

## Thoughts on Resurrection, Reinvention and Madonna

Chiara Montalto (September 14, 2008)



"Loving Madonna and becoming vegetarian were the most rebellious things you could ever do in an Italian-American family..."

Like Madonna, I recently celebrated a birthday. Not yet fifty, and thirty has already happened. I've decided the moment is right to start using the adage I long ago learned from my grandmother "I'm as old as my pinky and a little older than my teeth." I constantly hear seemingly soothing clichés "What are you upset about?" "You are a baby!" and my favorite "Age is only a number, its all about how you feel." Though I know there is truth in these words, I lately I've been a little, well, honestly, down. I take this amazing business class for artists, and when I emailed my accountability partner on my birthday that my task for that day was "to try and enjoy myself," she responded and wrote me a great message that, as a Leo, we are the true rulers of the universe. She was surprised by my astrological sign.

Madonna, when asked about her recent 50th birthday, seemed to not be too phased by her age. Now, I was always much more a child of punk and post punk than pop music, but like anyone my



age, unless you grew up under a rock, you knew who Madonna was. She was always there. "Like a Virgin" was the first cassette tape I ever owned- it was given to me. I had absolutely no idea what a virgin was. But I noticed the reaction that was caused by my having that tape.

My grandmothers, with whom I was very close, hated and despised her. They called her a vergona - a shame. I had no idea, really, why, but I knew that Madonna- like me- had an Italian name, and something about her made everyone care enough to hate her. These after all, were my grandmothers, who ordinarily would have had no dealings with pop culture, but they seemed to know everything about what she was doing, and they had an opinion about all of it. Sitting on the front porch of our row house, my grandmother would chat with her neighbor, as they sat. "She's a hooah," the neighbor lady would say. To this day, that is still my favorite word in Brooklynese. Whore- Hooah.

Stylistically, of course, at this point, I became obsessed and immersed in post-punk, but I reveled in observing the controversy that Madonna caused. I loved her freedom and lack of inhibition; it was something that personally, I longed for. Our world was full of rules and regulations, right and wrong, bella figura and brutta figura, and I was still, after all, a kid. And, at that, an Italian - American kid obsessed with punk and post punk and the problems of the world. My older brother and our neighborhood friends wasted no opportunity teasing me about my concerns about the injustices of apartheid. Madonna seemed to control all of the controversy she created. I, on the other hand, inadvertently created controversy that consistently blew up in my face. Case in point, my brother Franco, mischief up his sleeve, had convinced my friend that Bishop Desmond Tutu, whom I was very interested in, herded elephants across Africa. When that neighbor boy asked me if that was true and why I was so interested in this man, I burst into tears. Oh to have been able to control controversy on 23rd Avenue the way Madonna controlled the controversy over her every move! I, on the other hand, withdrew to myself. Not very Leo like.

Not long after the "Bishop Desmond Tutu incident," I did (to this day, I maintain) the single most rebellious thing you can do in an Italian- American family. Or at least in my Italian American family. I became a vegetarian. I waited a few months before making the announcement to my grandparents. When I finally did tell my grandparents, I had to assure them that I hadn't joined a cult or another religion, that I simply no longer cared to eat meat. At the time, I thought I'd never stop seeing meatballs and sausages, they were ubiquitous. . That and well, I was just tired of something. Of what exactly, I'm still not entirely sure, but I was stirring the pot of controversy in my own way, in my own world. The day we finally told my grandparents of my (major) decision, my grandmother, in her sweet way, took me aside. "Chiara," she whispered in my ear "how about this... I'll make you a little piece of steak, and.... I'm not going to tell anybody- it can be our secret." It took another few months to assure her that I didn't want to eat meat in secret. Finally, I was causing my own controversy and waging my own rebellion.

Madonna, of course, was still there in the background, but I was far too caught up in The Cure, Depeche Mode and U2 to admit that I was paying attention to her.

All I saw was that the women in my world still cared- they still had an opinion, they still hated her. I often wondered how someone whose life was so far removed from ours could have such an impact. Was it the substance of what Madonna said and did that caused the ire, or was it that she was free, uninhibited and powerful in her own right that upset them? These women in my world were smart, talented, vibrant and wonderful, but none of them were truly free to develop and utilize their talents- they were products of their own times. I am the first truly free woman in my family. With hindsight, I see their hatred of Madonna in another way; they perceived her freedom and they hated her for it. Yes, Madonna knowingly pushed the envelope ( what true artist doesn't) but the women in my world seemed to hate her for something more- for her freedom and her power. We were all deeply steeped in Italo-Catholic womanhood, and I fell somewhere in the middle of it. "Why can't you wear some nice little heels?" my cousin would ask, as a I tied up the laces of my boots. Sunday meals were peppered with long conversations and debates about what I should eat.

Then, "Like a Prayer" happened. Yes, I was still way too caught up in my alterna- world to admit publicly that I liked that song. Truth be told, I didn't like it- I LOVED it. It was brilliantly written and performed, complete with a Gospel choir. I took to calling it - "the Italian- Catholic girl's anthem of liberation." Of course, by today's standards the song and the video are tame. But, at that time, in my world, the uproar created by that song and video were unlike any I had previously seen or any



previously caused by Madonna; the imagery, the rape, the kissing a priest (and, at that a Black priest). "She's gonna go to HELL for this," they screamed. "She oughtta be ashamed of herself- these young people today, look at this, look at what the world is becoming." And of course, my favorite "She's a hooah, she took the name of the Madonna!" I loved it, loved the furor, loved the imagery, loved the reinvention, loved the statement that she made with that video- even though I wasn't exactly sure what it was. And then the furor died down, and I went back to my alterna world, my baby doll dresses and Doc Martens, my music, and my new obsession with surrealism and film noir. And my grandmothers went back to their worlds, and their front stoops, their families and meatballs and sausages- and to their last years of lives. I had no idea. I was way into my own rebellion, my own private Prayer.

And so here I am, all these years later. My grandmothers are gone, no more front stoop, no more rollers. I eat meat again. A few years ago, after my last grandfather died, my mother had made macaroni and meatballs. "Mom," I said, "I want a meatball."

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