insistence on being herself despite powerful social forces coming from the music industry *and* some of her radical feminist fans clearly points in the direction of social anarchy. She is speaking to her lesbian feminist fans when she writes:

¹⁸Ursula LeGuin, *The Dispossessed*, quoted by Lizzie Borden, "Women and Anarchy," *Heresies* 1, no. 2 (May 1977):73 as in *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* by Alison Jaggar, p.280.

¹⁹Bookchin, *Post-Scarcity Anarchism*, p.44 as quoted in *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* by Alison Jaggar, p.281.

*everybody's asking me: "are you in or are you out?"
and i think: "ah man, what's this all about ?"
'cuz you can't put me up on any shelf
i came here alone and i'll leave by myself²⁰*

She is very protective of herself and her interests both in personal affairs and in business matters.

It is important to note the business end of DiFranco's production because this largely influences what kind of music she can play. The company Righteous Babe Records is owned and run by her. DiFranco refuses to be controlled by anyone and is savvy enough to have know at a young age that ownership of the means of her production was important to her artistic freedom. "The music biz is big business, and it's always been a boys' club. The primary focus is money, with the music coming second, third or maybe even tenth."²¹ She is overtly political about her insistence on keeping the business within her control and seems to have an underlying social anarchist conviction about it being a step in the direction of social change. Jaggar points out that the social anarchists, along with the radical feminists who call it "building a womanculture," believe that building alternative institutions pushes for social change.²²

I don't think the music industry is conducive to artistic and social change and growth. It does a lot to exploit and homogenize art and artists. In order to challenge the corporate music industry, I feel it necessary to remain outside it...I could be selling a lot more albums.

²⁰Ani DiFranco, "In or Out," Imperfectly. (Buffalo: Righteous Babe Records, 1993).

²¹Ani DiFranco in an interview with Deneuve, February, 1995.

²²Jaggar, Alison. "The Politics of Radical Feminism," in Feminist Politics and Human Nature. (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1983), 280.

Life could be a lot more cushy. But it's more interesting to try and hammer out an alternative route without the music industry and maybe be an example for other musicians. You don't have to play ball.²³

In contrast to what DiFranco is able to do because she does not depend on a big label to promote her, Marianne Faithfull comments on the release of her song "Sister Morphine" that was yanked from the stores because it was upsetting to the "old dears up at Decca records." She writes:

I felt trapped; I wasn't going to be allowed to break out of my ridiculous image. I was being told that I would not be permitted to leave that wretched, tawdry doll behind. If I went on doing my nice little folky songs I could go on making records. Otherwise, I would not be permitted to do so.²⁴

Traditionally, female musicians have made it into the public sphere largely on the coat-tails of already established male musicians. This is known as the "groupie" phenomenon and explains the relentless control of style that results from women not having economic power over what they produce. But what's a girl to do? When role models are largely male and the music business is dominated by men, it is inevitable that many potential female musicians will have fantasies first of getting romantically involved with a male musician in order to later have him promote her art. Female groupies are misunderstood by the music industry. They

²³Ani DiFranco, quoted by Ira Robbins in *Newsday*, June 30, 1995.

²⁴Faithfull, Marianne, excerpt from *Faithfull*, 1994 in *Rock She Wrote*. Ed. Evelyn McDonnell and Ann Powers. (New York: Dell Publishing, 1995), 30.

are reduced to "teenyboppers" who wish only to be used sexually by the male stars who are center stage. Nothing could be further from the truth.

For every girl who daydreams about being a groupie, there must be at least one hundred who daydream about being writers, musicians, photographers, costume designers or poets: "If I were one of those, creeps couldn't say to me, 'No head, no backstage.'"²⁵

DiFranco is a living example of a woman who did not get trapped into a "groupie" role and was able to realize her dreams of being a musician.

Conclusion

Ani DiFranco's cultural production is paradoxical. On the one hand, she sings about being a strong woman fighting against patriarchy and on the other, she admits her weaknesses in the face of its power. The conceptual complexity of her production denotes an extraordinary honesty that young women grappling with male power can appreciate. For this reason, I feel that her music and her business is "feminist" because it contributes to the empowerment and solidarity of women. It is also "anarchist" because she never compromises her own self interests.

In addition, her musical production can be put into the "feminist" category more so than into the "woman's music" category because she plays with sounds and styles. She has not limited herself to gentle guitar playing with radical feminist lyrics. She has set an example for female musicians everywhere, and continues the struggle for self and women's liberation.

²⁵Twersky, Lori, "Devils or Angels? The Female Teenage Audience Examined," in *Rock She Wrote*. Ed. Evelyn McDonnell and Ann Powers. (New York: Dell Publishing, 1995), 181.