

Women in POP

By Joseph McCombs
Pop/Rock Writer



"Teenagers all over the country are writing letters to Avril Lavigne," Rick Dees announced not long ago on his weekly Top 40 Countdown radio show. "They're thanking her for making it okay for them to wear clothes again!"

Meanwhile, as Lavigne's power ballad, "I'm With You," ascended the upper reaches of the singles chart, Billboard Radio chose as its weekly "Pick to Click" the ethereal, breezy "In This Life" by Canadian export, Chantal Kreviazuk, a song well outside the teen-pop-seductress mold.

These separate events together signal a changing of the guard in the pop landscape. A wind of change that began as a faint whistle with the appearance last year of Lavigne on the radio along with other decidedly non-tarted-up popsters as Vanessa Carlton and Michelle Branch. They scored not only airplay but heavy MTV rotation with no more gimmick than heartfelt lyrics and the actual playing of their instruments. It seemed, in 2002, that "women in pop" was finally beginning to mean something beyond posing naked for *Maxim Magazine*.

Then Norah Jones kicked off 2003 by riding a chariot through the Grammy procession as if she'd been the only one invited. Suddenly, the world realized there is indeed a record buying demographic above the age of 25. One that likes women and their music to be -- well, adult. And it is having tremendous effects, not just upon top-selling acts like Jones and Carlton, but on the women populating the independent music scene. They're finding a clearer road to crossover success, one in which they can pursue their musical visions without being tramped up into dance-floor confections.



Nadine Goellner, a New York-bred singer/guitarist, finds the trend encouraging. "Now, [there's] a lot more singer/songwriter-type artists crossing over into Top 40 radio," she notes, citing Carlton and Branch as immediate examples. "Even John Mayer," she adds, highlighting the change is not limited to women only. "I think that's becoming more of what people are looking to hear. I think there's a little bit of a move away from" the TRL-oriented material. Goellner's merging of jazz chords and scatting intonations into a folkish pop setting earned her a featured slot in the recent Grammyfest showcase, where she performed along with Jesse Harris, author of the Norah Jones breakthrough hit "Don't Know Why."

I asked her if Jones's Grammy wins are a harbinger of good things to come for jazz-oriented vocalists. Her reply, "It's not quite that simple. There's been other crossover jazz artists, like Diana Krall, Cassandra Wilson, who have crossed over into the pop realm – but this is a little bit different with Norah Jones. It's definitely a jazz-influenced pop music. I guess you would call it a bit more sophisticated-sounding pop music." She adds, "It's nice to see more sophisticated music coming through."



"I would agree that things are changing," concurs Philadelphia-based performer Gina Scipione. Her piano-based balladry, not far removed from the meditative stylings of Kreviazuk and Paula Cole, has found outlets outside the Top 40 hegemony, just in time for her to promote her CD *Destino*. And there's enough room for both. She finds that she feels no pressure to alter her sound or appearance to conform to the Lolita landscape.

"It would be damaging for people to buy into the notion that to be a successful pop artist, a woman has to exploit her sexuality. I choose not to participate in that kind of thinking. I don't really listen to stations that play their music and I tend to think that most fans that listen to my kind of music don't either, which makes me think that our styles may exist independently of each other."

Maintaining a similar kind of confident autonomy is fellow songstress Jo Alexis, who is currently making her mark in Los Angeles by way of Philadelphia, Providence and Portland. Alexis, who recovered from a devastating accident in 1996 to resume her recording and performing career, takes the concern of pop tartlets lightly. With educative stops at grunge and country en route to her current style, she's the type who would be making music her way no matter what the flavor of the month.



Alexis, Scipione and Goellner have all maintained active recording and performing careers and look to be among the primary beneficiaries of a burgeoning trend toward marketing to "older" audiences. It's a demographic long forgotten, now reawakening. As Blue Note marketing director Zach Hochkeppel explained to the New York Times not long ago regarding Jones's tremendous success on the label, "She speaks to a huge group of people that the music business has forgotten and declared irrelevant."

The day of reaping these benefits has not fully arrived, however.

Despite the increased visibility of Jones, Carlton and the rest, there has not been a rush to sign studiously mature singer/songwriters. Scipione, Goellner and Alexis all remain independent, though all have given thought to the prospect of signing with a major label.

Alexis is particularly sanguine about the pros and cons of such a jump: "I think it's often a great dilemma. I just feel like, stop your bitching, when other people say, 'Oh, but [the major labels] won't let me make my own music!' You're making music; can it be that bad? I know that people are like, 'Where you are right now is the optimal place to be and you don't ever want a label' -- but I don't know. They can do so much." Goellner and Scipione both take we'll-see-what-the-future-holds stances on label involvement and the resulting promotion to the "new" Top 40 radio.

In the meantime, Goellner and Alexis -- both of whom make their CDs available at the CDBaby.com indie store -- note that their own music is being promoted to college radio rather than to the imposing Top 40 playlists. "There's just so many larger forces at work," Goellner explains briskly. Alexis adds, in reference to the reliance on independent promoters,

"Most of the radio is pay-to-promote and I just don't have the time to follow up." Although the most visible landmarks on the pop highway in recent years have been the Britneys and Christinas and Ashantis, independent female artists like Nadine Goellner, Jo Alexis and Gina Scipione take heart and inspiration from the less omnipresent (and less revealing) musicians who have stayed on the map. Alexis cites Alanis Morissette, Sarah McLachlan and Sinead O'Connor as influences, while Scipione welcomes comparisons to the piano-based stylings of the likes of Chantal Kreviazuk.



As the post-Norah's-Grammys landscape takes shape, Scipione's assessment rings particularly true: "The approach that has been used in marketing artists like Britney and Christina seems to me to glorify the more surfacy aspects of being women. That teenage girls who are forming their own identities about what it means to be a woman look to them as role models is troubling to me."

In my opinion, women in the public eye serve society better by emphasizing the deeper and more meaningful aspects of being women. Ultimately, it is up to the individual to choose her role models well."

And Rick Dees can now vouch for how individuals are choosing.

Jo Alexis Photos: Publicity
Nadine Goellner 2nd Photo © 2002 Sarah Foster
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