



Madonna

“Holiday” & “Burning Up”

Madonna

07/1983

Warner Bros. Records

# Mixed Messages

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The first love poem I ever gave a guy I stole word for word from Madonna. The “poem” was the lyrics to “Burning Up,” an intensely lusty number off her first album, and the guy was a boy at my high school whom I thought looked like Sting.

His name was Craig, and like the woman whose song I gave him, he had a reputation.

Back in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, when I started crushing on him, he’d been a jock verging on burnout, or maybe a burnout verging on jock. Thirteen is that kind of liminal age when you can easily embody two personas, no matter how contradictory, like a honey-sweet A-side with a dirty-horny B-side spinning away underneath. If you’re a boy, that is. If you’re a girl, still inexperienced and unsure of yourself, yet already developed, already drawing the kind of attention better suited to a woman twice your age, it’s not so easy. People will say you’re giving off mixed messages. They’ll call it “attention seeking” or “showing off.”

Craig was popular and I wasn’t. He was on the football and wrestling teams and I wasn’t on anything. He reportedly hung out in other kids’ basements after school to drink and smoke. After school I went to more school, to CCD, aka Catholic education for kids whose parents couldn’t afford parochial tuitions. Craig had spiked blond hair and acne, was twice the size of most the other boys, and wore a near-daily attire of black concert tees advertising one metal band or another. Metallica, Slayer, Iron Maiden...bands I never listened to or got near in my musical taste. Bands I probably wouldn’t have even known about if it weren’t for their appearance across the muscles of Craig’s chest.

My thing was pop music, like top 40 radio hits and heavy rotation MTV faves. I liked songs you could dance to. Michael Jackson, Janet Jackson, Prince, and yes, Madonna, whom I took a special interest in for a completely inconsequential and self-centered reason. We share an unusual name. Madonna is my middle name and my mother’s first name, and I had never known anyone else called Madonna, other than the Virgin Mary—which, in an era of classrooms crammed with Jennifer Lynns and Julie Annes, only made the name even more extremely weird and uncool.

Until “Holiday” came along.

I was 11 when I first heard it, on the radio one winter Sunday while listening to Casey Kasem’s countdown. Not listening actually, but dancing. Alone, in the room I shared with my sister A, four years older than me but the closest to me in age of my five siblings. We’d been roomies since I was born, sometimes even sharing a bed in the very full houses we’d grown up in, first on the northwest side of Chicago and then in a suburb known for nothing but a don’t-cough-or-you’ll-miss-it mention in *The Blues Brothers*.

I remember hearing Casey’s introduction to “Holiday” and thinking I misheard the singer’s name. Once the song started, I fell immediately for its peppy beat and message of celebration and togetherness. I was a misfit kid, a bookish loner who got bullied at school for my weight and glasses and crooked tetracycline-stained teeth, and my outsider experience made me a sucker for any song that pleaded for people to come together despite their differences, even for “just one day out of life.” Dancing, like books and music, was an escape for me, from the crowded physical spaces of home and the perpetual sense of social awkwardness and ugliness I felt at school. Dancing was where I could pretend I

was someone else, someone graceful and beautiful and cool. All it took for transformation was a good song.

After the song's fadeout on the countdown, Casey repeated its title and the singer's name and where she came from: Detroit, meaning the Midwest. Same as me, I thought. And in the easily impressed way of young misfit girls, that was all it took. I was a fan.

It wasn't long before I got to see this doppelganger of mine, on *American Bandstand*, lip syncing and skipping around to that same great song from Casey's countdown. If I'd been under the notion she and I had much in common, her appearance on *Bandstand* quickly put an end to that. Her look was streetwise, not suburban schoolgirlish. She wore all black, lots of makeup, and fabulously messy hair. Her skippy-kid dance moves didn't seem hard, but when I tried them later in my room it proved a challenge keeping up that energy for a whole song. She may not have been impressive vocally (live or on record), but there was something magnetic about her, something almost feral in her facial expressions that jarred with her song's utopian lyrics but fit perfectly with her disco-punk-gypsy getup.

Then there was the confidence—sexual, professional, just all-around. To this day, I'll maintain that's what rubs people about Madonna, what explains the perpetual trashing she's gotten since 1983—her audacious, undeniable, gender-role-busting self-belief. After her performance, as Dick Clark tried to interview her over the screaming kids in the studio, she couldn't stop smiling and giggling at her success and sudden popularity. When Dick Clark asks her if she was scared to go out on her own as a performer, she answers, "Not really. I think I've always had a lot of confidence in myself." Then she lays it right out for us. "What are your dreams, what's left?" Clark asks her. "To rule the world," she says, capping it off with another giggle.

"Look at this girl," one of my older siblings (a baby boomer to my Gen X) said dismissively, making disparaging comments about her bared bellybutton and visible bra straps. Like, who did she think she was? Going on TV, enjoying herself, dressing slutty, dancing around, plotting world domination.

I don't think it's possible for me to understate the significance of that *Bandstand* performance, the seed-planting, what it was like as a suburban Midwestern Catholic girl to see this other suburban Midwestern Catholic girl who'd not only escaped to something bigger and better but was demanding more. Without apology.

My sister soon got Madonna's first album, but I got more use out of it, dancing to it in the basement every week. Madonna may have been too local for A's taste anyway. She was mostly a Brit-band kind of girl. When she hit her teens, she'd begun covering the walls of our room with Star Hits tear-outs of Duran Duran, Howard Jones, and Culture Club. They took the place of my Muppets poster and her small B&W cut-outs of Matt Dillon from the Chicago newspapers' weekend movies section. On our closet door hung a huge poster of that blonded-up post-punk trio The Police, A's favorite. We fought over this space—I wanted it for an MJ poster featuring the King of Pop in white slacks and a yellow cardigan and matching bowtie. When A didn't relent, I took her stick deodorant and defaced Sting and Co's faces with it. As it turned out, deodorant scrapes right off poster paper (who knew?) and for years I had to contend with falling asleep under the sexy-intellectual gaze of The Police's lead singer night after night. Subconsciously, I must have started seeking that same gaze among the boys at my school. Because one night, when I was just turned 13, it struck me while staring back into Sting's eyes: with that blond spiky 'do and those cheekbones and muscles, he kinda sorta looked like that one tall guy at school. Metallica guy. Craig.

It was too bad Craig was all wrong for me. As in cool, popular, and rebellious where I was shy, self-conscious, and unknown. We had no classes together, nothing in common socially, and I was sure he didn't know I was alive. He said as much when someone squealed my crush on him. "I don't know who she is," he said, according to the girls who told him. Later, presumably after someone pointed me out to him, he told our one mutual friend, "She's too nice." And I couldn't decide which was worse—being invisible or being innocent.

Something had to change and that something had to be me. I wanted so badly for it to be me.

The truth was my life had become overwhelmed by changes. After turning 13, I got my first period, having already developed physically—breasts, hips, height, the works—beginning around 10 or 11. My older siblings started getting married off. And most life-changing of all, my grandmother had had a stroke and had come to live with us. She was given the room I shared with A, and all our music mag pics were taken down and replaced with pictures and statues of the Holy Family and various Catholic saints—Madonna for madonnas, you might say. A moved into a room formerly occupied by one of our brothers, and I moved into a tiny tandem room off hers, about the size of a large walk-in closet. After school, I had to be home to help look after my grandmother with my siblings, as our parents worked full-time.

There comes a time in every young girl's life when she senses things aren't under her control, that there are rules she's supposed to abide by that she didn't make and expectations she has to live up to that she can't possibly meet and taboos she shouldn't break that she suspects wouldn't even be on the radar if she were a boy. Most girls react to this realization head-on, and many by trying to take control over the one thing that all these rules and expectations and taboos seem to apply to—her body. I was no different. If I couldn't stop change from overwhelming my life and overtaking the space I'd tried to carve out for myself, I could at least try and make it work for me.

So I lost weight. A lot. I did it my way and the textbook teen girl way—dancing for hours to records in the basement after school and eating as little as a scoop of cottage cheese for dinner and a milk carton for lunch every day. It was only the beginning.

After graduating junior high, I spent the summer getting ready for high school reflecting on possibilities, on the dream of having a completely different look, a completely different social life—really, any social life. Meanwhile, A was going away to college, giving me her room and everything in it she left behind. Her last couple years of high school, she'd begun replacing her music mags with fashion rags, bookmarking spreads of stylish women whose looks she wanted to copy and elegant rooms whose décor she wanted to surround herself in. She'd always had a fashionable touch that I lacked. Studying her leftover, well-thumbed through copies of *Vogue* and *Mademoiselle*, I knew such transformation was hopeless for me, even newly skinny as I was. I was too hungry for high fashion—hungry to be noticed, to be loved, to stop being so invisible and innocent.

Who else could I turn for a role model but to Madonna, by now the queen of everything, not just a pop star but a cultural tornado-exploding-supernova. I didn't know if Craig liked her. I mean, looking back, reminiscing on all his death metal tees, probably not. But I don't think it even occurred to me. The point is I liked her.

So freshman year of high school saw a new me—dressed in extra-small tank tops I converted into ultra-short miniskirts (I'd pull the neck part over my hips and tuck the straps in at the sides) and visible bra straps and, yes, even rosaries worn as necklaces. Did Craig notice? Because I know my grandmother did. She complained about it to my mother,

who was either too distracted by her new role as caretaker to her mother to notice her youngest child's increasingly provocative attire or had raised enough kids by now to know a phase when she saw one. The only thing my mother objected to was the rosaries. "Those aren't *jewelry*," she informed me one morning as I was heading out of the house for the bus. And like the good Catholic girl I still was underneath, I obeyed and put the rosaries back on my grandmother's bedstand where I'd borrowed them.

If Craig wasn't impressed by my new look, maybe a good old-fashioned note would do the trick. But what to say to a pot-smoking, Slayer-loving, teenage Sting look-alike on the football team who I'd been obsessing about for a year now? I didn't trust my own words, didn't think I could put my schoolgirl feelings and hormonal yearnings into anything eloquent enough to convince him of the urgency of my love and lust for him. That was where music saved the day. I mean, he liked music. I liked music. What could go wrong?

After hitting on my epiphany, I spent a couple afternoons poring over all the songs in my record collection, reading all the lyrics on the liner sleeves, trying to determine the perfect song to snare Craig's attention and devotion. At some point, I don't know when—but I wish I did, to better determine just what I was thinking—I settled on "Burning Up." It was from Madonna's first album, same as "Holiday," already an oldie in the wake of two more albums she'd released. Unlike "Holiday," it hadn't been a hit, but in some ways it had solidified Madonna's hypersexual reputation more than any other song from her early career. The most notorious of the lyrics went:

*Do you wanna see me down on my knees?  
Or bending over backwards, now would you be pleased?  
Unlike the others I'd do anything  
I'm not the same, I have no shame  
I'm on fire!*

Over time, serious music critics would suggest that the song's love interest was really a metaphor for fame or power. The video seems to back this up, showing Madonna writhing around as if in sexual agony on a street intercut with some dude driving her way—until the last shot sees Madonna behind the wheel of the car, sans dude and smiling.

Metaphor or no, I took the lyrics literally (especially the line "But you don't even know I'm alive"), and diligently copied down the lyrics (where Madonna pants in the song, I remember I wrote "heavy breathing"), and got a friend to pass off this surefire love tactic to Craig in the hall one day. "This is from René," I told her to say. "Cool, thanks," Craig reportedly said, shoving the note in his pocket.

I don't know what I was expecting in return. A request for a date? A note with some favorite lyrics of his own? To be taken seriously? I mean, really? It got back to me eventually that Craig told our one mutual friend he started laughing when he read my note—to his credit, he also told our friend not to tell me that. She did anyway, because she thought I should know.

Regardless of whether Craig noticed me, others definitely had. I'd been frequently teased by boys, but now girls were talking about me too, making fun of me, even the nice girls and other misfit girls. And even before I'd lost weight, even before the new clothing choices, around the time I'd begun gaining inches in height and curves, I'd started to get a certain kind of attention. One boy at school would lift up my skirt as I walked down the hallways. At the library I'd been followed into the stacks and groped by a man. These were just a couple incidents I'd experienced. I didn't know what to do when these things happened,

other than run away and then blame myself for “leading guys on” or tell myself maybe I should be flattered.

Looking back, I refuse to say I was confused. That I didn’t know what I was doing, like why I’d picked an embarrassingly horny song to give to a boy and why I started dressing like a girl in a music video, why I’d veered so far (so it seemed) from the innocent girl who just wanted to dance her cares away in her bedroom on a Sunday morning. On the one hand, I tell myself I compromised my true self for a boy’s attention, a ploy that didn’t even work. On the other hand, I know I was trying to take control and ownership of the changes overwhelming my life and the expectations and rules overwhelming any girl. I was trying to take a cue from my name doppelgänger—Madonna, the Michigan girl with an uncanny ability for taking every rumor, criticism, or slut-shaming insult thrown her way and wielding it to her advantage, to power.

Within another year or two, life would throw more changes my way. By 15, my father had been hospitalized with a heart problem, my grandmother died, and I became an aunt for the first time. As for Craig, I finally had a class with him and picked up on some crude remarks he made, and some rumors that he’d hurt someone after school one day. I forgot him. I started to put weight back on and dressing in loose, dark layers. Began reading poetry and Irish and French history and listening to The Cure and New Order. I made pen pals with a boy on the south side of Chicago who sent me rap lyrics and detailed his graffiti-writing exploits to me. We started spending all night talking on the phone together, when everyone else in our houses was asleep. I was depressed and curious and artistic and still unconfident, but cared less whether people noticed, whether it was my job to endlessly please the world as a girl was supposed to do.

There’s a temptation now to disown the girl I was at 13, to say “I don’t know her.” I’d do as much with Madonna in the years to come, pretending I no longer liked her or her music, denying to myself the leaps her best songs made my heart do and the moves her beats once made my body do. But some things are just undeniable, like the person you were when you were on your way to learning how to be yourself, or a girl’s desire to prove she’s the one in control of her life, or an infectious song beckoning everyone to forget about the bad times and put their troubles down, for just one day out of life. To this day, nothing does it for me, nothing connects me to the better moments of my girlhood, like “Holiday.”

When I was in my 30s, I ran into Craig again, in a bar in Chicago. I was attending a book swap event, and he was a bouncer, checking IDs as all us bookish grown-up former misfit types entered the bar. We recognized each other right away, though he had to read my ID to remember my name. He didn’t look like Sting so much anymore. And I didn’t even recall the note I’d given him, or the girl I’d been, until thinking about my run-in with my old crush later that night. Once the memory surfaced, the lusty lyrics to “Burning Up” churning through my brain, I was mortified. And then I laughed, liked Craig himself did, like Madonna after promising she was going to the rule the world on *American Bandstand*.