When British dance music artist Betty Boo was caught miming and harassed off stage by jeering punters in a Melbourne club in July, Collette Roberts might have had a feeling of déjà vu.

Two years earlier, Collette herself suffered the same rejection when she supported American rap star Tone Loc at a Sydney show—though whether she was really miming or not was never established. Betty Boo blamed stress and overwork for the enforced cancellation of the rest of her Australian tour; Collette, with nowhere to flee to but her modest Sydney terrace, blamed “bad sound” and soldiered on.

Collette Roberts, 24, came to Australia from New Zealand in her late teens; she was a successful model, starring in many a supermarket sale catalogue before turning her attention towards the world of music.

Collette entered the pop world on the tail-end of the Kylie Minogue backlash and, despite the success of her first single “Ring My Bell”, soon found the pent-up indignation of rock hacks diverted her way.

Collette’s image was ‘fun’; she seemed like a young mother figure, or an au pair perhaps. Long blonde hair and cycling shorts; that was the look. She wrote the words to all the songs but one on her first album Raise the Roof, and we presume her collaborator, Sydney DJ Pee Wee Ferris, didn’t mind when she implied they were all her own work.

It didn’t do any good; Collette was consigned to the bimbo drawer from the start. Newspapers and even pop magazines never took her seriously. It suited her detractors to categorise Collette as a hugely successful mindless ex-model with no talent.

It was time for a re-think—always difficult in a market which rarely allows a second chance, especially for the lightweights. Midway through 1990, Collette took the plunge and went ‘street smart’. She cut her hair short and donned a velvet jumpsuit for “Who Do You Think You Are?”—probably her best track to date. The song announced her new approach with a gritty video and chorus of “Who do you think you’re foolin’?” It was as good and as opinionated as anything megastar Janet Jackson could manage, and Collette announced that it was about the critics who’d panned her in the past and who were about to get their comeuppance.

But the damage to her career was already done, and neither the single nor the new album, Attitude, sold in any great quantity here.

Collette is unrepentant, and firstly, I think it’s the look. Collette is self-assured and, though her videos have always been light-hearted affairs, there is nothing fluffy or cute about her. Secondly, there is the content. The Attitude LP took a more hardline approach lyrically but Collette has never been about sex, or even love, very much. To an average teen consumer, Dannii and Tina Arena really do have a sexy, little-girl quality. The sexiness gives credibility and interest; the girlishness makes it non-threatening. Their songs, too, have an air of anguish about them which makes them somehow ‘feminine’.

Thirdly, she has an attitude problem. Collette is more concerned with her music than anything else; she takes, you feel, no little pride in her work. But because she seems to feel compelled to present herself as a face, a figure, an image, she is less eager to show us this serious or creative side—though she will readily say that she’s now writing (read: co-writing) songs for other people.

In August, 14 top forty singles in the Australian charts featured women’s voices singing lead vocal—as well as two male/female duets. Only four of the top twenty albums, on the other hand, are by women. The majority of these women aren’t writing their own songs—though, unlike most male singers (who don’t have to worry much about such things), most of them are taking responsibility for their own ‘look’.

If Collette is to be singled out from all female pop stars as the ‘manufactured’ one, then the obvious should be stated: there isn’t one artist in pop music today who doesn’t rely on an image to help sell records; there probably hasn’t been one in thirty years. (‘Not having an image’ is one of the most powerful ‘images’ around, of course.) Subjective evaluation of Collette’s career gets harder by the day, especially since, with Attitude, she’s joined the argument her- self. But I, for one, am on her side.

DAVID NICHOLS writes for teen magazines.