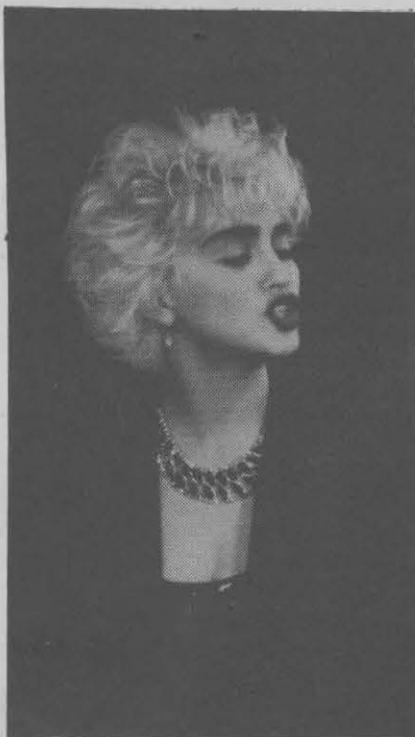


Profile

Madonna



I see the movie, I listen to the records, I buy the book, I study the signs. They point in opposite directions simultaneously. "From when I was very young, I knew that being a girl and being charming in a feminine sort of way could get me a lot of things, and I milked it for everything I could." And at the same time: "I wanted to do **everything** everybody told me I couldn't ever do." And that's just what she has done. It is alter ego at work, to millions it has proved irresistible. It is one of the keys to Madonna.

Born to strict Catholic Italian immigrant parents (who else would have thought up that name — along with the additional Louise Veronica Ciccone) Madonna was brought up in Detroit with three brothers, four sisters and a classic and urgent desire to make good.

She is a good girl. Her mother died when she was eight, her childhood was spent taking care of the little ones. Now, she is taking care of herself: mother dear — this girl just wants to have fun, as she might have sung to millions of teeny ears of Cyndi Lauper hadn't done it first. Not that the two, despite certain similarities, are inter-changeable. Many, including Lauper herself, felt that of the two, it was Cyndi who was the more likely candidate for pop stardom. On the other hand, Madonna is the all round enhanced media personality: she sings (pretty well), but was also pushing it as an actress, dancer and anything else

likely to bring the heights within her grasp, for years prior to her "overnight success".

When Susan Seidelman cast the New York based, and rather interesting, cult figure as the desperately sought after Susan, she could have had no real sense that she was hitching her film to a rising tidal wave.

But Madonna is a smart cookie, she knew what she was about and all along she was aiming at the ionosphere. And she was no ordinary pop chick merely walking through a movie. Susan was a neatly constructed and assured persona (and at least her third movie appearance, although she doesn't talk about the others). Susan was also immediately and stunningly beguiling. It didn't stop the putative star of the piece, Rosanna Arquette, being just a little pissed off. On the other hand, it did mean that Rosanna was in an unpredictably **huge** general release smash instead of the star of a marginal arthouse hit.

But was Madonna really the Susan of that film? Was Susan really Madonna? Who cared? Certainly not the millions of 15 year old WannabeMadonnas. They gave their mothers hysterics as they got themselves up like Times

Square tartlets, with sludgy luscious lipstick, charcoaled eyes, massed streaked hair and the clothes — aaaagh god! The clothes.

Susan/Madonna put on the style in great dollops — it was Maybelline and Fabulash country, brand names not spoken in polite society since the equally over-made-up 60s. But in many ways the early '80s were a lot spunkier than the '60s ever were: "Get into the groove," went her hit single from the film, "you gotta move boy, if you want my love". Quite what she had in mind is open to several interpretations, at least one of them is threatening to the male: posters for the movie were amended to "Madogga — slag — cunt — tart" by boys who ran away laughing nervously.

Between the '60s and this decade there has been women's liberation — dreaded, of course, ridiculed but subliminally sunk into everyday life. A dangerous substance, ingested by osmosis, secretly and continually popping up in unexpected places. Once upon a time there was Patti Smith and Debbie Harry when she was Blondie — Madonna's older sisters in the image business. Patti strutted the stuff of independence, actress Debbie created the look, they set the tone of their times. Madonna did the same for the early '80s, but she brought the two facets together.

That difference is yet another key. One that might hang jangling around her neck along with the rosaries and crucifixes of the good Catholic girl bent on subversion. Who literally obeys her daddy — on state on a US tour which sold over 650,000 tickets — and who has married, but said "I can't conceive of living happily ever after for a long period of time with one person" even before Sean Penn came along to prove the wisdom of such a statement.

Nevertheless, having committed the conventional she can still observe of the criticism of her stage show and stage personal: "Art and

music can never be too permissive, especially if they act as an alternative to the reactionary attitudes of people like Reagan and the Moral Majority."

Definitely Madonna — not the Magdalene — despite the studied sleaze and unabashed sweat of strenuous physical performance, there is nothing really dubious here. There is wholesome flesh on her bones, not the sinewy strungout twitch of Patti nor the smallhours pallor of Debbie, nor the anorexic "slimness" of the fundamentally unsure. Despite what she does with that microphone, nothing nasty has passed those pouting lips. Noxious substances haven't take their toll of the highly energised and sensuously proportioned frame: this is a pasta and popcorn girl. And that reveals yet another key: despite contradictory images, Madonna is no Lolita. Soft porn it verges on, kiddy porn it ain't. Perm any one of three preferred birth dates (57, 58 or 59) and she is a canny, clear headed young woman — boychild husband notwithstanding.

Her own hands were firmly on the wheel of Madonna Inc. She was responsible for the monster tours, the merchandising and the designer boutiques that went with the first wave of Madonna mania. And that is the penultimate key: comparisons with Marilyn Monroe and Goldie Hawn are more accurate than many realise. Madonna is as clever and talented as both, as conscious of the power and origin of the fluffy, kooky, muddlehead image as the former, and as in control of it as the latter. And she **plays** the contradictions for all they're worth.

She gets herself up like she escaped from a circus or bordello and she is nonchalantly unconcerned. Yet she never actually got to drink the triple Tequila Sunrise she ordered in *Desperately Seeking Susan* and she didn't actually engage in unpleasant, unlawful or unkind activities — it was hearsay, people

only **said** she did! The perverted bridal outfit she wore for her stage encore has to be the living end and a tired business person's fantasy but when it comes to it, she has clean, neat finger nails, perfect skin and she shaves her armpits to the smoothness of a baby's bottom.

To date, and in circular fashion, she's done everything people said she couldn't. She's done a lot of things people said she shouldn't. **And** she's also milked being

charming, young and feminine in a way that Massalina and Mata Hari would have understood.

Success has brought the luxury of failed movies, bopped photographers, more hit records and a gradual dilution of that first exciting image leap into the public eye. That perhaps is the final key to anyone who is still, and in any way, seeking Madonna.

Diana Simmonds

