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Show Business: Madonna Rocks the Land

By John Skow

Now then, parents, the important thing is to stay calm. You've seen Madonna wiggling on MTV -- right, she's the pop-tart singer with the trashy outfits and the hi-there belly button. What is worse, your children have seen her. You tell your daughters to put on jeans and sweatshirts, like decent girls, and they look at you as if you've just blown in from the Planet of the Creeps. Twelve-year-old girls, headphones blocking out the voices of reason, are running around wearing T-shirts labeled VIRGIN, which would not have been necessary 30 years ago. The shirts offer no guarantees, moreover; they merely advertise Madonna's first, or virgin, rock tour, now thundering across the continent, and her bouncy, love-it-when-you-do-it song Like a Virgin.

The bright side of this phenomenon is that these Wanna Be's (as in "We wanna be like Madonna!") could be out somewhere stealing hubcaps. Instead, all of them, hundreds of thousands of young blossoms whose actual ages run from a low of about eight to a high of perhaps 25, are saving up their baby-sitting money to buy cross-shaped earrings and fluorescent rubber bracelets like Madonna's, white lace tights that they will cut off at the ankles and black tube skirts that, out of view of their parents, they will roll down several turns at the waist to expose their middles and the waistbands of the pantyhose.

Does anyone remember underwear? The boldest of the Wanna Be's prowl thrift shops looking for ancient, bulletproof black lace bras and corsets, which they wear slapdash under any sort of gauzy shirt or found-in-the-attic jacket. They tie great floppy rags in their frazzled hair, which when really authentic is blond with dark roots.

To Madonna Louise Ciccone, who is 26, and her Wanna Be's, such getups somehow suggest the '50s, now conceived on the evidence of old Marilyn Monroe movies to have been a quaint and fascinating though slightly tacky time, rich in flirtatious, pre-feminist sexuality. Although to her it's a joke, Madonna's "Boy Toy" belt buckle offends almost everyone except the Wanna Be's. Those who snoozed through the '50s the first time around are mystified. Some feminists clearly feel that Madonna's self-parody as an eye-batting gold digger, notably in her song Material Girl, is a joke too damaging to laugh at. Somebody has said that her high, thin voice, which is merely adequate for her energetic but not very demanding dance-pop songs, sounds like "Minnie Mouse on helium." Other detractors suggest that she is almost entirely helium, a gas-filled, lighter-than-air creation of MTV and other sinister media packagers (these doubters have not felt the power of Madonna's personality, which is as forceful and well organized as D-day). That mossy old (41) Rolling Stone Mick Jagger says that her records are characterized by "a central dumbness."

Kids born since the breakup of the Beatles, however, don't want to hear any of this. Can't hear anything else, at this tick of the clock except brassy, trashy, junk-jingling, stage-stomping Madonna, who has been world famous for almost two months. Just now she is the hottest draw in show biz. Michael Jackson? History. Prince? The Peloponnesian Wars. Cyndi Lauper? Last week's flash, and besides, if

you wanna be like Cyndi, you have to dye your hair orange and fuchsia, and your parents freak. No, Madonna is the full moon you see at this bend in the river, and never mind what is around the corner.

Her numbers, as they say, are spectacular. Her first album, a batch of dance tunes called simply Madonna, started slowly nearly two years ago, but now, at 2.8 million copies sold in the U.S., is closing in on triple platinum (in record-business jargon, 500,000 albums sold is gold, and 1 million is platinum). Her second, Like a Virgin, which includes five of her own songs, has gone quadruple platinum at 4.5 million copies in domestic sales, with 2.5 million more worldwide. Her singles have found 6.3 million buyers in the U.S. (or the same buyer 6.3 million times, exasperated parents may feel). Like a Virgin has sold 1.9 million copies as a single in the U.S., and the ballad Crazy for You recently dislodged USA (United Support of Artists) for Africa's We Are the World single from the top of the charts, though it has now slipped to sixth.

Audiences have been building, meanwhile, for Desperately Seeking Susan, a funny, likable film comedy in which Madonna co-stars (with Rosanna Arquette) as a rambunctious East Village vagabond whose free life becomes the obsession of a repressed New Jersey housewife. Madonna's current 28-city, 38-date concert tour, of which she is not only the lead singer and dancer but the director and driving force, has sold out almost instantly just about everywhere tickets have gone on sale. Sheer velocity of box office is watched very closely by concert promoters. Big stars are supposed to sell out, but stars whose shows sell out slowly may have peaked. When Madonna tickets went on sale for three June dates at Radio City Music Hall in Manhattan, fans who had huddled all night in the rain managed to slap their wadded-up, wet money on the counter fast enough to buy the 17,622 seats available in, yes folks, a new record of 34 minutes. (The old record was 55 minutes, jointly held by Elvis Costello and Phil Collins, who presumably are lolling by the pool somewhere, plenty worried.)

What is more, Madonna paraphernalia -- posters, at least ten different kinds of shirts, bracelets and cross-shaped earrings like the ones Madonna wears in salute to herself for having survived a strict Catholic upbringing -- are selling at concerts at a rate not seen even in the mega-meltdown tours of Michael Jackson and Prince. This is very important, and not just because it brings in money by the front-end loaderful. Fathers new to the bubblegum rock ramble (though they may have hung out at the Stones' concerts only a few years ago) may think that all they have to spring for is a pair of \$15 tickets, a couple of \$1.50 hot dogs and the parking fee. Not so. The young fans are telling their dads that they have to have some jewelry costing between \$5 and \$30, which is on display so that the dads can say no, feeling wise and fatherly, lawgivers. Then the dads compromise on the shirts, which turn out to cost \$13 to \$22, and Jennifer has something to wear in school the next day to prove that she's seen Madonna.

Why the hard little hearts of all of the Jennifers, and quite a few of the Kevins, ache for Madonna is another question. Big-time show biz is three- fourths mass hysteria, especially when teenagers and rock music are involved, and anyone who thinks he can explain it fully is dreaming. But incredibly lucky timing is clearly part of the Madonna craze. As it happens, few other big rock stars are diluting media attention. Also the neoconservative mood of the kid culture seems to be just right for an entertainer whose personality is an outrageous blend of Little Orphan Annie, Margaret Thatcher and Mae West.

Madonna's best bit of luck may be her uproariously appropriate part in Desperately Seeking Susan. Here too, the timing was superb. As Director Susan Seidelman points out, when the movie was cast in the summer of 1984, Madonna was not quite a star. She was just another pretty pop singer, just beginning to be widely known. Madonna's style and attitude got her the part, though not without a lot of hesitation among male executives of Orion Pictures who had never heard of her. A year later she would have been too famous and too expensive for a nonsinging role in a low-budget comedy. Any film cast then would have been the usual rock-star exploitation flick, with songs, writhing dancers, guitarists with their shirts off and too much tricky camera work.

As things are, Susan gives Madonna an audience she can't reach with MTV or disco. When she sings she lacks the all-there quality of a great pop singer like Linda Ronstadt or Tina Turner. She disguises this with vocal intensity and good dance moves. The kids are so caught up in their own emotional storms that they don't notice it, but in the love songs Madonna is not in love, and in the heat songs, like *Burning Up*, she is not in heat. But in the funny songs, like the pop reggae *Material Girl*, she is very funny. All-there people are not funny, most of the time, but detached, cool people like Madonna often are. And if you watch Madonna's video routines more than once, you begin to realize that almost all of her songs, as she belly-rolls her way through them, are sharply comic send-ups, mostly of rock-'n'-roll sexual gyrations as delivered by male rockers from Mick Jagger to Prince.

In fact, Madonna is a talented, practiced comedian, who has been wising off constantly since grade school. And in the title role of Susan she proves it, playing a calamitous neo-hippy who clunks in and out of people's lives, and whose total self-absorption amounts to innocence. She dresses weirdly too; in one scene she parades through the streets wearing what appears to be men's boxer shorts, over which she has rigged a white garter belt, which holds up white lace stockings, which disappear into rhinestone boots. Madonna admits that Susan, except for her four-second attention span, is to some extent a self-caricature, and it remains to be seen what she could do with a role that required her to wear grown-ups' clothes. The guess here is that she would be very good. It does not take much imagination to see her in the Judy Holliday role in *Born Yesterday*, beating Broderick Crawford at gin rummy.

Hollywood thinks so too. Director Herbert Ross, who did *Funny Girl* and *Footloose*, is considering her, he says, for the lead in a movie about Stripper Blaze Starr. Producer Ray Stark has talked with her about starring in a film about Libby Holman, the '20s and '30s torch singer. "Considering" and "talking with" do not cost much, of course, but Madonna's considering is moving in the same direction. "I don't think of myself as a rock star," she tells an interviewer as she cools out in her hotel room after her concert two weeks ago in New Orleans. The comment is not a gesture at modesty; Madonna is not modest. Nor, for that matter, is she puffed up with self-importance. She has a very clear, cold view of her strengths and weaknesses, and those of the wide world too. She got her first training as a dancer (she won a scholarship in dance at the University of Michigan, but she stayed only 1 1/2 years). She became a fairly good rock drummer and guitarist during her knockabout years as a musician in New York City, then turned to rock singing because she realized she wasn't going anywhere in the dance world. She says that she might do another rock tour, if her manager Freddy DeMann "puts a gun to my head," but clearly it is almost time for another career change.

She travels, just now, with a light load of baggage (see following story). Her physical possessions, she says, amount to not much more than the ragbag of goofy clothes that serve as her professional and private wardrobe, a ten-speed bicycle stored in New York and a Chinese rug in Los Angeles. No house, no apartment, no car, no rich-at-last jewels or stereo system. She seems to have passed through the lives of a lot of people and to have remained in not many. She sees her father and stepmother only rarely.

It can be hard, now, to get her to talk about her scroungy years in New York. She recalls being fired from a long succession of ratty jobs. She resents suggestions that she slept her way to the top. That is not because she didn't learn her trade from a succession of musicians and deejays, some of whom she slept with, but because the idea that she couldn't make it to the top on drive and talent alone is insulting. In fact the men in her life talk about her now % without rancor; it seems to have been obvious even then that Madonna was just passing through. Mark Kamins, deejay at the Danceteria, a funky, four-floor Chelsea disco that caters to purple-haired punks in leather and other exotics, is credited with "discovering" Madonna in 1982, although like America before Columbus, she was there all along. "She had this incredible sense of style," says Kamins. "She had an aura." She also had a four-track demo tape she had made with another boyfriend, a musician named Steve Bray. Kamins

played it and got great response from the disco crowd for a song called Everybody. Madonna's career began to gather momentum, and Kamins at one point thought she had agreed to let him produce her first album. Madonna instead chose a professional producer, Reggie Lucas. "At the time, I felt stepped on," says Kamins. "But I don't think there's a mean bone in her body. Maybe a mean knuckle but not a mean bone."

Madonna's current boyfriend is Actor Sean Penn (The Falcon and the Snowman), whose name she shouts out with joyful exuberance when an interviewer asks her a plonking question about favorite actors. But Penn, 24, is about to start shooting a new movie in Tennessee, and she is grinding through her tour, and they do not see each other much, though Madonna calls for half an hour every night after her show. The dreary fact is that stars sometimes lead lives of chaste exasperation.

For Madonna on a show night, work begins at about 5, with a sound check at the arena to make sure the roadies have the equipment adjusted correctly. At about 7:20 the Wanna Be's start to file in. All of them head directly for the ladies' rooms, for a last mirror check on their getups. They are delighted with the two brand-new ancient games, dressing up and sexual teasing, that Madonna has taught them. Their dates look confused. Nobody under 40 has teased anyone sexually in the U.S. for something like 20 years. New Yorker Robert Shalom, owner of the video club Private Eyes, says, "The guys are scared of these girls. 'What do I do?' they ask. The girls come on so strong, dressed in their mothers' best fake jewelry, saying 'Don't touch me, I'm the material girl, spend money on me.' " Waiting for a concert to begin, some of the boys who have tagged along will say that Madonna is, um, yeah, real sexy, but the cleverest, even as they scrape the ground nervously with one hoof, suspect that they are being kidded.

They could be right. When the Madonna show detonates at about 9 p.m., after a forgettable 30 minutes by a raunchy rap band called the Beastie Boys, the strongest impression is of being back in the '60s, listening to the Shirelles. This is no girl group; Madonna's two backup dancers are male and masculine. But they are small and unmenacing, dressed cheerfully in handpainted jeans and jackets, and when they frisk about the stage with Madonna the mood is light and childish. She wears spiked boots, black fishnet tights and a hip-slung miniskirt below her winking belly button. A loose-fitting hand-painted jacket swings free now and then to show a lacy purple shirt and the trademark black bra. She has a floppy purple rag tied in her hair. The costume is sexy, and light as she is, at 5 ft. 4 1/2 in. and 118 lbs., her body is lush. But her movements to Holiday are skipping and prancing steps, mischievous kid stuff.

The show turns darker and funkier, with a lot of smoke bombs and jungle-queen strutting in silhouette, toward something like a 14-year-old's florid conception of adult sexuality. Madonna comes onstage with a big portable stereo boom box and goes into a routine that sounds like the dirty jokes that eighth-graders giggle over. "Every lady has a box," she says. "My box is special. Because it makes music. But it has to be turned on." Adults wince, but the youngsters love it. "I like the way she handles herself, sort of take it or leave it," says Kim Thomson, 17, a Wanna Be in Houston. "She's sexy but she doesn't need men, really. She's kind of there by herself." Says Teresa Hajdik, also 17: "She gives us ideas. It's really women's lib, not being afraid of what guys think."

What the guys think is sometimes seriously scrambled. Madonna comes onstage dressed in an elaborate bare-midriff wedding gown to do Like a Virgin, the first of two high-spirited production numbers that close the show. "Will you marry me?" she asks the audience. "Yes Yes!" everyone screams. And in Dallas, one lovesick adolescent male stands up and yells, "I wanna have your babies!" Madonna sings, as she sashays about the stage, "You make me feel" -- hip thrust -- "like a virgin" -- belly roll -- "touched for the very first time." Mocking virginity, mocking sex, mocking, some might say, the solemn temple of rock 'n' roll itself.

Then she is back for her best number, carried onstage in a reclining posture by her backup dancers, looking like Madam Recamier in her salon, twirling a long rope of pearls and camping a mile a minute.

"This is," she sings to a pop reggae beat, "a material world. And I am" pause "a material girl." Luxuriating in materialism, poking fun at greediness -- she is performing for adolescents who feel deprived if their cars don't have quadraphonic cassette players -- Madonna is singing that she is available to the highest bidder, then denying that. And at the end, she pulls wads of fake banknotes out of the top of her dress and tosses them all to the audience. Do the Wanna Be's see materialism glorified here, or mocked? Of course, they see both, and see no contradiction.

One last funny, sad, self-parodying joke as the lights go up: a loud, disapproving, male voice is heard over the loudspeaker, saying "Madonna, get down off that stage this instant!" And Madonna's recorded voice, whining, "Daddy, do I hafta?" Then the Wanna Be's, to whom the war between men and women is still far less real than the eternal skirmishing between parents and children, file out of the hall, dreaming of the time when they will be able to do anything in the world they want. Like Madonna.

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