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FROM PERSONA TO PERSONALITY:
THE EVOLUTION OF ALANIS MORISSETTE

by

Angela Michelle Brunson

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Music

Major: Music

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To my family

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Angela Brunson

Abstract

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"From Persona to Personality: The Evolution of Alanis Morissette." Major
Professor: Dr Kenneth Kreitner.

Rarely does a teen pop star remain successful into adulthood. Rarer still does she become even more successful. Alanis Morissette has fought the odds, selling well over forty million albums worldwide in a career spanning two decades. At the same time, her critics oppose her as passionately as her fans support her. They mock her ever-changing style as proof of a manufactured persona, while Morissette vehemently preaches of her personal evolution, saying her albums depict where she is at that moment of her life.

Morissette has remained in the spotlight by constantly evolving. She is "growing up" through her music, allowing her fans to follow her journey from childhood fame to spiritually-grounded maturity. This document explores the life of Alanis Morissette by analyzing both the singer and her songs. It examines her ability to express emotion through transforming musical styles. This thesis shows how and why Morissette dropped her manufactured persona in favor of confessional songwriting.

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Chapter I

The Disco Queen

My name is Alanis, I'm just sixteen
So please gimme a break, I'm no disco queen

--Alanis Morissette, "Oh Yeah!," 1991¹

Rarely does a teen pop star remain successful into adulthood. Rarer still does she become even more successful. Alanis Morissette has fought the odds, selling well over forty million albums worldwide in a career spanning two decades. At the same time, her critics oppose her as passionately as her fans support her. They mock her ever-changing style as proof of a manufactured persona, while Morissette vehemently preaches of her personal evolution, saying her albums depict where she is at that moment of her life.

I propose that Morissette has remained in the spotlight by constantly evolving. She is "growing up" through her music, allowing her fans to follow her journey from childhood fame to spiritually grounded maturity. In this thesis, I will explore the life of Alanis Morissette by analyzing both the singer and her songs. I will examine her ability to express emotion through transforming musical styles, searching for consistency and outside influences. Through this study, I hope to

¹ Alanis Morissette, "Oh Yeah!" *Alanis*, MCA Canada MCAD-10253, CD, 1991.

discover how and why Morissette continues to reach into the souls of her listeners.

Alanis was born in 1974 in Ottawa to Hungarian refugees Alan and Georgia Morissette, both of whom are teachers and devout Catholics. At the age of three, Alanis saw the movie *Grease* and immediately knew she wanted to be a performer. By six she was playing piano and beginning to write songs. That same year she saw her parents' friends, Lindsay and Jacqui Morgan, perform a live show, making the idea of an entertainment career seem attainable.²

Three years later, the precocious nine-year-old made a tape of two songs she had written and mailed it to the Morgans. Impressed by her fortitude, the Morgans invited the Morissettes to their home, where Alanis performed her songs live. The first, entitled "Fate Stay with Me," amazed Lindsay: "I remember sitting there, and I remember feeling the hair come up on the back of my neck and she just went right through the song. I knew right then that there was something incredible here."³

While pursuing a singing career, Alanis attempted acting as well, starring in the Nickelodeon comedy sketch show "You Can't Do That on Television." Since she played the love interest of the two leading boys, she received hate mail from female viewers, but she did not let it stop her. She saved up her money and used it to make 1300 copies of her single, with the help of Lindsay Morgan. Sound engineer Rich Dodson remembers, "She wanted to be a big star. No

² Paul Cantin, *Alanis Morissette: You Oughta Know* (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing, 1997), 7.

³ Lindsay Morgan, interview by Kyra Phillips, *People in the News: Profiles of Alanis Morissette, Margaret Cho*, CNN, January 4, 2003.

doubt about it. She was very aggressive. Very dedicated.”⁴ She was so dedicated that she sold her singles on the city bus and gave them away to strangers. She even managed to get a little airplay, but record labels were not interested. Her songs were aimed at adults but she herself was still a child.

The lyrics were far too mature for someone her age to fully understand:

What did you think I'd be doing now
While you left me, I was thinking aloud
Would there be no end to my sorrow
Will I make it through tomorrow
Let the autumn leaves fall
The chilly raindrops freeze
The white snow melt
I'll just sail on those seas
Fate, fate, fate stay with me
I wanna be, wanna be, wanna be free⁵

When Lindsay first asked her where she was getting her material she replied, “Well, it's not from experience.”⁶ She explained in a later interview, “I was just always writing lyrics. At first, for obvious reasons, it was more creative writing and less personal. When I was nine years old I didn't have enough life experience to draw upon, and I wasn't secure enough when I was really little to

⁴ Cantin, *Alanis Morissette*, 23.

⁵ Alanis Morissette, "Fate Stay with Me," Lamor Records LMR-10-12, Vinyl, 1987.

⁶ Cantin, *Alanis Morissette*, 10.

be disclosing too many personal things.”⁷ While she had never experienced a broken heart, she could imagine what one might feel like.⁸

By the time she was twelve, she had written over thirty songs, but she used the B-side song from her single, “Find the Right Man,” for an important audition. Figure skater and producer Stephan Klovan needed a girl for Bryan Adams to pull out of the audience at the Tulip Festival’s entertainment extravaganza. Though the auditions had come and gone, Georgia Morissette called Klovan and insisted he come to their home. This was not the first or last time the Morissettes invited local celebrities to meet their talented daughter. Alan and Georgia did whatever was necessary to help her achieve her dream.⁹ Klovan recalls his reaction to her performance of “Find the Right Man”: “I said to her, ‘Alanis, that’s quite a mature song for an 11-year-old to be singing, do you understand the words?’ And she said, ‘Understand them? I wrote them!’”¹⁰

Klovan was taken with her personality and voice and made her the star of the show, along with her twin brother, Wade. Her performance at the festival made the executives of Dalmy’s department stores “swoon,”¹¹ and they immediately hired the twins to promote their new Dalmy’s Kids stores. Alanis even composed a jingle for them.

⁷ Stuart Coles, *Alanis Morissette: Death of Cinderella* (London: Plexus, 1998), 12.

⁸ Cantin, *Alanis Morissette*, 11.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁰ Barry Grills, *Ironic: Alanis Morissette: The Story* (Toronto: Quarry Press, 1997), 43.

¹¹ Carolyn Abraham and Norman Provencher, “Fate Stay with Me,” *Ottawa Citizen*, February 24, 1996 in Grills, *Ironic*, 43.

Klovan stepped in as a manager for Alanis, finding new ways to get her on stage. With a pumped-up backing track, she performed “O Canada” at nearly every event in Ottawa, and is still known to some as “Miss O Canada.”¹² At one of these events, the World Figure Skating Championships, Alanis met Leslie Howe of the pop duo One 2 One. A few years earlier she had attempted to connect with the other member, Louise Reny, but Reny thought Alanis was too young at the time. Now Georgia and Alan Morissette tracked down Leslie Howe and asked him to work with Alanis, who felt Klovan alone could not take her any further.

Howe had a new studio and agreed to work with Alanis. He says, “I wasn’t thinking: ‘Hey, we’re going to be millionaires, and we’re going to sell millions of records.’ It was more like ‘hey, this girl is good, she can sing good, she’s got a great personality and great looks. Perhaps we can do something together.’”¹³ Alanis appeared on Star Search shortly after that, performing music prepared by Howe and Klovan. Soon the two men were dictating most of her life. While Klovan called himself her manager, he also worked as her agent, lining up a constant stream of performances. Howe called himself her producer, but he was also her co-writer and music coach.¹⁴ And while Howe was searching for a major record deal, Klovan was “grooming” her look.¹⁵

¹² Grills *Ironic*, 45.

¹³ Coles, *Death of Cinderella*, 16-17.

¹⁴ It is not completely clear from the literature what this coaching entailed, but Howe was a professional singer and presumably had some training of his own.

¹⁵ Grills, *Ironic*, 47.

At this point, Alanis's image was definitely manufactured, as can be seen in the bio that Howe and Klovan sent out with demos. It lied about her age and claimed she grew up in Hungary. Here was their proposal: "Alanis's image will be that of a spunky, street-cool European young woman; singing with meaning and an aggressive, mature attitude. Clothing would be East meets West, with possibly some elements of traditional Hungarian styling along with a street-wise European look. We wish to give the impression of integrity, sincerity and not too happy or bubbly."¹⁶ Her true emerging fashion sense was dressing down, but the public would not see that until she came to the U.S.¹⁷

Since Klovan was a figure skater, he knew how to be a charming performer. He "taught Alanis to be a hard-working, happy-looking crowd pleaser, so she equated performing with repressing whatever stress and anxiety she might be experiencing. Whatever adolescent torment she would encounter in the coming years would have to wait. 'I was prepared to entertain people and perform, as opposed to being naked and unadulterated and honest.'"¹⁸ This would come back to haunt her, though, as I will show in Chapter II.

Howe and Klovan decided to take a big risk in order to land a major record deal – they would shoot a video for the song "Walk Away" in Paris. With airline and hotel sponsorships, and a lot of loans, the men took the young Alanis and director Dennis Beauchamp across the sea. Klovan reflects, "How many parents

¹⁶ Cantin, *Alanis Morissette*, 50.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 34.

would have trusted their 14-year-old daughter with three grown men? I wouldn't advise it for everybody her age. But in her case she was certainly mature and worldly enough to adapt."¹⁹ I question whether she truly adapted, and I will investigate this further in Chapter III.

The video, which featured Alanis frolicking in a Parisian fountain in a bathing suit, was a success. When MCA's John Alexander saw it, "he flipped out," according to Howe.²⁰ Alanis signed her first record contract, and Alexander took on a big role in her career.

Howe, Klován, and Alexander began to formulate a persona to reach their target audience. Klován says, "At that time, Debbie Gibson and Tiffany were really big in the states. Alanis was in that age group, so we were targeting the same market in Canada."²¹ Alanis hated this. Peter Castro of *People* magazine says, "She would kill you if you ever compared her to Debbie Gibson."²² But that's exactly what people did, according to Klován:

She never wanted to be a Tiffany or Debbie Gibson. But people kind of naturally compared her to them, just because of her age and the pop princess thing. We never tried to emulate them, but they were so successful, we kind of used them for a guideline for what she was doing. If it is working down in the States, maybe it could work in Canada. That was our initial attack. I've never seen Alanis as a teenybopper artist. Even back

¹⁹ Grills, *Ironic*, 49.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Cantin, *Alanis Morissette*, 34.

²² Peter Castro, interview by Kyra Phillips, *People in the News: Profiles of Alanis Morissette*, Margaret Cho, CNN, January 4, 2003.

then, the Debbie Gibson stuff and Tiffany was wimpy, sort of bubblegum girly stuff.²³

At this point, Alanis was afraid to go against what the adults in her life told her to do, as I will discuss in Chapter II. She recalls, “There was an element of me not being who I really was at the time. It was because I wasn’t prepared to open up that way. The focus for me then was entertaining people as opposed to sharing any revelations I had....I had them, but I wasn’t prepared to share.”²⁴

Her first album, self-titled *Alanis*, was “all about teens getting teen feet moving.”²⁵ Co-written with Howe, the album incorporated the styles she knew and loved: the dance beats and pop music of Janet Jackson and Madonna. The first single, “Too Hot,” had a sexy video featuring Alanis in skin-tight jeans and a sports bra, dancing and gyrating with several guys. At that time, she was pleased by how it turned out: “Having a little sex thrown in there is OK. But there’s no way I want people seeing me and saying: ‘She’s only sixteen? Oh, that little slut, what is she doing?’”²⁶ The video for her second single, “Feel Your Love,” put so much emphasis on her physical appearance that she became obsessed with fitness. She was overly strict with her diet, ran twenty kilometers, cycled thirty minutes,

²³ Coles, *Death of Cinderella*, 20.

²⁴ Craig Tomashoff, *You Live, You Learn: The Alanis Morissette Story* (New York: Berkley Boulevard Books, 1998), 41.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 31.

²⁶ Cantin, *Alanis Morissette*, 73.

and swam every day.²⁷ This may have been the beginning of her problems with eating disorders.²⁸

Alanis consisted of ten tracks filled with synthesizers and drum machines, all in all a “deeply danceable collection of songs.”²⁹ The lyrics were not quite so inspired, though. Many of them are typical pop love songs, while others are more like gibberish; e.g., “Your love ain’t enough-OW! / You’re just a party party party boy yeah, oh baby!”³⁰ One song, however, gives a taste of what’s to come. “On My Own” is Alanis’s first recorded attempt at confessional writing. She says about it, “I hope a lot of young people can relate. I put a lot of feeling into that one.”³¹ In this song, she begins to reveal her problems with oppression and perfectionism – themes that would appear in every album to come.

Why do I feel it’s all up to me to see that
everything’s right and it’s how it should be
Why don’t they just leave me alone
I’ve got to prove I can
Little girl with stars in her eyes they’ve
got her all figured out and there’s nowhere
to hide why can’t they all see who I am
when will they understand

It may take some time they don’t know how
it feels because they can’t read my mind
They always say I’m too young and they
feel they should help me

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 74.

²⁸ Susannah Felts, “How I Beat my Eating Disorder,” *Health* (December 2009): 74, 77.

²⁹ Cantin, *Alanis Morissette*, 72.

³⁰ Alanis Morissette, “Party Boy,” *Alanis*, MCA, CD, 1991.

³¹ Cantin, *Alanis Morissette*, 72.

But I can make it all alone out here on my own

Every day I feel so in demand and all I
wish I could find is a place I can land
One day I'll feel comfort inside cause I'll
know who I am

I can hold the line if I know in the end
that I won't be left behind I don't regret
what I've done I don't think you can blame me
Now I'm standin' all alone out here on my own

I'm not thinking 'bout leavin' home
But I need to be on my own
Doesn't mean I have a heart of stone
I won't even ask them why
I can't ever let them see me cry
Here I'm standing all alone out here on my own...
out here on my own

Feeling lost in a world full of lies
I can't help thinkin' that love is just
passin' me by Hold on to what I believe
and keep an open hand

Can I have it all if there's no one to
turn to when I stumble and fall
Is there a secret I need because no one
has told me-all alone

It may take some time cause I know
how it feels to have a lot on your mind
I'll never feel all alone cause I
Know that I have me
Now I can make it all alone out here on my own³²

³² Alanis Morissette, "On My Own," *Alanis*, MCA Canada MCAD-10253, CD, 1991.

The amount of stress portrayed in this song seems to correlate with her life. She attended Glebe Collegiate's Program for Advanced Learning during the day, wrote and recorded all night, and maintained a busy schedule of public appearances. The stress only intensified after the album's release. She was mobbed at an Ottawa shopping mall and "besieged" by freshmen students at school trying to catch a glimpse of her.³³ The other students let jealousy take control and treated Alanis as only high school kids can. The school even unintentionally fueled this jealousy by playing Alanis's version of "O Canada" over the PA system every day. "I was hurt a lot by it, but at the same time I didn't feel I was doing anything wrong. It's one thing when you're upsetting people because you're doing something dark and cruel. But I knew I was doing something musical and creative and that's as pure as it was. I wasn't doing anything wrong, so if people were or are upset with me, it's for their own reasons," said Alanis years later.³⁴

Despite Alanis's personal problems, she was the perfect specimen for MCA to market. "An exceptionally bright and beautiful teen with big hair and small skirts, she could charm an audience with her innocently flirtatious lyrics and danceable tunes."³⁵ With the exception of "On My Own," her songs and videos were inspired, perhaps even modeled after, Janet Jackson and Madonna. The three men pulling her strings, John Alexander, Leslie Howe, and Stephan Klovan,

³³ Grills, *Ironic*, 67.

³⁴ Coles, *Death of Cinderella*, 20.

³⁵ Tomashoff, *You Live, You Learn*, 2.

were looking for a hit record, not an outlet for Alanis's emotions or artistry. Craig Tomashoff argues, "Revealing deep thoughts or working in complicated melodies was out of the question. Not that this was Alanis's fault, or some cynical marketing strategy designed to take advantage of a trend. She was simply taking the kind of music she knew, the sort of sound that her peers couldn't seem to get enough of, and giving it back with as much ability as she had."³⁶

Morissette's debut album sold 100,000 copies and won her the nickname of Canada's Queen of Pop.³⁷ She also took home the Juno Award, the Canadian equivalent of the Grammy, for Most Promising Female Vocalist in 1992. But trophies and platinum albums left her feeling empty. She says,

Society leads you to believe that if you achieve this success, whether it be winning awards or selling millions of records...everything is great, and you get approval from people. And is this not what a perfectionist seeks? Someone who is young and somewhat given into what society has asked of them. Is this not the epitome of what they yearn for? And then you achieve it, and nothing is different.³⁸

Alanis knew that something was missing from her music.

Alanis decided to take a different approach on her second album, making it deeper, more serious, and not as dance-oriented. All of her interviews from the time show an internal struggle between doing what she wanted and winning the

³⁶ Ibid., 31.

³⁷ Kyra Phillips, *People in the News: Profiles of Alanis Morissette, Margaret Cho*, CNN, January 4, 2003.

³⁸ Coles, *Death of Cinderella*, 24.

approval of others. In one she says she doesn't want the album to be "like the Alanis Diary."³⁹ In another she seems to say the opposite:

This time I wanted to prove I could actually write the songs. More than anything, I wanted to prove it to myself.... I just wanted to bare my soul in the songs. I had a lot more to do on the writing end and I feel a lot more of my own personality and feeling have come out with the music this time.... It's much more personal because the first album was a bit of an experiment.⁴⁰

The press noticed the difference. "She certainly had her own personality and wasn't just some music industry creation, at least the second time around," reports the *Calgary Herald*.⁴¹ Klovan corroborates the story, noting that Alanis wanted to write more serious songs.⁴² Her then boyfriend Dave Coulier also recounts the time, saying Alanis was always "trying to dig deeper into herself, to move toward a more introspective point of view in her music."⁴³ I am stressing this point because, strangely, Leslie Howe claims the majority of the words were his.⁴⁴ However, when the album was not a huge success, he remarked, "In hindsight, I think we were in the middle of the road. We fell halfway between pop and dance... If I could have done things differently, I would have gone more in

³⁹ Tomashoff, *You Live, You Learn*, 48.

⁴⁰ Cantin, *Alanis Morissette*, 87.

⁴¹ James Muretich, "It's Like...Wow! I Love It!" *Calgary Herald* (July 11, 1991).

⁴² Grills, *Ironic*, 85.

⁴³ Tomashoff, *You Live, You Learn*, 43.

⁴⁴ Cantin, *Alanis Morissette*, 87.

the dance direction for that album.”⁴⁵ Introspective lyrics and dance beats are not typically paired, making me think he was against those lyrics from the beginning.

Alanis has mentioned that, during this time, when she suggested changes she was quickly silenced. She often disagreed with the adults around her, and she felt that their advice required her to give in too much to what society expected. She told the *Baltimore Sun* that people in Ottawa repressed her creativity and made her song writing a “black and white task.”⁴⁶ Being a celebrity, she also had to constantly worry about her appearance. Louise Reny commented, “She’s got the record company and [other] people telling her, ‘You’ve got to be thinner, you’ve got to look better. We want you to look like a little pop queen.’ They want everybody to have boob jobs and be skinny and beautiful.... You have to be so-o-o self-confident to get over that.”⁴⁷

It seems that Alanis was not self-confident enough for the position she was in, though she hid it well. Her “smile and chirpy demeanor”⁴⁸ were a façade. In reality, Alanis was struggling with tremendous stress – a teenaged celebrity in a collegiate school trying to follow up a hit debut album while fighting creative oppression and finding herself. Since she hid her feelings instead of finding an outlet for them, she suffered from a breakdown, the first of many. Paul Cantin

⁴⁵ Grills, *Ironic*, 86.

⁴⁶ J. D. Considine, “‘Angry’ Label Irks Morissette Rock Star: Transition from Happy Pop Songs to the Music of Rage Is Not so Odd, Says Alanis Morissette. It’s a Matter of Growth,” *The Baltimore Sun* (January 30, 1996).

⁴⁷ Tomashoff, *You Live, You Learn*, 44.

⁴⁸ Coles, *Death of Cinderella*, 24.

posits, "By attempting to make everyone else happy, she had made herself miserable."⁴⁹

Morissette's second album, *Now Is the Time*, is evidence of her artistic desires and the forces holding them back. While the lyrics occasionally get more personal, they never let loose. She wanted to open up, but something held her back. One place where Alanis was able to reach out to her listeners is the CD liner notes. She wrote a poem, or pep talk as she calls it, to show what she was striving for:

No regrets. Growth. Give yourself credit. Everybody is different. Their view of you may not be correct. Does it really matter? Who matters? You. Who do you love? What do you know that no one else knows? Take a chance. Talk, listen, cry. You know how to laugh. Make a fool of yourself. Honesty. Enjoy the highs, appreciate the lows...they are humbling. Learn, learn about you. Be aware. Patience. Be positive. Be hopeful. Don't ever let anyone destroy who you are and what you believe. Be open to change and evolution. Accept. Reach out. Ask questions. Hear the answers. Are they right? Live for the moment but anticipate a future. A good one. You deserve it. Work very hard. Don't stop. Admit weaknesses...your strengths will speak for themselves. Use your gifts. Yes, you have gifts. Forgive. Let go. Swallow your pride. But spit it up when you're done to make sure it's still intact. Be gentle. Strong. Kiss. Kissing is wonderful. Keep a promise. Conquer a fear. Don't be perfect, be excellent. Falter. Balance. Be grateful. Be real. Never give up. Don't be afraid. I believe in you.⁵⁰

The majority of the songs on *Now Is the Time* are generic teen pop love songs, like the first single, "An Emotion Away." This song topped the charts above Bon Jovi and U2, and featured another video with Alanis dancing in a suit with shoulder pads and big hair. "An Emotion Away" could easily fit on the first

⁴⁹ Cantin, *Alanis Morissette*, 86.

⁵⁰ Alanis Morissette, *Now Is the Time*, MCA Canada MCAD-10731, CD liner, 1992.

album, but the second single shows a distinct shift in style. "No Apologies" is a power ballad oozing with sentimentality. Though the song does not really make any sense, the early nineties synthesizers, key changes, and dramatic variations in dynamics lend this single emotional credibility. Without the glitzy pop and computerized drum machines in the way, this is also the first time we can really hear the strength behind Morissette's voice. The video reveals her forthcoming performance style as well – no dancing, no half-naked guys, just Alanis looking into the camera, passionately singing, using her hands to convey the emotion she feels.

Another song from this album that deserves recognition is "The Time of Your Life." It was not released as a single, and the lyrics are not exactly impressive, but it foreshadows a style change that her future critics would accuse her of copying from other alternative artists. In this song, Alanis sings with a hard, almost snarling voice against a rock background. She sounds pointedly angry on the lines: "Look at me, I'm a girl that some may preconceive. / Why do they try and generalize, why are they antagonizing me?"⁵¹ Although the chorus talks about love, this one section allows Alanis to air her frustrations with the oppression she claims to feel. This theme returns in her future albums, and I will discuss this in Chapter III.

Overall, *Now Is the Time* was a flop, selling about 50,000 copies. When asked why she thought it was unsuccessful, Alanis said, "When certain people get to know you as one identity, they don't want you to change, because there is

⁵¹ Alanis Morissette, "The Time of Your Life," *Now Is the Time*, MCA Canada MCAD-10731, CD, 1992.

a comfort in having that relationship with that artist....I was just moving in a direction I wanted to, and was less concerned with the approval of others when I was writing it. Or it might be that people just hated the songs. And that's cool, too."⁵² Several critics suggest that it was just bad timing. Nirvana and Pearl Jam had started the new grunge fad – loud, hard, and angry. It was the polar opposite of Alanis's perky, upbeat pop style,⁵³ and unfortunately for her, it had taken over the music industry.

MCA's John Alexander was not ready to give up on Alanis, though. He decided she needed real-life experiences to write about, so he sent her to Toronto to live alone with little money, like a normal person of college age. She says, "I saw how unfulfilling it was – the whole fame, celebrity part....That's why the best thing I ever did was just walk away and start over."⁵⁴

Alanis spent almost every day at a writer's group, where she would pair up with another writer and collaborate on a song. Her past as a teen dance star held her back at first, as no one would take her seriously. She was often seen as naïve or insincere.⁵⁵ Soon, though, she was so popular it was hard to get an appointment with her. During her time in Toronto, she worked with over 100 writers. None of them allowed her to write the way she wanted to. She recalls,

⁵² Cantin, *Alanis Morissette*, 88.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁵⁴ Tomashoff, *You Live, You Learn*, 56.

⁵⁵ Cantin, *Alanis Morissette*, 101.

I would write in the way I wrote *Jagged Little Pill*, and I have vivid memories of writing and then just looking up at the person I was writing with and they would be shaking their head, saying: 'You can't do that.' And I would say: 'I have to go!' And I wouldn't finish the song, or I would finish it and nothing would be personal, and in my own mind I would disown it.⁵⁶

Alanis was disheartened that she felt no connection with her partners. One collaborator, Tim Thorney, tried to be open to her style, but Alanis was still looking for a new sound. She was running out of options. Thorney recalls, "A lot of people thought she was over. And I would say, 'Have you heard her sing? Is this not a real thing? She's twenty and she can just do anything. She can sing quietly. She can sing in any key. Whatever key you write the song in, she can figure out a way to sing it."⁵⁷

While her time in Toronto did not produce any chart-topping tunes, it did prepare her for her next project. John Alexander decided Alanis needed a new manager, one who could bring her international fame. He immediately thought of Scott Welch, who is known for "transforming" Paula Abdul from a cheerleader into a pop star. Alexander brought Morissette's two albums to Welch, who was thrilled to take on Alanis, saying,

We have turned down a lot of really financially rewarding clients, but he and I both want to have a life. I do not want to be called at three in the morning to bail somebody out of jail, or have scream-out matches, you know. She's just a good person. I just knew I wanted to work with her. What happened from there, she delivered. I said I think if we really want to see if this woman can blossom into something spectacular and stand on

⁵⁶ Grills, *Ironic*, 90.

⁵⁷ Cantin, *Alanis Morissette*, 107.

her own two feet, I think we shouldn't worry about licensing these records. I think we should let her see if she is going to become a songwriter.⁵⁸

Alanis moved to Los Angeles and forged a partnership with Glen Ballard. In a matter of weeks, the pair crafted *Jagged Little Pill*, the album that made Alanis known around the world. Since then, Alanis has released several more records, selling well over forty million albums.

Now, twenty years after the release of *Alanis*, Morissette is still in the limelight with a huge loyal fan base. Though her records are no longer consistently on the top of the charts, they continue to sell. In an industry where teenage stars normally burn out quickly, Alanis has overcome the odds. She has outlasted her contemporaries by constantly evolving. I believe that a study of her music will reveal an evolution of both character and style. In this paper, I will explore the link between music and emotion throughout Morissette's life.

⁵⁸ Grills, *Ironic*, 88.

Chapter II

The Perfectionist

We'll love you just the way you are
If you're perfect

--Alanis Morissette, "Perfect," 1995¹

Being in the limelight as a child programmed Alanis to equate performance with life. She explains, "I never felt pushed, but I think being in the public eye at a really young age is a form of child abuse."² At the age of three, Alanis decided she wanted to be a singing actress.³ She blames no one for her early career – it was her choice – but she had no idea what life she was choosing. She notes, "As any former child actor will tell you, an early dose of adult reality is a dangerous thing."⁴ But, when she realized how much it pleased the adults in her life, Alanis dived into the adult world of show business at full speed.

¹ Alanis Morissette, "Perfect," *Jagged Little Pill*, Maverick/Reprise 45901, CD, 1995.

² Matthew Hutson, "Eccentric's Corner: Rock Star Next Door," *Psychology Today* (May 2008): 39.

³ Brian D. Johnson, "Reinventing Alanis Morissette," *Maclean's* 112 (March 8, 1999): 46-51.

⁴ Timothy White, "Morissette's 'Jagged' Self-Healing," *Billboard* 107 (May 13, 1995): 1-10.

Alanis admits she has always battled perfectionism: “That was more about being told that I had to be kind and smart in order to be accepted, whether that was in reaction to report cards or doing something for which I got a lot of praise, and obviously feeling good about myself when I got a lot of praise and not feeling good about myself when I didn’t.”⁵ Though the problem started as a typical issue of childhood self-esteem, it quickly grew into an obsession. “I just wanted to do whatever it took to get the approval of my parents and the people I was working with at the time,”⁶ she says. This included repressing any doubts or insecurities and plastering a smile on her face.

Alanis felt like she needed to prove herself, but she was pushing herself very hard to do so: “It required me to be very much an adult, while emotionally I was still very much a child. The pressure to perform perfectly was mine.”⁷ She was left with a constant feeling of failure and the pressure was too much for a child to bear, but her parents’ hands were tied: “They knew that in order for me to get away from the pressure it would mean my getting out of the music industry. And they knew if they even suggested it, I would never agree. It was my decision.”⁸

⁵ Mim Udovitch, “Alanis Morissette: The Rolling Stone Interview,” *Rolling Stone* 800 (November 26, 1998): 56-58, 60, 62, 141.

⁶ David Wild, “Alanis Morissette,” *Rolling Stone* 720 (November 2, 1995): 40-46.

⁷ Johnson, “Reinventing Alanis Morissette.”

⁸ Barry Grills, *Ironic: Alanis Morissette: The Story* (Toronto: Quarry Press, 1997), 47.

As Alanis released her two Canadian albums in 1991 and 1992, she wrestled between two varieties of perfectionism. First, she felt compelled to obey the adults around her in order to win their affection. Second, she felt oppressed by the rules placed on her by these same adults, and society in general, that kept her from achieving her own view of perfection. Teenage rebellion meets extreme people pleasing. True to form, though, she held back her rebellious tendencies, at least for a while longer:

I think my drama was more implosion and internalized. I'm also Canadian. Ha! I have the old "don't worry about me" thing going on. My whole thing was over-responsibility, that was the route I took. As kids, you can go one way or the other. You can act out, rebel and be the renegade. Or you can go, "I'm going to be the overachieving, perfectionist, low-maintenance, needless creature." So, I went the former, and they are both equally torturous. Some people go the way of becoming an overt train wreck and other people try to hold it together, like everything's perfect, but internally everything's crumbling. I went the former.⁹

The train wreck was on its way.

In the fall of 1994, Alanis moved to Los Angeles expecting a slight change of scenery, but she was greeted by major culture shock. Immediately upon arriving, she was mugged at gunpoint by two thieves. The police officer called to the scene sarcastically said, "Welcome to L.A."¹⁰ Alanis was alone and scared in a huge city, but she finally found her connection.

⁹ R. M. Vaughan, "Singing, Writing, Kite Surfing, and Now She's on Weeds," *The Globe and Mail (Canada)* (September 18, 2009): R4.

¹⁰ Johnson, "Reinventing Alanis Morissette."

She walked into Glen Ballard's studio and experienced "the musical equivalent of love at first sight."¹¹ She noted his warm, positive spirit. Glen felt the same way about her: "She came to my studio, and we started writing about fifteen minutes later. It was clear to me that she was articulate and intelligent and it was just...we just dove right in. I think there was an instant rapport, immediately. It wasn't awkward for any length of time. It was relaxed. It really is hard to tell you why. All I can tell you is it was one of those instant connections, and we didn't have the slightest problem getting to work. That never happens."¹²

The pair completed ten tracks in their first two sessions together,¹³ but none of these songs were released. Alanis could not let go of the voices in her head, reminding her of what it took to please her parents, her schoolmates, her early fans, her co-writers in Toronto, and everyone other than herself. Now that she finally had the chance to do what she wanted, she had no idea what that was.

On a flight home to see her parents for Christmas, she was overcome by a panic attack, followed by fainting spells and "bouts of uncontrolled sobbing."¹⁴ Through several treatments of hypnosis and therapy, Alanis was able to unearth the repressed emotions of her overzealous childhood years. She somehow had

¹¹ Grills, *Ironic*, 109.

¹² Stuart Coles, *Alanis Morissette: Death of Cinderella* (London: Plexus, 1998), 32.

¹³ Paul Cantin, *Alanis Morissette: You Oughta Know* (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing, 1997), 121.

¹⁴ Johnson, "Reinventing Alanis Morissette."

to sort through this newly-discovered side of herself, and as she poured her heart into her music, this journey became her third album:

Jagged Little Pill just came from where I was at that time. That time of my life happened to be one where I was letting out a lot of things that I had repressed for a long time. So I feel like that was a new beginning point for me, as far as the fearlessness involved in creating something that vulnerable. I've written a lot of stuff in the past, but it was all very safe. Because I was nowhere near being as secure a person as I am now.¹⁵

Alanis now sees the album as a response to her childhood, society, the way she was treated and brought up, and the way she was taught to be.¹⁶

Still, she was not prepared to make the journey on her own. Her previous albums were collaborative efforts, and she needed help interpreting her music. Scott Welch, her manager, explains, "Her frustration was she had a lot more to say, but because she was still growing, she wasn't really a great musician yet. She was frustrated that she had a whole bunch of ideas but couldn't translate them yet."¹⁷ So she headed back to California.

Alanis and Ballard were in the studio, in the middle of writing a song, when they stopped abruptly and spontaneously created a masterpiece. Ballard recalls how it began on CNN, "I just went to an E – and then resolved it. And she said 'Sometimes.' Then I went up to an F sharp minor nine. (singing) 'It's never quite enough.' And so she jumps the melody up a whole step there, which is really brilliant. (singing) 'Don't forget to win first place.' Don't forget to win first place

¹⁵ Coles, *Death of Cinderella*, 76.

¹⁶ Craig Tomashoff, *You Live, You Learn: The Alanis Morissette Story* (New York: Berkley Boulevard Books, 1998), 69.

¹⁷ Grills, *Ironic*, 91.

was, like, OK, I don't know what's going on here, but this is great. I mean, because she's coming up with it on the spot."¹⁸ Alanis had finally released the part of her that "just wanted to be authentic and raw,"¹⁹ and 20 minutes later, "Perfect" was complete.²⁰

This song was the turning point for them. They had finally "tapped into it," reached their goal, and "set [their] precedent" against which all their future songs were to be judged.²¹ Ballard calls it "one of the most overwhelming spiritual moments that [he's] ever had," a "religious awakening." He says giddily, "It was like God's way of saying to me, 'You've been working your ass off, and I'm going to give this to you. Enjoy it, please.'"²²

For Alanis, the song was about healing, not entertaining. It allowed her to vent the pressure that had built inside her for so long. The lyrics are written in a parent's voice, but are obviously the interpretation of a child:

Sometimes is never quite enough
If you're flawless, then you'll win my love
Don't forget to win first place
Don't forget to keep that smile on your face

Be a good boy
Try a little harder
You've got to measure up

¹⁸ Glen Ballard, interview by Kyra Phillips, *People in the News: Profiles of Alanis Morissette*, Margaret Cho, CNN, January 4, 2003.

¹⁹ Alanis Morissette, interview by Kyra Phillips, *People in the News: Profiles of Alanis Morissette*, Margaret Cho, CNN, January 4, 2003.

²⁰ Cantin, *You Oughta Know*, 127.

²¹ Coles, *Death of Cinderella*, 33.

²² Cantin, *You Oughta Know*, 127-28.

And make me prouder

How long before you screw it up
How many times do I have to tell you to hurry up
With everything I do for you
The least you can do is keep quiet

Be a good girl
You've gotta try a little harder
That simply wasn't good enough
To make us proud

I'll live through you
I'll make you what I never was
If you're the best, then maybe so am I
Compared to him compared to her
I'm doing this for your own damn good
You'll make up for what I blew
What's the problem...why are you crying

Be a good boy
Push a little farther now
That wasn't fast enough
To make us happy
We'll love you just the way you are
If you're perfect²³

The public was quick to judge the Morissette family, assuming they treated their children this way, but Alanis corrects them: "No one ever says those things, but they're intimidated everywhere: Unless you are externally successful, you are nothing. I was able to put it into words, what I felt....It was cathartic."²⁴ Alanis

²³ Alanis Morissette, "Perfect," *Jagged Little Pill*, Maverick/Reprise 45901, CD, 1995.

²⁴ Tomashoff, *You Live, You Learn*, 74.

finally learned that music could bring healing, and she based the rest of her career on this fact.²⁵

While the words were a breakthrough for Alanis, it was the music that reached her fans.²⁶ As a Type A, over-achieving, people-pleasing teenager myself at the time, I was captivated by “Perfect.” Finally someone was saying exactly what I was feeling, so I no longer felt alone. Like millions of other girls around the world, I would sing along and release the pressure and anxiety I had heaped upon myself. There was power in this song, but identifying its source is complicated.

The harmonic structure is unusual, but strangely simple. The majority of the song alternates between E major and F-sharp minor 7, with A and B major chords thrown onto the ends of the verses. The song begins sparsely, with just the strum of an acoustic guitar and the soft hint of brush percussion. The bass enters on the third line, but it is subtle, almost unnoticeable.

Clearly, the focus here is the vocal line. Ballard verifies my assumption, saying he pushed her vocals to the front of the mix for a “conversational, confessional quality.”²⁷ He recorded her with a 1954 AKG C-12 microphone, sent

²⁵ The healing power of music has been known for millennia. Aesthetician Julius Portnoy explains, “Music permits us to discharge pent up emotions to drain the pus that might poison us from festering wounds.” The Greek philosopher Aristotle made similar statements: “Music of a passionate nature could cure a turbulent mind as though it were purged by a drug.” Julius Portnoy, *Music in the Life of Man* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963): 106, 189.

²⁶ A study by Peynircioglu and Ali shows that women rate more personal relevance to lyrics when they are sung rather than read. Zehra F. Peynircioglu and S. Omar Ali, “Songs and Emotions: Are Lyrics and Melodies Equal Partners?” *Psychology of Music* 34 (October 2006): 514.

²⁷ Cantin, *You Oughta Know*, 129.

through vintage tube limiters and preamps. He adds, “She is such a great singer. I tried not to mess with it. I tried to get it as pure as possible on tape.... Mostly it has to do with what is coming out of her mouth.”²⁸

Of course, if an artist’s voice is going to be so bare, I would expect multiple takes and attempts to iron out any rough spots, but the song was recorded immediately after it was written, in one or two takes.²⁹ The intense, spiritual experience must have left her shaken up, because her voice is trembling. I also find it interesting that her voice has a childlike quality at the beginning of the song, as if she is regressing to deal with the past.

The second verse is more passionate, as the words are no longer telling the child to be perfect, but shaming her for failing to do so. A typical rock drum pattern kicks in as the electric guitar and bass actively dance around Morissette’s voice and a Hammond organ plays softly in the background. She no longer sounds like a child, but begins to take on the sound of an admonishing parent.

The bridge modulates to G major and continues the odd formula of alternating I and II chords. The emotional intensity, as well as the dynamic level, reaches its peak at this point. Her voice takes on a sharp, pained characteristic that is especially striking when she sings high E’s without audibly switching to her head voice. It is an eerie effect when her technically flawless singing symbolizes hysterical screaming. Then when the band drops out on “Why are you crying?”

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Paul Zollo, *Songwriters on Songwriting*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2003), 656.

you realize you've been holding your breath for several measures, because she is drawing you into her madness.

The final verse returns to the original meager instrumentation and restrained vocals, reminding us that this song is coming from the mind of a child who just took her first step toward growing up. After all, the first step toward healing is admitting you have a problem,³⁰ and the final line of the song is her confession: "We'll love you just the way you are if you're perfect."

Once Morissette and Ballard wrote "Perfect," they set a new standard for themselves. Alanis told Matt Hurwitz, "If a song took longer than 30 minutes to write, then I would just stop writing it, 'cause, to me, that meant that it didn't want to be written."³¹ When they got to the studio, Alanis would sit on the floor, Ballard in a chair, both with guitars, and Alanis would fall into a "trance-like state." She explains the process:

We would just open ourselves to it. Sometimes within five minutes, sometimes within two hours, it would just start and it would all come out and the song would be done. A lot of times I would listen to these songs and never even remember writing them. I just remember driving back to the studio to write another song the next day, listening to this song we wrote the night before, and I couldn't believe it. I couldn't remember it.³²

³⁰ This is the first step of the Twelve Step Alcoholics Anonymous program. Alcoholics Anonymous, *Alcoholics Anonymous: The Story of How Many Thousands of Men and Women Have Recovered from Alcoholism* (New York City: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1993), 59.

³¹ Matt Hurwitz, "Recording Notes: Alanis Morissette: Lyrical Mistress Adds Another Recording to Her Time Capsule," *Mix* 28 (April 2004): 132, 138, 140-41.

³² Cantin, *You Oughta Know*, 126.

Many critics scoff at this idea, but both Morissette and Ballard proclaim its truth. He says, "In 95 percent of what you hear on the record, the ink is not dry on the page. It is the most extraordinary thing I've ever seen."³³ This method of writing and recording captures the raw emotion as Alanis experiences it, allowing the listener to experience it as well. Alanis told *Guitar World*,

My vocal style comes from two things: one, I think, is having sung for a really long time. And the other is letting go of all the stringent rules of singing that I gave into when I was younger. On my early records, my vocal style was sort of the same but a lot more "perfect," made to sound flawless over the course of 15 or 20 takes.... On *Jagged Little Pill*, there weren't a lot of takes. It was of a priority to convey the emotions.³⁴

Ballard says this experience was unique in the modern music industry:

This was the least calculated thing I've ever done. All of her vocals were done the same day the song was written. Singers always want to nuance, but she was so close to what she was saying, singing the lyrics as she wrote them, that at the end of the night I would toss a track on tape as quickly as I could get it there, and she would sing it in one or two takes – and that's the record, largely. That's never happened in my career. I've spent a month just on one vocal.³⁵

This emotional delivery coupled with Morissette's confessional lyrics made *Jagged Little Pill* unapologetically vulnerable, and her live performance was no different. Every concert and every song took Alanis back through the pain of her past, as countless witnesses have recounted. She threw her entire body into her

³³ Cantin, *You Oughta Know*, 127.

³⁴ Coles, *Death of Cinderella*, 47.

³⁵ Chris Willman, "Quiet Riot Grrrl: Is Alanis Morissette a poseur? -- The 'Jagged Little Pill' Grammy sensation remains the silent center of the authenticity debate," *Entertainment Weekly* 318 (March 15, 1996).

singing while wringing her hands and arms into contorted positions, running, cowering, screaming, and crying during each show.

Alanis performed 252 sold-out concerts in a year and a half, which in itself is enough to wear a person out. But *Jagged Little Pill* was a phenomenon that quickly outsold The Beatles' *Abbey Road*. Alanis affected fans so deeply that some felt compelled to find their new soul mate. They would hide in the halls outside her hotel room. She recalls, "I'd come back from shows, people would have been in my bed and left notes under my pillow, and it was all very invasive.... I became the watched. I became the person that people were looking at."³⁶ She found her overnight celebrity status overwhelming, and when her tour ended, she found a place where no one would recognize her: India.

Alanis took a year and a half off as a "sort of extended mental-health day."³⁷ She jokes, "Once I got off the road, I needed a lot of time off. First to see if I even wanted to write another record and not throw in the towel and open up a coffee shop somewhere, which was definitely an option at one point."³⁸ I will discuss her Indian journey in-depth in Chapter III, but for now, suffice it to say she had a life-altering experience of a spiritual nature. Through this experience

³⁶ Alanis Morissette, interview by Cynthia Bowers, *CBS News Sunday Morning*, CBS, June 8, 2008.

³⁷ Jeff Giles, "Alanis Lives, Learns, and Now Returns," *Newsweek* 132 (October 26, 1998): 70-71.

³⁸ David Wild, "Alanis Morissette," *Rolling Stone* 720 (November 2, 1995): 40-46.

she underwent more emotional growth and healing, which comes across on her next album, *Supposed Former Infatuation Junkie*.³⁹

Her time in India affected more than just her words, however. Her musical style shows a heavy Eastern influence in its rhythms, melodic lines, and instrumentation. Brian D. Johnson's critique of the album notes that her "voice surfs the thrash and drone of minor chords, pulled by an undertow of Indian rhythms, while the lyrics offer a therapeutic balm of confessions, conversations and New Age resolutions. The sexy anger of *Jagged Little Pill* has given way to healing and reconciliation."⁴⁰

Morissette has faced her demons and worked through her past, but she has not completely overcome her problems. Her songs suggest that perfectionism is still a daily battle for her, but one that she is closer to winning. Five of the album's 17 tracks deal with this subject. In "Thank U," Alanis questions why she continues chasing an ideal she can never reach: "how bout them transparent dangling carrots / how bout that ever elusive kudo."⁴¹ In "One," she is threatened by the thought of being "average."⁴² In "Would Not Come," she expresses her dissatisfaction with her career, and the joy she had hoped it would

³⁹ Alanis Morissette, *Supposed Former Infatuation Junkie*, Maverick/Reprise 47094, CD, 1998.

⁴⁰ Johnson, "Reinventing Alanis Morissette."

⁴¹ Alanis Morissette, "Thank U," *Supposed Former Infatuation Junkie*, Maverick/Reprise 47094, CD, 1998.

⁴² Alanis Morissette, "One," *Supposed Former Infatuation Junkie*, Maverick/Reprise 47094, CD, 1998.

bring: “If I am famous then maybe I’ll feel good in this skin.”⁴³ She admits how badly she wanted approval in “Your Congratulations.”⁴⁴

One song especially shows maturity that was not evident in her previous albums. “That I Would Be Good” seems to be Morissette’s answer to “Perfect,” an uplifting ballad that offers hope and encouragement. The lyrics read like a wish list – every line begins with some variation of “that I would be good” and is followed by an “even if” clause where she lists reasons she previously would have found herself unlovable. The wording is open-ended, leaving room for interpretation. Is she hoping someone will still consider her good if these things happen? Is she trying to convince herself? Perhaps this indicates that she wants to believe that she would be good under any circumstances, and is still trying to reach that goal. It would be a lofty goal for anyone:

that I would be good even if I did nothing
that I would be good even if I got the thumbs down
that I would be good if I got and stayed sick
that I would be good even if I gained ten pounds

that I would be fine even if I went bankrupt
that I would be good if I lost my hair and my youth
that I would be great if I was no longer queen
that I would be grand if I was not all knowing

that I would be loved even when I numb myself
that I would be good even when I am overwhelmed
that I would be loved even when I was fuming
that I would be good even if I was clingy

⁴³ Alanis Morissette, “Would Not Come,” *Supposed Former Infatuation Junkie*, Maverick/Reprise 47094, CD, 1998.

⁴⁴ Alanis Morissette, “Your Congratulations,” *Supposed Former Infatuation Junkie*, Maverick/Reprise 47094, CD, 1998.

that I would be good even if I lost sanity
that I would be good
whether with or without you⁴⁵

This song is unique in that she wrote the text and music separately.

Normally her music and lyrics are written simultaneously,⁴⁶ but she wrote these words in her closet. She had hit a block in the studio, but she had people at her house as well. She says, “When I write I need to be alone, for the most part. So I didn’t want to kick them out of my house, but I needed silence. So I just locked myself in my closet and sat there and I wrote everything that I felt.”⁴⁷ When she returned to the studio, they added the music, including a flute solo by Alanis.

The track begins with five seconds of white noise which *Link* magazine says “sounds like the hum of a tube amp underneath.”⁴⁸ I fail to see the significance of this decision, but Morissette and Ballard experimented with a lot of medium-associated sound on this album. The humming continues throughout the entire song.

The first stanza is accompanied by acoustic guitar and organ. Like “Perfect,” this song features Morissette’s voice high in the mix, but she sounds much more self-assured now. She has shed the child-like quality she had before. Gentle percussion enters on the second stanza, and swirling strings are added on the third line. The thick landscape cushions her voice before suddenly

⁴⁵ Alanis Morissette, “That I Would Be Good,” *Supposed Former Infatuation Junkie*, Maverick/Reprise 47094, CD, 1998.

⁴⁶ Zollo, *Songwriters on Songwriting*, 656.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 661.

⁴⁸ Stan Link, “The Work of Reproduction in the Mechanical Aging of an Art: Listening to Noise,” *Computer Music Journal* 25 (Spring 2001): 35.

dropping out on the last stanza, where it returns to the original instrumentation, also like “Perfect.” In the final line, “that I would be good whether with or without you,” she declares her independence. Then she vocalizes on what sounds like “I.”

Alanis ends the song with a flute solo that is reminiscent of the Native American sound often heard on nature CDs. She is obviously not a professional, but her performance is still somehow passionate. I think she portrays emotion more through her breath than anything else. I picture her in the studio, recording this song the first time through, singing into the microphone and then pulling the flute up into the exact same position. We hear her air more than her music, which makes her seem more fervent than amateurish.

Written in A major, “That I Would Be Good” has a more stable harmonic structure than its predecessor. The basic pattern is I-IV-ii-V-vi-IV-ii-V-I, which follows the rules of classical theory with a deceptive cadence. I find it interesting that after spending time away from Western music, Alanis returned to a more normal Western sequence, when she avoided them in the past. Of course, this was the first time she played the flute on an album, so it is possible she received some classical training during her time off.

After the release of *Supposed Former Infatuation Junkie*, Alanis was asked about her musical future. She replied, “I will continue always making records that are snapshots of what I am thinking about and feeling at that time. And I’ll continue stretching, always trying new instruments, working with different

people in different environments, different countries, different flavors, and always evolving.”⁴⁹

In 2002, Morissette stretched beyond anything she had ever tried before. She wrote and produced an entire album by herself. *Under Rug Swept*⁵⁰ allowed Alanis to truly find her own style. She blended elements of rock, pop, alternative, folk, dance, tribal rhythms, and hip-hop loops – whatever it takes to express the emotion of the song. Larry Flick notes, “Her sounds perfectly reflect their emotional intent.”⁵¹ Ann Powers praises the album: “She has found the sound, a little bit of new wave, a little bit of folk, a little bit of Led Zep guitars all mixed up in a very clean package, but a clean package that’s centered around that voice of hers which is so open and so bright and so confrontational yet seductive at the same time. And I really think for a vocalist, she’s constructed this sound around her vocals. It’s really masterful. I’m very impressed.”⁵²

Alanis may have conquered a musical milestone, but she was still dealing with her perfectionism. “So Unsexy” verbalizes her insecurities that are triggered by the tiniest of perceived rejections. She says the song “basically speaks of the process of how loving myself can affect everything and change everything. Why when I don’t take care of myself, or love myself or feel connected to my definition of God, everything’s very painful and disjointed and disconnected and ...

⁴⁹ Zollo, *Songwriters on Songwriting*, 662.

⁵⁰ Alanis Morissette, *Under Rug Swept*, Maverick 47988, CD, 2002.

⁵¹ Larry Flick, “‘Under Rug Swept’: A Track Listing,” *Billboard* 114 (January 19, 2002): 89.

⁵² Ann Powers, interview by Elizabeth Blair, *Morning Edition*, National Public Radio, April 25, 2002.

depressing, to be totally honest.”⁵³ The lyrics suggest that she still relies on others’ perceptions of her for a portion of her self-worth:

Oh these little rejections how they add up quickly
One small sideways look and I feel so ungood
Somewhere along the way I think I gave you the power to make
Me feel the way I thought only my father could

Oh these little rejections how they seem so real to me
One forgotten birthday I’m all but cooked
How these little abandonments seem to sting so easily
I’m thirteen again, am I thirteen for good?

I can feel so unsexy for someone so beautiful
So unloved for someone so fine
I can feel so boring for someone so interesting
So ignorant for someone of sound mind

Oh these little protections how they fail to serve me
One forgotten phone call and I’m deflated
Oh these little defenses how they fail to comfort me
Your hand pulling away and I’m devastated

When will you stop leaving baby?
When will I stop deserting baby?
When will I start staying with myself?

Oh these little projections how they keep springing from me
I jump my ship as I take it personally
Oh these little rejections how they disappear quickly
The moment I decide not to abandon me⁵⁴

It is comforting to note that Alanis has overcome the all-encompassing people-pleasing perfectionism that plagued her youth. Now she is contending with the

⁵³ Dan van der Kooy and Shanon Cook, “Alanis Not About to Be Swept Under the Rug,” CNN, July 5, 2002.

⁵⁴ Alanis Morissette, “So Unsexy,” *Under Rug Swept*, Maverick 47988, CD, 2002.

insecurities that are common to all women, and by the next album, she might even beat those.

This song's style implies that Alanis is talking about an emotion that is closer to the surface. Gone are the earth-shaking ballads and tearful vocals of her previous songs on the subject, in favor of up-tempo pop hooks and "funk-fortified groove."⁵⁵ It would be easy to sing along to "So Unsexy" on the radio without giving a thought to the words because the tune is so catchy.

The first two measures set the pace with a distinctive drum loop. In four-four time, the beat takes the following rhythm: eighth, sixteenth, sixteenth, eighth, eighth, sixteenth, sixteenth, sixteenth, eighth, quarter. A flanger is used on the cymbal to create the effect of rising and falling, which could easily symbolize a woman's self-esteem as she feels loved and rejected.

The electric guitar comes in thick and heavy, playing only varieties of E chords, rotating through E major, E major 9, E 5, and E major 7. When Alanis enters, she does not carry the spotlight as she has before. This is not to say that she is inaudible – she is still high in the mix – but she is joined by a more aggressive band this time around. Meshell Ndegeocello, the guest bassist for this song, adds her special flavor as well, especially in the 50 second long outro.

The words are rushed during the verses, as if Alanis had too much to say and not enough time to fit it all in. Strangely, the song still comes out over five minutes long. The awkwardness disappears in the chorus, though, where her

⁵⁵ Flick, "Under Rug Swept."

voice shines. She even doubles herself a sixth below, putting her deep in her chest voice and giving the illusion of an alto joining her.

So, if she feels unsexy, unloved, boring, and ignorant, why does she sound so happy in this song? The melodic line gives us the answer. While “so unsexy” peaks at B, “someone so beautiful” reaches an E, drawing the focus of our ears. Alanis does not want to dwell on her insecurities, but on the positive aspects of herself. This is a song of triumph. She is retraining her brain to love herself through song, and only the next album can tell us if it works.

Morissette’s 2004 album, *So-Called Chaos*,⁵⁶ shows that her methods of emotional healing might have worked, or she is happy because she is in love with movie star Ryan Reynolds, but either way, the album has a lighter tone overall. Karen Bliss writes, “*So-Called Chaos* reflects her humor, her insight, her willingness to tear herself apart, to apologize and also acknowledge her strength.”⁵⁷ Alanis sees the songs as more streamlined and concise, saying “I feel like there’s a simplification that has happened, not only in my music but in my life over the past couple of years.”⁵⁸

The album’s first single, “Everything,” comes across as the world’s most pretentious love song. Though I knew Alanis was in a relationship at the time, I was shocked by her boldness in the lyrics, where I thought she was calling herself the “most gorgeous woman” that “he” had ever met. While he can and

⁵⁶ Alanis Morissette, *So-Called Chaos*, Maverick 48555, CD, 2004.

⁵⁷ Karen Bliss, “Alanis Morissette,” *Canadian Musician* 26 (July-August 2004): 34-37.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

should say that to her, I considered it gauche for her to say it about herself. I can only imagine that others felt the same way when this song came on the radio:

I can be an asshole⁵⁹ of the grandest kind
I can withhold like it's going out of style
I can be the moodiest baby and you've never met anyone
Who's as negative as I am sometimes

I am the wisest woman you've ever met.
I am the kindest soul with whom you've connected.
I have the bravest heart that you've ever seen
And you've never met anyone
Who's as positive as I am sometimes.

You see everything, you see every part
You see all my light and you love my dark
You dig everything of which I'm ashamed
There's not anything to which you can't relate
And you're still here

I blame everyone else, not my own partaking
My passive-aggressiveness can be devastating
I'm terrified and mistrusting
And you've never met anyone as,
As closed down as I am sometimes.

You see everything, you see every part
You see all my light and you love my dark
You dig everything of which I'm ashamed
There's not anything to which you can't relate
And you're still here

What I resist, persists, and speaks louder than I know
What I resist, you love, no matter how low or high I go

I'm the funniest woman that you've ever known

⁵⁹ This word was changed to "nightmare" for the radio version after Janet Jackson's wardrobe malfunction at the Super Bowl led the media to refuse anything remotely risqué. Karen Bliss, "Alanis Becomes a 'Nightmare': In Wake of Janet Controversy, Singer Edits Song for Radio," *Rolling Stone* (March 12, 2004).

I'm the dullest woman that you've ever known
I'm the most gorgeous woman that you've ever known
And you've never met anyone
Who's as everything as I am sometimes

You see everything, you see every part
You see all my light and you love my dark
You dig everything of which I'm ashamed
There's not anything to which you can't relate
And you're still here⁶⁰

I now know that I was completely wrong about the song's meaning. Alanis told CBS that "Everything" is actually a love song to herself. She explains, "The last two years have been just really aspiring to love all parts of myself, so it's deep, it's smart, profound, flaky, all of it. So, you know, in loving all of those different parts I just become more peaceful because I'm not struggling against these parts anymore, so the song's to myself."⁶¹

The band sets a spacy atmosphere with acoustic and electric guitars playing broken ninth chords amidst a good bit of reverb. The texture is denser at the vocal entrance, but the effect does not change. The music is there to set the stage, not to steal it. Alanis goes back to her old pattern of I and II chords, alternating between B-flat 9 and C 7. Since the verses consist mainly of the notes B and C, these chords make sense, and surprisingly, they are not boring.

The chorus opens up to a I-IV pattern, giving it a warmer feel. The vocal line only rises two whole steps higher than the verse, so I cannot explain why I "hear" Alanis smiling in this section, unless it's the slightly longer duration of

⁶⁰ Alanis Morissette, "Everything," *So-Called Chaos*, Maverick 48555, CD, 2004.

⁶¹ Alanis Morissette, interview by Hannah Storm, *The Early Show*, CBS News, May 27, 2004.

notes. The full band has joined in, so I think the keyboard and drums add to the brighter atmosphere. The music expresses the peace she feels through her love and acceptance of all parts of herself.

The bridge, however, represents her resistance to that peace. She modulates up to E-flat, but continues the same style of chord alternation. Other than rising one more step, her voice shows no sign of stress. In the music video, we see Alanis walking down a sunny road until this point. Suddenly she is surrounded by dark clouds, rain, and lightning. I interpret this as the storms of life that temporarily pull her from the peace she had found. She quickly finds her way out of the storm in the video, and presumably she finds her way back to self-acceptance.

One thing Alanis has reiterated throughout her career is: “All I can promise is I’m going to write exactly where I’m at.”⁶² Assuming that she has kept that promise, we can watch her from afar and analyze the maturity she has reached at the time of each album. In 1995, Alanis realized she could never be “Perfect,” but in 1998 she set a new goal for herself, “That I Would Be Good.” By 2002, she was letting men make her feel “So Unsexy,” but she finally found a way to like “Everything” about herself by 2004. This is obviously an overgeneralization, but it does give us a good idea of how Alanis has conquered a life-controlling issue through the power of music.

⁶² Coles, *Death of Cinderella*, 76.

Chapter III

The “Angry White Female”

It was a slap in the face how quickly I was replaced
Are you thinking of me when you fuck her?

--Alanis Morissette, “You Oughta Know,” 1995¹

It was after midnight in the spring of 1996. Three teenage girls lay across the hood of a car in the driveway of a suburban home. The stereo was at its maximum volume, but the girls easily drowned out the music as they sang along. With the song on repeat, they shouted the lyrics with a newfound sense of power and unity. Somehow those words, which held no relevance to their lives, created a bond of simultaneous emotional release.

I could never explain why “You Oughta Know” touched our lives so much. At the age of sixteen, my friends and I had never experienced the heartbreak and betrayal of a man leaving us for another woman. We could not begin to understand the pain portrayed in the music. But as we listened, we believed we could. As we screamed at the evil man in the song, we screamed at every man who would do us wrong in the future, every teacher who had ever insulted us, every parent who had treated us like a child. Our anger came out in another

¹ Alanis Morissette, “You Oughta Know,” *Jagged Little Pill*, Maverick/Reprise 45901, CD, 1995.

woman's words, and these words changed my entire generation. Alanis Morissette incited a what many called a revolution of angry women in rock.

Though she was touted as “the poster girl for angry young chicks,”² Alanis Morissette never intended to build a career with a one-dimensional label.³ “I see it as a really great turning point,” she says. “Because it takes a lot of energy, in my opinion, to figure out what I will share with people and what I won't... So, when I wrote ‘You Oughta Know,’ I finally just let the floodgates open and, wrote what I was feeling. My intention in writing that song was to liberate myself from the repression that was holding in my anger and my fear and self-loathing or my insecurity. All of these things that I had been told were ‘bad things, don't show.’”⁴

“You Oughta Know” has been called a “bit of primal scream therapy,”⁵ but Alanis gives a caveat: “To isolate ‘You Oughta Know’ is a misrepresentation of the whole story. By no means is this record just a sexual, angry record. That song wasn't written for the sake of revenge. It was written for the sake of release. I'm actually a pretty rational, calm person.”⁶

Thanks to Morissette's habit of immediately recording, her passion is evident. While some critics mock her “banshee” voice,⁷ others remark, “Her

² Shanda Deziel, “Isn't It Ironic?” *Maclean's* 118 (April 25, 2005): 50-52.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Alanis Morissette, interview by Elizabeth Vargas, *20/20*, ABC, June 10, 2005.

⁵ Jeff Giles, “Alanis Lives, Learns, and Now Returns,” *Newsweek* 132 (October 26, 1998): 70-71.

⁶ David Wild, “Alanis Morissette,” *Rolling Stone* 720 (November 2, 1995): 40-46.

⁷ Deziel, “Isn't It Ironic?”

sounds perfectly reflect their emotional intent.”⁸ I believe that her expression is the key to her success. A smooth, tender voice would destroy the power of her lyrics, but her sharp, raw vocal style brings them to life. Timothy White also notices this value:

In a tone too peeved to be mistaken for coy sarcasm, she dares pop the questions that define the grimly visceral relationship (e.g., “Is she perverted like me? Would she go down on you in a theater?”)...Lyrics that appear roguishly uncouth when read off the page are piteous when heard leaving Morissette’s lips.⁹

I wonder if perhaps “piteous” should be replaced with “contagious,” considering the trend of angry female rockers who followed her lead with this muscular sound. According to Mim Udovitch, Alanis is set apart from these others because “she writes from the point of view of someone searching for meaning in a meaningful, rather than a meaningless world. She’s not angry in the punk-rock, fuck-you tradition; she’s in touch with her anger.”¹⁰

“You Oughta Know” uses odd keys and aggressive guitar riffs to match the anger and intensity in Alanis’s voice. Written in F-sharp minor, the song perfectly suits her ideas of musical rage: “I just love ‘purple’ chords, chords that are a little minor, a little – they give you some sense of release, but they also contest you

⁸ Larry Flick, “‘Under Rug Swept’: A Track Listing,” *Billboard* 114 (January 19, 2002): 89.

⁹ Timothy White, “Morissette’s ‘Jagged’ Self-Healing,” *Billboard* 107 (May 13, 1995): 1-10.

¹⁰ Mim Udovitch, “Alanis Morissette: The Rolling Stone Interview,” *Rolling Stone* 800 (November 26, 1998): 56-58, 60, 62, 141.

and make you feel a little uncomfortable on a musical level.”¹¹ If she was trying to make us uncomfortable, she could have simply spoken her lyrics:

I want you to know, that I'm happy for you
I wish nothing but the best for you both
An older version of me
Is she perverted like me
Would she go down on you in a theatre
Does she speak eloquently
And would she have your baby
I'm sure she'd make a really excellent mother

'cause the love that you gave that we made wasn't able
To make it enough for you to be open wide, no
And every time you speak her name
Does she know how you told me you'd hold me
Until you died, till you died
But you're still alive

And I'm here to remind you
Of the mess you left when you went away
It's not fair to deny me
Of the cross I bear that you gave to me
You, you, you oughta know

You seem very well, things look peaceful
I'm not quite as well, I thought you should know
Did you forget about me Mr. Duplicity
I hate to bug you in the middle of dinner
It was a slap in the face how quickly I was replaced
Are you thinking of me when you fuck her?

'cause the love that you gave that we made wasn't able
To make it enough for you to be open wide, no
And every time you speak her name
Does she know how you told me you'd hold me
Until you died, til you died

¹¹ Sarah Chauncey, “Music, Meditation and Alanis Morissette – Supposed Former Infatuation Junkie,” *Canadian Musician* 20 (November-December 1998): 34-37.

But you're still alive¹²

With the music, however, this song has the opposite effect: it allows the singer to feel comfortable with the past for the first time.

The song begins in a strange i^7 with just a sliding bass and snares accompanying Alanis, whose voice almost speaks its low F-sharps as she tries to convince her ex-boyfriend, and herself, that she is happy for him in his new relationship. Quickly realizing she cannot keep up the façade, she starts asking him the questions meant only to make him regret his decision, as she desperately hopes that his new woman does not make him as happy as she did. Her interrogation is joined by a driving guitar while the bass quickly pulses on the tonic. Then in a sort of introspective dialogue, she accompanies her own voice as she ponders what went wrong. She bellows “NO!” in a heart-wrenching sob before she completely loses control, asking “And every time you speak her name does she know how you told me you’d hold me until you died?” All the while, the song has contained only two chords, i^7 and major IV, alternating every two measures.

The chorus kicks in when Alanis cannot stand to be nice anymore. In a sudden F-sharp major key change, she lets her rage fly forth as she screams, “And I’m here to remind you of the mess you left when you went away!” The full band comes in here, finally bringing a more typical rock progression: I - V/III - III - IV. The music stops abruptly, though, as she shrieks out the title words, her voice breaking up a third each time she says “you.” This peculiar technique was only

¹² Morissette, “You Oughta Know.”

used in this song, but still managed to become her signature sound. Millions of girls across the world attempted, but none could recreate it. This particular sob, along with the pain that caused it, is hers alone. Charles Batteux, an eighteenth-century aesthetician, seems to predict this ability: “Nothing is so irregular as the course of the passions of love, anger and discord. The voice becomes so shrill and then suddenly it takes on an explosive quality, in order to express them.”¹³

In the second verse, Alanis sings, “Did you forget about me, Mr. Duplicity? I hate to bug you in the middle of dinner.”¹⁴ After years of debate over which man inspired this song, former “Full House” star Dave Coulier has admitted the song is about him.¹⁵ A few years earlier, he had hinted at the possibility, telling the press that while he dated Alanis, she always called during dinner.¹⁶

After the chorus repeats, a sparse background is filled with sung moans. Somewhere between “oh” and “ah,” her voice glides around in a sort of whimper. Then the drums join her, adding strength to her voice. This power is illustrated in the final repeat, where again she doubles herself, this time not always on the same pitch, giving it the elusive quality of frantic weeping. Her rage has built to the point of bursting and threats begin to flow from her mouth:

¹³ Peter le Huray and James Day, *Music and Aesthetics in the Eighteenth and Early-Nineteenth Centuries*, Cambridge Readings in the Literature of Music (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 53.

¹⁴ Morissette, “You Oughta Know.”

¹⁵ Nicole Carter, “Dave Coulier Admits Alanis Morissette’s ‘You Oughta Know’ Is About Him,” *New York Daily News*, August 14, 2008.

¹⁶ Gayle Fee and Laura Raposa, “H’wood Has Lots of Good Will for Filming in Bay State,” *The Boston Herald*, March 24, 1997.

'Cause the joke that you laid in the bed that was me
And I'm not gonna fade
As soon as you close your eyes, and you know it!
And every time I scratch my nails down someone else's back
I hope you feel it...well, can you feel it?¹⁷

By the last chorus, Alanis is in such a frenzy that her voice becomes more guttural, closer to screaming than singing. You cannot help but feel the words which are being pounded into you with the joint effort of voice and instruments. White remarks, "The singer's wounded outrage mingles with a gathering courage that gives the listener a giddy desire to cheer her on."¹⁸ The jumble of emotions and rock make the listener want to jump around and scream just like Alanis, and by the end of the song, your energy has drained, but so has your anger. And this, in my opinion, is why Alanis has been so successful.

Podolsky considers anger a destructive emotion, defining it as "an emotional disturbance which arises from a frustration of needs, or injury where satisfaction of needs had formerly been encountered. Anger is an expression of extreme unhappiness, dissatisfaction, unfulfillment and discouragement. In a way anger serves as an emotional safety valve; it helps to reduce our inner pressures and tensions."¹⁹ A study by Peynircioglu and Ali on the emotional power of song

¹⁷ Morissette, "You Oughta Know."

¹⁸ White, "'Jagged' Self-Healing."

¹⁹ Edward Podolsky, "Moderating Anger with Music," *Music Journal* 23 (November 1965): 41.

finds that women consistently report more intense emotions than men in relation to music, especially on negative dimensions.²⁰

I agree that simply reading the words to “You Oughta Know” would have much less impact. Gabrielsson and Juslin’s study, “Emotional Expression in Music Performance: Between the Performer’s Intention and the Listener’s Experience,” notes that participants deem music “angry” if it has “fast tempo, loud sound level, tendency to (relatively) sharpen contrasts between ‘long’ and ‘short’ tones, no final retard [sic], mostly non-legato articulation, very sharp tone onsets, harsh timbre, [and] distorted tones.”²¹ Each of these elements is clear in this song, but Alanis’s music changes over time, covering every possible emotion.

Still, over fifteen years later, Morissette is “pigeonholed as That Angry Chick in the Theater,”²² and the world’s only evidence is “You Oughta Know.” For example, Marisa Fox wrote this review in *The New York Daily*:

Armed with a distinctly powerful and theatrical voice, as well as tunes that stick in your brain and ring with poignancy, Morissette has found a shtick that really works – pop-soluble anger. That emotion colors every facet of her performance, from the way she twists her voice into wails and gasps, to the way she stretches words into pained vowel sounds, to the way she contorts her limbs into awkward knots, to her confessional songs about betrayal, rejection and lust.²³

²⁰ Zehra F. Peynircioglu and S. Omar Ali, “Songs and Emotions: Are Lyrics and Melodies Equal Partners?” *Psychology of Music* 34 (October 2006): 514.

²¹ Alf Gabrielsson and Patrik N. Juslin, “Emotional Expression in Music Performance: Between the Performer’s Intention and the Listener’s Experience,” *Psychology of Music* 24 (1996): 86.

²² Rob Sheffield, “Recordings: ‘Supposed Former Infatuation Junkie’ by Alanis Morissette, ‘Spirit’ by Jewel,” *Rolling Stone* 801 (December 10, 1998): 119-120.

²³ Barry Grills, *Ironic: Alanis Morissette: The Story* (Toronto: Quarry Press, 1997), 55.

Fox is speaking of a performance during Morissette's *Jagged Little Pill* tour. At that point in her career, Alanis had only one song about "betrayal, rejection, and lust," and I wonder if Ms. Fox left the concert after its performance.

To claim Alanis relied on a shtick completely based on anger ignores the fact that the five other singles from that album were encouraging – sometimes even sappy. Rob Sheffield claims "Ironic"²⁴ established Alanis as the new Carole King, while others continue to debate her grammatical use of the word. The gooey love song "Head Over Feet"²⁵ is so saccharine it could nullify the anger of "You Oughta Know." "Perfect"²⁶ and "Forgiven"²⁷ deal with Morissette's past while "You Learn"²⁸ offers hope for her future.

Only one other song on *Jagged Little Pill* contains anger. "Right Through You"²⁹ is directed at the record executives she met with when looking for a deal. She was upset because they "wanted to package her cleavage more than her

²⁴ Alanis Morissette, "Ironic," *Jagged Little Pill*, Maverick/Reprise 45901, CD, 1995.

²⁵ Alanis Morissette, "Head Over Feet," *Jagged Little Pill*, Maverick/Reprise 45901, CD, 1995.

²⁶ Alanis Morissette, "Perfect," *Jagged Little Pill*, Maverick/Reprise 45901, CD, 1995.

²⁷ Alanis Morissette, "Forgiven," *Jagged Little Pill*, Maverick/Reprise 45901, CD, 1995.

²⁸ Alanis Morissette, "You Learn," *Jagged Little Pill*, Maverick/Reprise 45901, CD, 1995.

²⁹ Alanis Morissette, "Right Through You," *Jagged Little Pill*, Maverick/Reprise 45901, CD, 1995.

music.”³⁰ Alanis told the *Houston Chronicle*, “When I was 16, I would have said, ‘Yeah, put me on the cover.’ But it’s not about my cleavage, and I think people are a lot more open now to hearing what (women) have to say. And there are a lot more women being emotionally honest and naked about things than men are.”³¹ Certain record executives were not listening, so Alanis used music to express her emotions. Apparently the process was very frustrating for her:

Wait a minute man
You mispronounced my name
You didn’t wait for all the information
Before you turned me away
Wait a minute sir
You kind of hurt my feelings
You see me as a sweet back-loaded puppet
And you’ve got meal ticket taste

I see right through you
I know right through you
I feel right through you
I walk right through you

You took me for a joke
You took me for a child
You took a long hard look at my ass
And then played golf for a while
Your shake is like a fish
You pat me on the head
You took me out to wine dine 69 me
But didn’t hear a damn word I said

I see right through you
I know right through you

³⁰ Stuart Coles, *Alanis Morissette: Death of Cinderella* (London: Plexus, 1998), 46.

³¹ Grills, *Ironic*, 40.

I feel right through you
I walk right through you

Hello Mr. Man
You didn't think I'd come back
You didn't think I'd show up with my army
And this ammunition on my back
Now that I'm Miss Thing
Now that I'm a zillionaire
You scan the credits for your name
And wonder why it's not there³²

Alanis knew that she had reached a place of integrity in her music, and the executives were more interested in an image.

Morissette's co-writer Glen Ballard had worried this might happen.

Normally a singer does not complete a record before signing a contract, but Ballard insisted they continue. He told Scott Welch, Morissette's manager, "I believe in this so much, I don't want to stop to worry about a record company. Let's just not stop." He was concerned that a label would "dilute" the "purity of their vision."³³

Most record companies wanted a say in how the album was made and how Alanis was portrayed. It took another artist to understand what Alanis was looking for. Madonna had just started her own label, Maverick, and the two singers immediately hit it off. Madonna was drawn to Morissette's music by "her honesty, her pain, her hopefulness."³⁴ She says about Alanis, "There's a sense of

³² Morissette, "Right Through You."

³³ Paul Cantin, *Alanis Morissette: You Oughta Know* (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing, 1997), 129.

³⁴ Grills, *Ironic*, 99.

excitement and giddiness in the air around her – like anything’s possible, and the sky’s the limit.”³⁵ Apparently it is, because according to the *Ottawa Citizen*, “Maverick picked up the record as it was, relatively unheard of in the music business.”³⁶ The record executives from other companies probably did feel remorse when they heard “Right Through You,” if not for her feelings, then for the enormous amount of money they lost.

Maverick expected *Jagged Little Pill* to sell fewer than 250,000 copies. Scott Welch predicted only 100,000 copies would sell. They wanted to start Alanis off slowly, just get her name out there, so they did not market the album. They were shocked when a Los Angeles DJ put “You Oughta Know” into rotation, and one week later the song was number one.³⁷ Welch explains, “That song came on the air, and millions of women went: ‘That’s exactly how I feel. That is IT! I want to hear that song again.’”³⁸ A Live 105 DJ exclaimed, “I have never seen a song take off like this one has.”³⁹ Switchboards at every radio station were lighting up, and people across the country were rushing to the store. Timothy White of *Billboard* says the album was a “complete groundswell. It was from the public up, not the company down.”⁴⁰ People everywhere already loved

³⁵ Coles, *Death of Cinderella*, 38.

³⁶ Grills, *Ironic*, 156.

³⁷ Cantin, *You Oughta Know*, 145.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 145.

³⁹ Coles, *Death of Cinderella*, 39.

⁴⁰ Grills, *Ironic*, 158.

her – “Women finally have an ally, and girls someone to look up to, someone who is clearly a strong person and who loves herself, yet acknowledges her emotional vulnerability without whining”⁴¹ – or hated her – “There’s a strangeness about this level of success. There’s a spookiness any time someone captures the emotions and desires of millions of people, whether it’s in politics or rock music. Why does it happen to someone like Morissette and not, say, to someone equally (some would say more) deserving like Liz Phair or PJ Harvey?”⁴²

Alanis received much of her criticism from her hometown of Ottawa. In what is coined the “Paul Anka Syndrome,” Canadian superstars return home only to be snubbed.⁴³ The *Ottawa Citizen* reports, “Many locals are anything but proud of the evolution they’ve witnessed. They call her contrived, rejecting the prickly, alternative image that’s brought her international fame. But it hardly matters. Alanis does not belong to Ottawa any more.”⁴⁴ Shirley Manson, the lead singer of Garbage, also had her doubts about Alanis: “When she first came out with that song, ‘You Oughta Know,’ I thought it was some contrived marketing ploy; it bugged the living shit out of me. But over time, I’ve become enamored with what she stands for. She’s a tremendous female role model, and she’s given the male-dominated industry a real jolt.”⁴⁵

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 164.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 165.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁴⁴ Carolyn Abraham and Norman Provencher, “The Song of Alanis Morissette,” *Ottawa Citizen*, February 24, 1996.

⁴⁵ *Rolling Stone*, “Rock & Roll: Alanis to Tour” 805 (February 4, 1999): 32.

Grills makes a good argument for Alanis, however: “Somehow the woman who belts out her outrage in the lyrics of the songs on *Jagged Little Pill* is supposed to have felt a similar outrage as a very young child, to justify its credence now. If not, the whole enterprise is perceived as contrived. But the alternative seems rather ridiculous, especially if one playfully imagines a three-year old Alanis performing even a childish version of *You Oughta Know* for her parents in their living room.”⁴⁶

Are all these people missing something? Is this song even about anger? Alanis says it’s not: “The song was more vulnerable than upset or angry. Anger is an extension of hurt, to me. It’s a cowardly way of dealing with pain. When I sing the song now, I think back to the original emotion. The acoustic version with strings at the Grammys was my way of carrying it back to its first emotion, feeling hurt and confused. So, when I see the *Angry Young Woman* label, it’s completely missing the point of what the song is about.”⁴⁷

The music video was made to symbolize healing and renewal. At no time does Alanis chase after her ex-boyfriend in rage. Instead she walks through the desert, lugging around her emotional baggage. She changes clothes, thereby symbolically shedding the pain, and comes to a place of peace and happiness (a field of flowers). The entire video is blurry so that Morissette’s appearance will not be a factor in her music’s reception. She wanted listeners to connect to the emotion, which they misinterpreted.

⁴⁶ Grills, *Ironic*, 36.

⁴⁷ Coles, *Death of Cinderella*, 68.

If *Jagged Little Pill* won Alanis the “angry” label, then her next album, *Supposed Former Infatuation Junkie*,⁴⁸ made her a “spiritual flake.”⁴⁹ She had just returned from her time in India, a spiritual journey that changed her outlook on life and music. With New Age philosophy on her lips, she had experimental directions in mind, such as harder beats, wild guitar excursions, and no focus on structure. “It would have been hard for me to avoid responding to a lot of what I’ve experienced over the last few years, because it’s so much a part of who I am. I wanted to make sure I wasn’t overly reactionary to it, but I got a few songs out of my system.”⁵⁰

Of course, not every song on the album falls in this category. In fact, with 17 tracks, this album has more hard rock tracks than *Jagged Little Pill*. But, as *Jagged Little Pill* shows, the first single sets the mood for the entire album, and the first single on *Supposed Former Infatuation Junkie* is “Thank U.” This is the first song that she and Glen Ballard wrote when she came back from India. The influence is evident in both the music and the lyrics:

how bout getting off these antibiotics
how bout stopping eating when I’m full up
how bout them transparent dangling carrots
how bout that ever elusive kudo

thank you india
thank you terror
thank you disillusionment
thank you frailty

⁴⁸ Alanis Morissette, *Supposed Former Infatuation Junkie*, Maverick/Reprise 47094, CD, 1998.

⁴⁹ Shanda Deziel, “Isn’t It Ironic?” *Maclean’s* 118 (April 25, 2005): 50-52.

⁵⁰ Wild, “Alanis Morissette.”

thank you consequence
thank you thank you silence

how bout me not blaming you for everything
how bout me enjoying the moment for once
how bout how good it feels to finally forgive you
how bout grieving it all one at a time

thank you india
thank you terror
thank you disillusionment
thank you frailty
thank you consequence
thank you thank you silence

the moment I let go of it was the moment
I got more than I could handle
the moment I jumped off of it
was the moment I touched down

how bout no longer being masochistic
how bout remembering your divinity
how bout unabashedly bawling your eyes out
how bout not equating death with stopping

thank you india
thank you providence
thank you disillusionment
thank you nothingness
thank you clarity
thank you thank you silence⁵¹

⁵¹ Alanis Morissette, "Thank U," *Supposed Former Infatuation Junkie*, Maverick/Reprise 47094, CD, 1998.

Brian Johnson remarks that Alanis turns “free-form journal entries into unrhyming lyrics.”⁵² Lenny Kaye notes her talent for “skewing her syllables so they stretch in unlikely places and semitones.”⁵³ This song makes it clear that Alanis has thrown convention out the window and begun writing for herself. She admits, “I remember when I was younger I was working in environments with people who would say, ‘Well, you can’t fit this in,’ and ‘*This* isn’t syncopated properly,’ and ‘*This* structure doesn’t work.’ And I remember just *bubbling* with anger and wanting to say, ‘*Please*, just don’t tell me what can’t fit into a song.’”⁵⁴

While “You Oughta Know” was misread as angry, “Thank U” has been completely misunderstood. Authors, journalists, and online forums have tried to interpret the “cryptic” lyrics. The first line has been judged as a stab at the medical industry, but Alanis laughs at this premise: “That is a funny one. [laughs] It’s true, though. I was on antibiotics, and I was talking to Glen, and I was just jittery all day and freaking out. And then an hour before writing I was saying that I had to get off of these. And then when he started playing the music [laughs], it was such a natural thing to sing.”⁵⁵

⁵² Brian D. Johnson, “Reinventing Alanis Morissette,” *Macleans* 112 (March 8, 1999): 46-51.

⁵³ Lenny Kaye, “Taking Communion,” *The Village Voice* 43 (November 17, 1998): 145.

⁵⁴ Paul Zollo, *Songwriters on Songwriting*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2003), 658.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

When it comes to “transparent dangling carrots,”⁵⁶ most people just shrug their shoulders and sing along to the chorus. However, *Blinded by the Lyrics*, a book written specifically to explain lyrics like these in songs from all genres, might have it right. The author likens these carrots to various enticements with which bosses attempt to motivate their workers. Why are they transparent? Most of them prove to be mirages.⁵⁷ This explanation is not enough for the British musician Steven Wilson, who regularly covered the song. He rewrote the lyric as “How about changing a line ’cause it don’t make sense.” Alanis is not swayed by this: “It doesn’t matter who does get the message and who doesn’t get it. What matters is that I have the power to express it.”⁵⁸

All the “how ’bouts” in this song are suggestions, seemingly to Alanis herself, that will help her find peace with the world around her and the spirit within. The “thank u’s” are showing gratitude for the level she has already reached. Alanis clearly picked up some Buddhist philosophy while she was in India, and “Thank U” is her ode to enlightenment. The front cover of this album displays the following words, which refer to the Eight Precepts of Buddhism, printed over Morissette’s laughing mouth:

We ask you to abide
by the following
moral code upon
the premises.
Please refrain from

⁵⁶ Morissette, “Thank U.”

⁵⁷ Brent Mann, *Blinded by the Lyrics: Behind the Lines of Rock & Roll’s Most Baffling Songs* (New York: Citadel Press, 2005), 102.

⁵⁸ Zollo, *Songwriters on Songwriting*, 655.

killing
stealing
lying
sexual misconduct
taking intoxicants
playing music, singing
please dress respectfully.⁵⁹

If Alanis was truly practicing Buddhism, this would probably be seen as blasphemous, but I wonder if she is laughing because she is so blatantly disobeying two of the precepts by releasing her album. In addition, the music video for “Thank U” utterly disregards another, which I will discuss shortly.

The song begins with small chords and intervals played in syncopation on piano. A synthesizer gives the sound a cartoonish quality, where every note echoes in a cheerfully mocking tone. The major tonalities contribute to this cross between a childhood wonderland and nirvana. The entire song is built on three chords: C^{M7}, G⁹, and G⁷ suspended with F in the bass. Glen Ballard says Alanis loves these chords: “She was so open to my contribution as a musician and I was able to stretch harmonically. I would play a weird chord, a ninth or an eleventh or a major seventh, and she never flinched. Because she’s so musical, she embraced the new harmonic landscapes.”⁶⁰

When Morissette enters, the piano’s bass line drops two octaves from C5 to C3. Now the synthesizer resembles an organ. On the third line of text, the piano drops out and the drums come in with the standard rock beat. The bass thrums along with the beat on one and the upbeat of four, and the guitar plays

⁵⁹ Alanis Morissette, *Supposed Former Infatuation Junkie*, Maverick/Reprise 47094, Cover Art, CD, 1998.

⁶⁰ Grills, *Ironic*, 110.

subtle descending riffs that are almost unnoticeable. After the first 12 bars offered such magical tinkering, this seems like a harsh reminder of the real world – a perfect backdrop for “transparent dangling carrots” and an “ever elusive kudo.”⁶¹

Alanis uses the chorus to prove that she is no longer held back by these cruel realities. She now sees value in such injustices as terror, frailty, and disillusionment. The band backs up this assertion with a full musical fairyland. The opening piano motif returns over the bass, guitar, and drums, while synths undulate in and out, giving the impression of an angelic choir. A breath sample adds to the rhythm while maintaining the human element – possibly an homage to her favorite pastime, meditation.

Morissette’s voice is the most captivating element of the song, though. Limited step-wise motion on the verses gives way to octave leaps in the chorus. Alanis explains, “I love interesting intervals and movement. I like melodies that have a big range and open up slowly as you hear them.”⁶² She leaves plenty of time for the melody to bloom, because the words take precedence: “I felt that there was more to say and that I wasn’t done saying it yet. So I just kept saying it till I felt it was done.”⁶³ Articles could be written to dissect the psychological aspects of each line of “Thank U.”

⁶¹ Morissette, “Thank U.”

⁶² Zollo, *Songwriters on Songwriting*, 655.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 658.

Each listener must determine whether Alanis has sincerely changed,⁶⁴ but if musical clues are not enough, the video might help. Johnson believes her evolution is evident in her videos, as she moves from the desert in black leather pants in “You Oughta Know” to the streets of downtown Los Angeles in a “granola/Godiva pose of sexless nudity, her breasts coyly veiled by the hippie hair and her crotch whited out by a video blur”⁶⁵ in “Thank U.” Yes, Alanis is naked in her video, which is not “dressing respectfully” as in the Eight Precepts of Buddhism I mentioned earlier.

Although Morissette’s video has been parodied and scorned, she claims her intentions were pure: “I thought of it when I was in the shower.... I wanted something very raw and present.... The way I feel about my body has changed so that I don’t see it as just an ornament.... Now who I am inside determines how I feel about my body instead of the other way around.”⁶⁶ The video was an outer display of her perfectionism dwindling away and the inner peace she had found. She tells Johnson, “When I’m naked, I feel so free and liberated and unself-conscious and close to God.”⁶⁷

In the middle of a bustling city, Alanis appears on a street, in a subway, in a grocery store, while faceless shapes flash past her. They are revealed as humans only when individuals occasionally peel off from the crowd to stop and

⁶⁴ Some still find it hard to believe, but many of these also have “I Hate Alanis” websites, so their opinions are probably not based on scholarly research.

⁶⁵ Johnson, “Reinventing Alanis Morissette.”

⁶⁶ Udovitch, “Alanis Morissette.”

⁶⁷ Johnson, “Reinventing Alanis Morissette.”

touch Alanis. The playback speed was so slow during the shooting that she had a hard time making her singing look natural, but her eyes draw attention away from her lips. With no make-up on, her hazel eyes are the only parts that catch the light, and they appear to see another universe. Lenny Kaye has a similar response: “Alanis seems sweetly and blithely appreciative, unaware that she’s creating any stir.”⁶⁸

Zollo notices this same evolution when he interviews Alanis, implying that the persona was not crafted for the video alone: “Her countenance is almost supernaturally peaceful, the polar opposite of a prima donna. Grounded in gratitude and spirituality, she’s dedicated to the expression of an eternal truth in her songs.”⁶⁹ The best way to see if Morissette has created a new shtick or simply matured is to look at her next album.

In 2002, Alanis released another chart-topping album, *Under Rug Swept*.⁷⁰ The title is taken from a line of “Hands Clean,”⁷¹ the album’s first single, and reveals her need to dig up some experiences she had ignored for too long. From the time of *Jagged Little Pill*, Alanis was open about her past. But when she mentioned she was sexually active at fourteen, she was not forthcoming with details about her partner. Years later, however, she divulged more information through her music. In “Hands Clean,” she cleverly reveals that an older man

⁶⁸ Kaye, “Taking Communion.”

⁶⁹ Zollo, *Songwriters on Songwriting*, 655.

⁷⁰ Alanis Morissette, *Under Rug Swept*, Maverick 47988, CD, 2002.

⁷¹ Alanis Morissette, “Hands Clean,” *Under Rug Swept*, Maverick 47988, CD, 2002.

somehow involved with her music career forced her to keep their sexual relationship a secret.

When asked if she was abused, she replied, “Emotionally abused maybe. If it were my 15-year-old daughter, I would have some pretty huge issues with allowing a relationship like that. But it was so secretive there was nothing anyone could do. No one knew about it.”⁷² According to federal law, though, she was in fact the victim of child abuse⁷³ – the long-term effects of which include anger, anxiety, depression, inappropriate sexual behavior, and poor self-esteem.⁷⁴

“Hands Clean” relates the story of her early teenage years when her manager or producer used her sexually in exchange for his services. Her naiveté and people-pleasing personality led her to believe that she was in a true, but secretive, relationship. More than anything, she wanted his love and her parents’ approval.⁷⁵ In order to accomplish this, she had to lead a bit of a double life, performing sexually in private and wholesomely in public. She probably even thought the secrecy was her idea for many years.

However, over a decade later, the past began to haunt her. She had used her music to deal with more recent relationships, anger, and pain, but this six-

⁷² Brian D. Johnson, “Alanis in Wonderland,” *Maclean’s* 115 (2002): 50-56.

⁷³ Rebecca T. Leeb, Leonard J. Paulozzi, Cindi Melanson, Thomas R. Simon, and Ileana Arias, *Child Maltreatment Surveillance: Uniform Definitions for Public Health and Recommended Data Elements Version 1.0* (Atlanta: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2008).

⁷⁴ Dorit Amir, “Giving Trauma a Voice: The Role of Improvisational Music Therapy in Exposing, Dealing with and Healing a Traumatic Experience of Sexual Abuse,” *Music Therapy Perspectives* 22 (2004): 97.

⁷⁵ Wild, “Alanis Morissette.”

year affair of her youth had somehow been off limits. As she reexamines the past and the truth becomes more evident, the anger at her former lover increases and once again she needs release. It is time to work through her anger and denial, and the way she does this is by writing a song.

The situation of “Hands Clean” is not as utopian as “Thank U,” but the song will help me demonstrate the difference in musical styles used by the same artist to express the same emotion. Compared to the raw intensity and shrieking vocals of “You Oughta Know,” this song could seem like a ballad. With a pop-rock beat and G major key, “Hands Clean” makes her newfound maturity obvious and enjoyable. The chord progression – IV⁹ - V - I⁶ - IV⁹ – never rests on the tonic, giving the song an unresolved feel, which could subconsciously be a sign that Alanis still has details to work out.

The song is written in a dialogue form, with each verse containing the man’s justifications for his actions, which were apparently told to her at the time. Then the chorus allows Alanis to tell him her current evaluations and emotions. She explains, “I like the idea of him ‘speaking’ to me from the past and my responding from the present...It was really healing and empowering for me to be able to have that virtual dialogue.”⁷⁶ A musical shift establishes the change in voice. The lyrics are critical to my analysis:

If it weren’t for your maturity none of this would have happened
If you weren’t so wise beyond your years I would’ve been able to control
myself
If it weren’t for my attention you wouldn’t have been successful and
If it weren’t for me you would never have amounted to very much

⁷⁶ Flick, “Under Rug Swept.”

(Chorus I)
Ooh this could be messy
But you don't seem to mind
Ooh don't go telling everybody
And overlook this supposed crime

(Chorus II)
We'll fast forward to a few years later
And no one knows except the both of us
And I have honored your request for silence
And you've washed your hands clean of this

You're essentially an employee and I like you having to depend on me
You're kind of my protégé and one day you'll say you learned all you know
from me
I know you depend on me like a young thing would to a guardian
I know you sexualize me like a young thing would and I think I like it

Chorus I

Chorus II

(Bridge)
what part of our history's reinvented and under rug swept?
what part of your memory is selective and tends to forget?
what with this distance it seems so obvious?

Just make sure you don't tell on me especially to members of your family
We best keep this to ourselves and not tell any members of our inner
posse
I wish I could tell the world cuz you're such a pretty thing when you're
done up properly
I might want to marry you one day if you watch that weight and keep your
firm body

Chorus I

Chorus II⁷⁷

I will also refer to the music video for this song, as it retells the story as a
timeline.

⁷⁷ Morissette, "Hands Clean."

A gentle melody is plucked on an acoustic guitar and Alanis enters in a sensitive, caring tone with notes closely following speech inflection. It reminds me of a parent patiently explaining the importance of manners to a child. A “hip-hop style rhythm loop”⁷⁸ enters for the second half of the first verse, underscoring the man’s declaration that her success depends on him. Electric guitars create a whirling atmosphere during Chorus I, as if he is trying to hypnotize her. She supplements this with strummed rhythm on her acoustic.

In the music video, Alanis grabs a late night dinner at a sushi bar when this man walks through the door. She reels as the memories suddenly bombard her, which we get to see through flashbacks. In fact, the entire video is encased in a television screen with the progression of time displayed on the bottom. With the words “Years Earlier” flashing, Alanis appears with an 80’s hairstyle next to a much older man. The camera peeks under the table where his hand rubs her leg, and then we see her face looking uncomfortable and trying to hide it from the adults around her. We pop back to the present where the same expression distorts her face. Suddenly it is “The Next Day” and Alanis sits on her couch with a notebook and guitar, writing this song as she did that day.

“We’ll fast-forward to a few years later” sends us two weeks later in the video. We hear the full band now in a progressive rock style, and see them recording the song. The pain that was visible while Alanis was writing has turned to complacency. She dances around to the beat while she sings into the

⁷⁸ Jim Kelly, “Alanis Morissette,” *Canadian Musician* 24 (March-April 2002): 34-37.

microphone, and a weight is noticeably lifted as she lets the words flow out of her.

It amuses me that immediately after telling him she has “honored his request for silence,” the video shows the beginning of the song’s release. The CDs are pressed, the cover is made, and the video is recorded. By the second Chorus II, she looks directly into the camera, facing her abuser for the first time. But questioning him makes her question herself, which brings us to the bridge. The music becomes more pensive – the keyboards create an ethereal mood and the guitars back down so Alanis can concentrate. She wonders how she never before realized the inappropriateness of his behavior and berates herself for her vulnerability.

The final verse is reminiscent of the musical *Tommy*, in which a four-year-old boy witnesses a murder. His mother repeatedly tells him, “You didn’t hear it, you didn’t see it! You won’t say nothin’ to no one, ever in your life.”⁷⁹ That boy psychologically became deaf and blind. Alanis suffered a comparable trauma – her abuser swore her to secrecy, effectively pushing her memories into oblivion. It is apparent that she blacked out much of that relationship, but seeing him brought those memories to light.

At this point in the video, we see people all over the world buying her CD, listening on the radio, and singing along. This coincides with his admonishments to keep her mouth shut, and Alanis is getting the last word. It is a bittersweet moment, though. She has finally told her story and worked through the past, and then we see preteen girls singing her song as karaoke. After putting her painful

⁷⁹ Pete Townshend, *The Who’s Tommy* (New York: Pantheon, 1993).

secret on display, people mindlessly sing the lyrics by following a bouncing ball, giggling and dancing along.

“Hands Clean” helped Alanis let go of her anger, but to her fans it is just another fun song with a great beat. The critics did not slap the “angry” label on this one, but the lyrics sparked controversy, as Peter Castro of *People* magazine explains: “It’s really a no-holds barred song. And the lyrics are pretty intense and they’re pretty incriminating.”⁸⁰ With such intense lyrics, the critics want anger they can hear and feel, something they can sink their teeth into...something like “You Oughta Know” – which leads me to wonder, if the “angry rock chick” persona is what sells, why would Alanis move away from that?

Jon Pareles complains that “‘Hands Clean’ holds not a hint of Lolita guilt, forbidden passion or resentment,” making it “downright clinical.”⁸¹ Why this critic assumes Alanis should blame herself for the abuse is a topic in itself, but declaring it clinical calls the emotional quality of the music into question. What makes “Hands Clean” musically different from “You Oughta Know” is essentially the major tonality. The same instruments are used and both songs are upbeat. Morissette’s voice is the wild card – as she has matured, she has lost the angry snarl and acquired a confident, soothing timbre. She is controlling the emotions, instead of letting them control her.

When it comes to “Hands Clean,” though, Alanis does not understand the response it has received: “That song is so deeply personal and so specific that it

⁸⁰ Peter Castro, interview by Kyra Phillips, *People in the News: Profiles of Alanis Morissette, Margaret Cho*, CNN, January 4, 2003.

⁸¹ Jon Pareles, “Pop Therapy: Morissette Drops Her Mentors but Stays on the Couch,” *Rolling Stone* 891 (March 14, 2002): 69-70.

begs the question of exactly what people are responding to. Is it just musical resonance? I guess a lot of people must be interpreting it in different ways.”⁸²

Why have women connected emotionally to this song? I would like to believe that no one else has experienced the abuse that Alanis dealt with, but with one out of six American women being the victim of rape, and 80% of those being under age 30,⁸³ this is wishful thinking. Also, I mentioned earlier that my friends and I connected with “You Oughta Know” when we had no “evil exes” to hate.

Whether this song is just a good beat with clinically-treated lyrics or a deep emotional release through music is a matter of opinion. However, either view acknowledges a change in Morissette’s music. She is no longer the “angry white female”⁸⁴ of her youth. For better or worse, she has grown, matured, evolved, and her music is living proof.

⁸² David Wild, “Q&A: Alanis Morissette,” *Rolling Stone* 893 (April 11, 2002): 48.

⁸³ Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network, “Who are the Victims?” <<http://www.rainn.org/get-information/statistics/sexual-assault-victims>> (10 March 2010).

⁸⁴ David Wild, “Alanis Morissette: Angry White Female,” *Rolling Stone* 720 (November 2, 1995).

Chapter IV

The Deity

What I learned I rejected but I believe again
I will suffer the consequence of this inquisition
If I jump in this fountain, will I be forgiven?

--Alanis Morissette, "Forgiven," 1995¹

Georgia and Alan Morissette had the best intentions for their children. As devout Catholics, they attended mass every Sunday and held family gatherings every night to discuss personal thoughts and feelings. The couple "fostered a positive, outgoing nature" in all of the kids,² but especially Alanis. Her religion and perfectionism intertwined to push her toward an unattainable goal, but she was fine with a life without alcohol or drugs – she just wanted the equal right to sin. She could not understand why her parents had different expectations of her: "My parents were pretty liberal, but while my brothers were allowed to have fun with their sexuality, I was this virgin that was held up on a pedestal."³

¹ Alanis Morissette, "Forgiven," *Jagged Little Pill*, Maverick/Reprise 45901, CD, 1995.

² Paul Cantin, *Alanis Morissette: You Oughta Know* (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing, 1997), 7.

³ Craig Tomashoff, *You Live, You Learn: The Alanis Morissette Story* (New York: Berkley Boulevard Books, 1998), 27.

Like the stereotypical Catholic schoolgirl, Alanis rebelled, but she was still internally bound by the church's moral teachings. She was stuck in a vicious circle of deviance and devotion, specifically when it came to sexual repression.⁴

I was taught that if you're a virgin, then you're clean and men will love you and you are going to be this prize. So while I was very sexually active from the time I was 14 years old, I remained a virgin, which was hilariously ridiculous in retrospect. But I was inundated with this whole you-have-to-stay-quote-unquote-pure thing.⁵

"For the sake of being the good white Catholic girl,"⁶ she retained her virginity until she was almost nineteen. However, she "rejected the whole concept of organized religion"⁷ for what she perceived to be its "hypocritical messages and its rigidity and exclusivity."⁸

At the time she did not realize the impact the church had on her life. Walking away seemed like an easy choice, but it left her lost, confused, and disengaged from God. She would not confront these feelings until she started writing *Jagged Little Pill*.⁹ In the rock ballad "Forgiven," she questions what she was taught with both refusal and regret. Stuart Coles calls the song Morissette's

⁴ David Wild, "Alanis Morissette," *Rolling Stone* 720 (November 2, 1995): 40-46.

⁵ Brian D. Johnson, "Reinventing Alanis Morissette," *Maclean's* 112 (March 8, 1999): 46-51.

⁶ Wild, "Alanis Morissette."

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Alanis Morissette, foreword to *Conversations with God for Teens*, by Neal Donald Walsch (New York: Scholastic, 2002), ix.

⁹ Alanis Morissette, *Jagged Little Pill*, Maverick/Reprise 45901, CD, 1995.

“bitter reposte” [sic] against her Catholic upbringing,¹⁰ but he disregards the anguish in her voice and the depth of her lyrics:

You know how us Catholic girls can be
We make up for so much time a little too late
I never forgot it, confusing as it was
No fun with no guilt feelings
The sinners, the saviors, the loverless priests
I'll see you next Sunday

We all had our reasons to be there
We all had a thing or two to learn
We all needed something to cling to
So we did

I sang Alleluia in the choir
I confessed my darkest deeds to an envious man
My brothers they never went blind for what they did
But I may as well have
In the name of the Father, the Skeptic and the Son
I had one more stupid question

We all had our reasons to be there
We all had a thing or two to learn
We all needed something to cling to
So we did

What I learned I rejected but I believe again
I will suffer the consequence of this inquisition
If I jump in this fountain, will I be forgiven
We all had our reasons to be there
We all had a thing or two to learn
We all needed something to cling to
So we did

We all had delusions in our head
We all had our minds made up for us

46. ¹⁰ Stuart Coles, *Alanis Morissette: Death of Cinderella* (London: Plexus, 1998),

We had to believe in something
So we did¹¹

Through the music, Alanis makes complaints about her experiences, but she also seems to be seeking something – perhaps forgiveness.

The song begins with the soft rumble of the bass drum. In 4/4 time, the beat hits on one and the sixteenth before three, setting an unbalanced foundation for the music to come. I picture a young girl sitting in a hushed cathedral while a priest makes his slow procession to the altar, each step echoing off the stone walls. No matter how many times I hear “Forgiven,” the opening beat still leaves me unsettled. The recording is so quiet here that I wonder if I really hear something and often adjust my volume.

Following two measures of the lone drum pattern, the guitar enters with the arpeggiated chords A^{6/9} and F-sharp sus alternating. Another guitar plays simple solo lines through the intro and verse, but the overall tone is reverent. Morissette’s voice is soft and low with an enormous echo. She sounds inexplicably both devious and remorseful in the same breath as she contemplates her attempts to “make up” for the sins she missed as a Catholic child. She says she could not understand why so much shame surrounded sex: “Over the years I have, at times, been overwhelmed with how many emotions I’ve felt and how many questions I’ve found myself asking and the fiery passion by which these questions were fueled.”¹²

¹¹ Morissette, “Forgiven.”

¹² Morissette, *Conversations with God for Teens*, vii.

At this point her remorse gives way to frustration and she addresses the problems she has with the Catholic Church. The transition is startling with the sudden entrance of the full drums and bass guitar coupled with a dynamic change from mezzo-piano to forte.¹³ She expresses her confusion over “no fun with no guilt feelings”¹⁴ through a rising chord motif where the fifth scale degree of the V chord climbs every two beats, building tension as it transforms: E – E⁺ – E^{add 6} – E⁷ – F-sharp – f-sharp⁷. The vocal line is equally stressful, leaping down a tritone and back up a minor sixth. Alanis lingers on the non-chord tones to intensify the apprehension.

After she “scorns the idea that confessions and attending Sunday Church make for good Christians,” she explains herself in the “loud crashing chorus.”¹⁵ The harmony goes back and forth between D major and C-sharp major chords, and the rest of the band is overpowered by the thrashing electric guitar. Alanis soars over the top by jumping up an octave and wailing passionately. Of all the lyrics in the song, the chorus seems to hold the least power, but as she sings, I find myself drawn into the music. Like “You Oughta Know,” this is another song that teenage girls can scream along to, but the words they are screaming are matter-of-fact statements that should hold no emotion; e.g., “We all had our reasons to be there.” There is no target to attack this time.

¹³ These dynamics are as marked in the sheet music. On the recording the fluctuation is much more drastic. I would guess pianissimo to fortissimo. Alanis Morissette, *Jagged Little Pill Piano/Vocal/Guitar Artist Songbook* (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard, 1995), 28-33.

¹⁴ Morissette, “Forgiven.”

¹⁵ Coles, *Death of Cinderella*, 46.

In the second verse, Alanis delves deeper into the issues that plague her. She realizes her duplicitous life is fraudulent – she sings in the choir by day and transgresses by night. But she also recognizes this duplicity as a human trait – even those who do not sin still long to do so. When Alanis criticizes a priest as a man envious of her “darkest deeds,” she clinches her rejection of the religion. She sings this line with a flirtatious lilt, implying that she enjoyed teasing and tempting her celibate leaders.

Her pain and anger abruptly boil over when she recalls the injustices of her gender’s higher standards. She snarls at the thought of her brothers being applauded for their promiscuity while she “may as well have” gone blind for her iniquities. This is obviously more than a mere disagreement with the Church’s doctrine. Alanis has not simply questioned the need for a pristine life, but she has punished herself for failing to live one. And anyone who could have helped her rein in this guilt was instead put off by her skepticism.

The bridge displays a return to faith with an abundance of sarcasm, at least as I perceive it. Alanis claims to believe again, but she still doubts the legitimacy of the rites and rituals involved. The music depicts her wavering conviction through undulating harmonies – D – E – D – C-sharp⁷ – D – E – F-sharp. The lowest chord accompanies the word “consequence,” while “forgiven” takes the highest, suggesting a bit of word-painting. An electric guitar hammers out these chords in implied triple meter over the percussion’s continued 4/4 rhythm, multiplying the fervor of Morissette’s unbridled voice. Jon Pareles describes her sound as a “pinched rasp on its way to a shriek; it’s the enraged

voice that appears when the good girl has taken all she can stand and starts to fight back.”¹⁶ I disagree with Pareles, though. Throughout the entire song, Alanis avoids confrontation and provides more of a narrative than an argument. She recounts her individual experiences with the Catholic Church and relays her introspective dialogues, but she does not lead a rally against religion or encourage others to do so. If anything, this song is more self-indulgent than querulous, and it is definitely not the last time Alanis will sing about religion.

After her extended tour with *Jagged Little Pill*, Alanis felt empty: “I had experienced what society had said was the *pinnacle* to attain yet I still felt like I was missing something. I was determined to understand what that was.”¹⁷ Even though she wanted nothing to do with religion, she still longed for God: “The most difficult part of my leaving it behind was the fact that I had been left with the challenge of establishing an entirely new relationship with God.... It would be years from the time I said goodbye to religion before I connected again with my newly defined God in a way that I felt clear and good about.”¹⁸

During her year and a half of healing time in India, Alanis discovered new philosophies, new religious concepts, and new peace: “In Indian philosophy they take responsibility, for instance, for people’s distance from God. I completely

¹⁶ Jon Pareles, “Pop Therapy: Morissette Drops Her Mentors but Stays on the Couch,” *Rolling Stone* 891 (March 14, 2002): 69-70.

¹⁷ Morissette, *Conversations with God for Teens*, xi.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, vii.

agree with that, in that God never goes away; it's us that turn from God."¹⁹ As she turned back to God, her musical style and ways of dealing with her emotions transformed. Her sophomore album, *Supposed Former Infatuation Junkie*, was released to much lower sales. It seems the girls who depended on Alanis for their emotional release had not caught up with her spiritual growth. Featuring Indian rhythms and modal harmonies, the album is more reminiscent of a New Age artist. She explains, "I went *within* when I went to India...I had never gone quite as deeply as this."²⁰

Her quest for self-understanding led Alanis through many religious portals, some of which bothered her. "Baba" relates one of those experiences:

i've seen them kneel
with baited breath for the ritual
i've watched this experience raise
them to pseudo higher levels
i've watched them leave their families
in pursuit of your nirvana
i've seen them coming to line up
from switzerland to america

how long will this take baba
how long have we been sleeping
do you see me hanging on to
every word you say
how soon will I be holy
how much will this cost guru
how much longer 'til you
completely absolve me

i've seen them give their drugs up

¹⁹ Timothy White, "Morissette's New 17-cut Set Is All It's Supposed to Be," *Billboard* 110 (October 3, 1998): 1-4.

²⁰ Morissette, *Conversations with God for Teens*, xi.

in place of makeshift altars
i've heard them chanting
kali kali frantically
i've heard them rotely repeat your
teachings with elitism
i've seen them boasting robes and
foreign sandalwood beads
i've seen them overlooking god in
their own essence
i've seen their upward glances
in hopes of instant salvation
i've seen their righteousness
mixed without loving compassion
i've watched you smile as
the students bow to kiss your feet

give me strength all knowing one
how long 'til enlightenment
how much longer 'til you
completely absolve me²¹

Baba is a spiritual guru purportedly misleading his Hindu followers in a cult-like environment. Alanis speaks directly to this deceiver in a condemning tone. She never accuses him of wrongdoing, but she warns him that she has watched his game. Interestingly, she first points out the similarities between his version of Hinduism and her encounters with Catholicism; e.g., kneeling for a ritual. I think she has many of the same problems with both religions, because she is far too involved in this song for it to be a one-time observance.

In this A-sharp phrygian song, Robert Walser believes the modal choice to “constitute a female appropriation of Phrygian power and paranoia, a development of musical signs that has been used by men but that enable

²¹ Alanis Morissette, “Baba,” *Supposed Former Infatuation Junkie*, Maverick/Reprise 47094, CD, 1998. Capitalization and spelling as printed in the liner notes.

particular depictions of intensity, dread, and desire that resonate powerfully with contemporary problems of maintaining female identities.”²² However, anyone unfamiliar with Brahma Kumaris would have no basis for this idea.²³ Alanis never implies that Baba’s followers are only women, and Baba himself could be female. Since both men and women are leaders in this religious sect, gender does not seem to be a factor. Therefore, the phrygian mode is more likely used for its Eastern sound.

In “Baba,” an electric guitar scratches out parallel fourths through waves of distortion, following a rhythmic pattern on C-sharp, B, and D. When the percussion enters, another guitar provides a high-pitched, distorted drone which occasionally slides up and down. The result is an Eastern-tinged electronic rock quality with hints of heavy metal. Alanis is augmented by airy reverberation for a supernatural touch, though her growling low notes betray her.

During the chorus the band is powerful and violent, with the bass’s incessant pounding penetrating the mix. Full F-sharp and G chords alternate while Alanis overdubs herself a fourth higher. Rage overcomes her usually pleasant voice. Something in this song touches a nerve, and it might be the parallels she draws between Brahma Kumaris religion and Catholicism. I find it hard to ignore how often the word “holy” is used in Christianity, and Alanis must

²² Robert Walser, “Uninvited: Gender, Schizophrenia, and Alanis Morissette,” in *Musicological Identities: Essays in Honor of Susan McClary*, edited by Steven Bauer (London: Ashgate, 2008), 237.

²³ Reender Kranenborg, “Brahma Kumaris: A New Religion?” (paper presented at the Center for Studies of New Religions international conference, Bryn Athyn, PA, June 2, 1999.)

have purposely chosen this word. She mocks the guru for promising absolution, but her attacks might be aimed at Jesus Christ.

The second verse is definitely pointed at Hinduism alone, since a Hindu goddess is specifically named. Kali is known as both the mother goddess and the goddess of death. Hindu doctrine calls her the redeemer of the universe. The guru promises his disciples instant nirvana through Kali, but Alanis believes this comes from within: “It was kind of affirming, the fact that we don’t find this bliss and this sense of our higher selves outside of ourselves; it’s something that we already are. If you are around people who seek and seek and seek, you will seek forever, because it’s not outside of you.”²⁴

Alanis may not worship Kali, but she has adopted some practices associated with the goddess, such as a strict vegetarian diet and meditation. Morissette’s connection with the religion is strengthened by her prayer-like bridge. She vocalizes over the chord F-sharp/C/E in Eastern-style runs and turns, and the instruments buzz and hum with echoes and sound effects. With the soft clicks of the cymbal, I feel like I’ve walked into an Indian palace.

The song ends with a similar tableau, but this time Alanis sings “Ave Maria.” In case her clues in the rest of the song were too subtle, she repeats this prayer six times to confirm the dual focus of “Baba.” Alanis still battles the past, and immersion in other religions serves as a reminder of her own lost faith. To conquer this problem, she must redefine who she believes God to be.

²⁴ Paul Zollo, *Songwriters on Songwriting*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2003), 660.

A cameo appearance in a feature film in 1999 helped Alanis realize *she* was God. The singer played the part of “God” in Kevin Smith’s movie *Dogma*.²⁵ Her character is a fun and loving flower child in a tutu, but her eyes convey a hidden depth. When she is forced to condemn a fallen angel, her grief is evident, and when she shows mercy to a human, she exudes unconditional love. Though the movie is a comedy, the role was apparently not a joke to her, and neither was the song she wrote for it:

I was just really excited to be able to sing about who and what I thought God is...I saw a rough cut of *Dogma*...I went to bed that night and *couldn't* stop writing. I was writing everything I felt God was. And I woke up the next day, and I had sort of a pseudo-studio built in my hotel room, and I stayed in and wrote it and recorded the demo that night.²⁶

Alanis wrote “Still” to sort out her own ideas about God and how he or she relates to the good and evil in the world. Her answer is an all-encompassing being consisting of everything and everyone:

I am the harm which you inflict.
I am your brilliance and frustration.
I'm the nuclear bombs if they're to hit.
I am your immaturity and your indignance.
I am your misfits and your praised.
I am your doubt and your conviction.
I am your charity and your rape.
I am your grasping and expectation.

I see you averting your glances.
I see you cheering on the war.
I see you ignoring your children,
And I love you still.
And I love you still.

²⁵ *Dogma*, directed by Kevin Smith, Lions Gate Entertainment, 1999.

²⁶ Zollo, *Songwriters on Songwriting*, 661.

I am your joy and your regret.
I am your fury and your elation.
I am your yearning and your sweat.
I am your faithless and your religion.

I see you altering history.
I see you abusing the land.
I see you, your selective amnesia,
And I love you still.
And I love you still.

Haaaaaaaaahh
I see you averting your glances.
I see you cheering on the war.
I see you ignoring your children,
And I love you still.
And I love you still.
I see you altering history.
I see you abusing the land.
I see you, your selective amnesia,
I love you still.
And I love you still.

I am your tragedy and your fortune.
I am your crisis and delight.
I am your profits and your prophets.
I am your art, I am your vice.
I am your death and your decisions.
I am your passion and your plight.
I am your sickness and convalescence.
I am your weapons and your light.

I see you holding your grudges.
I see you gunning them down.
I see you silencing your sisters,
And I love you still.
And I love you still.
I see you lie to your country.
I see you forcing them out.

I see you blaming each other,
And I love you still.
And I love you still.

Haaaaaaaahh
I see you holding your grudges.
I see you gunning them down.
I see you silencing your sisters,
I love you still.
I love you still.
I see you lie to your country.
I see you forcing them out.
I see you blaming each other.
I love you still.
I love you still.
I see you.²⁷

Featuring an electric sitar, this song has more of a Middle Eastern ambiance. Arabic drums and rhythms play alongside the slow rock beat, and C-sharp scales blend with maqām modes. After the chorus, Alanis twists and slides through melismatic passages using quarter tones. She evokes the sentiments involved with Jewish and Islamic music, but maintains enough Western style to entertain her fans. This combination of cultures suggests a belief in one God who transcends religious barriers.

“Still” was released on the movie’s soundtrack and on Morissette’s *The Collection*, but it was never on a studio CD. She probably did not include the song on *Under Rug Swept* because she had already altered her image of God again. I propose that her role in *Dogma* was critical in these changes, due in part to Method acting.

²⁷ Alanis Morissette, “Still,” *Music from the Motion Picture Dogma*, Maverick 47597, CD, 1999.

Based on the teaching of Konstantin Stanislavsky and the direction of Elia Kazan, Method acting allows performers to bring their characters into their psyche by sharing emotions from their past with that role. The Method pledges “sincerity and emotional truth,”²⁸ which are the same principles Alanis has always promised. Someone so dedicated to honesty in her music must certainly feel the same about her acting. There is a major problem with Method acting, though, as David Thomson reveals: “Method actors take their roles home with them: Once in they can’t get out—Vivien Leigh nearly went crazy playing Blanche Du Bois.”²⁹ If Alanis got that deep into her role as God, she could have taken those traits into her own life. Is this why she thinks she is God? She told David Wild, “Well, I believe I am God. But I also believe everybody is God. So, yeah, I believe I’m a little piece of God all the time. But so are you.”³⁰ Prior to this movie, Alanis had never expressed such a belief.

In 2000, Alanis stayed at a Navajo reservation where she witnessed a “sense of community” that helped further shape her philosophy.³¹ Spiritual openness and supreme acceptance became her goals. Now instead of defining who God was, she took on the task of defining her own ideal world. The product

²⁸ David Thomson, “The Death of Method Acting: So Much for Tapping into Emotional Truths – Today’s Acting Greats Tell Lies; Long Live Damon and Streep,” *The Wall Street Journal*, December 5, 2009.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ David Wild, “Q&A: Alanis Morissette,” *Rolling Stone* 893 (April 11, 2002): 48.

³¹ Jennifer Vineyard, “Alanis Morissette: The Silence Is Over,” MTV News, January 31, 2002.

of this mission is “Utopia,” which *Rolling Stone* describes as “a wistful, waltzing vision of a perfectly understanding world.”³² Indeed, she has great expectations:

We’d gather around all in a room.
Fasten our belts, engage in dialogue.
We’d all slow down, rest without guilt.
Not lie without fear, disagree sans judgment.

(Pre-chorus I)

We would stay and respond and expand and include
And allow and forgive and enjoy and evolve.
And discern and inquire and accept and admit
And divulge and open and reach out and speak up.

This is utopia, this is my utopia.
This is my ideal, my end in sight.
Utopia, this is my utopia.
This is my nirvana,
My ultimate.

We’d open our arms, we’d all jump in.
We’d all coast down into safety nets.

(Pre-chorus II)

We would share and listen and support and welcome.
Be propelled by passion, not invest in outcomes.
We would breathe and be charmed and amused by difference.
Be gentle and make room for every emotion.

This is utopia, this is my utopia.
This is my ideal, my end in sight.
Utopia, this is my utopia.
This is my nirvana,
My ultimate.

We’d provide forums, we’d all speak out.

³² Pareles, “Pop Therapy.”

We'd all be heard, we'd all feel seen.

(Pre-chorus III)

We'd rise post-obstacle, more defined more grateful.

We would heal, be humbled, and be unstoppable.

We'd hold close and let go and know when to do which.

We'd release and disarm and stand up and feel safe.

This is utopia, this is my utopia.

This is my ideal, my end in sight.

Utopia, this is my utopia.

This is my nirvana,

My ultimate.³³

The final pre-chorus was originally a repeat of the first, but after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, Alanis felt inspired to write another one. She wanted the Pre-chorus III and the song as a whole to comfort a grieving nation. She says the track “sheds light on the willingness to understand” and “the passionate desire to stand up and show a self-care and self-respect.”³⁴ *The Record (Waterloo Region)* notes its “soulful introspection and spiritual awareness” appropriate for a “post-9/11 universe.”³⁵

In her foreword to Neal Donald Walsch's *Conversations with God for Teens*, Alanis explains how her individual ideals relate to a larger audience:

I've always believed, and I believe now more than ever, that the personal is the global, that the personal is the political, and our political choices and stances reflect what our spiritual stances are, and that the personal is a reflection of our spiritual belief, like how we are in our day-to-day lives and our relationships. So I've tried writing songs that were more overtly about

³³ Alanis Morissette, “Utopia,” *Under Rug Swept*, Maverick 47988, CD, 2002.

³⁴ Teri van Horn, “New Alanis Album in February; New Song Online Now: ‘Utopia’ Can Be Downloaded at Maverick Records Web Site,” *MTV News*, September 25, 2001.

³⁵ Joel Rubinoff, “Sad Little Alanis Is Now Mighty Female Role Model,” *The Record (Waterloo Region)*, February 22, 2002.

global issues, but there wasn't as much of a resonance for me because there was a detachment from it.³⁶

In Morissette's idyllic world, everyone would connect spiritually and put others' needs before their own. She believes that "if we all raised our consciousness, then we wouldn't need all the laws that govern us."³⁷

Pareles calls "Utopia" "an eternal group therapy session" in which "Morissette becomes an airy Celtic choir."³⁸ In F major, the chords rise and fall in stepwise motion through the verses: vi – V – IV – iii – IV – V. An acoustic guitar provides the harmonic and rhythmic foundation for the song, and the strings create a blissful atmosphere like a boat gently rocking in the ocean. I imagine a group of hippies sitting in a circle, arms around each other, swaying and singing songs of peace. Alanis has moved past her obsession with Eastern musical styles and adopted a Gaelic sound instead. As she doubles herself up a third, fourth, or fifth, she displays her elusive head voice, an angelic timbre she rarely uses. "Utopia" is such a stark contrast from "Forgiven," "Baba," and "Still" that it hardly seems like the same artist.

Alanis journeyed through many cultures, picking up bits of religion as she went. Her music has always represented her spiritual condition, and I assume more songs will come as she resolves her beliefs. She now admits that her faith combines aspects of several different religions, as she explained in a recent

³⁶ Morissette, *Conversations with God for Teens*, xiv.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Pareles, "Pop Therapy."

interview. Talk show host Chelsea Handler asked Alanis about her spirituality:

“Are you, like, into Buddhism, like, Hinduism? What’s your thing?” Alanis replied,

I sort of pull from the thread of continuity that permeates all of them, ya know. There’s one main message that keeps coming up in every religion, so I stick to that one.... The message is that the truth of who we are is innate goodness and that the whole journey is really about removing any obstacle or false belief that keeps us from knowing that.³⁹

If Alanis continues down this path, her style will most likely evolve to match her new view of humanity.

³⁹ Alanis Morissette, interview by Chelsea Handler, *Chelsea Lately*, E!, August 10, 2010.

Chapter V

The Inspired

How to hate women when you're supposed to be a feminist
How to play all pious when you're really a hypocrite
How to hate god when you're a prayer and a spiritualist
How to sabotage your fantasies by fears of success
I'll teach you all this in eight easy steps
The course of a lifetime you'll never forget

--Alanis Morissette, "Eight Easy Steps," 2004¹

Over the past twenty years, Alanis Morissette has grown from a teen pop star to a mature, spiritually-grounded woman. She started her career in the hands of puppeteers who controlled her every move, but she developed her own voice and confessional genre in *Jagged Little Pill*.² The album's success garnered longtime fans and life-long naysayers. Her critics still accuse her of manufacturing a persona for that record, but her work since then suggests otherwise.

Alanis admits that her first two albums, *Alanis*³ and *Now Is the Time*,⁴ were filled with superficial dance tunes intended for teens. At that point in her life,

¹ Alanis Morissette, "Eight Easy Steps" *So-Called Chaos*, Maverick 48555, CD, 2004.

² Alanis Morissette, *Jagged Little Pill*, Maverick/Reprise 45901, CD, 1995.

³ Alanis Morissette, *Alanis*, MCA Canada MCAD-10253, CD, 1991.

adults dictated her style for both her music and her image. They modeled her after American pop stars whom she disliked and encouraged her to alter her appearance. When she tried to voice her own ideas, her creativity was stifled. Since *Jagged Little Pill* was the first album Alanis had a big hand in, I did not spend much time investigating her first two albums. Morissette insists that there was an “evolution going on throughout her career, that a kind of honesty and directness were there from the very beginning,” but “most musical pundits tend to dismiss her earlier work as from another planet.”⁵

On the other hand, critics who followed Morissette during her teen years were just as quick to toss aside her new work on *Jagged Little Pill*,⁶ claiming that her new image and alternative style were contrived. Stuart Coles summarized the media's view of Alanis in 1996, stating they all believed “Alanis was fabricated, that her collaboration with Glen [Ballard] was not less fake than a thousand glossy pop hits, and that her persona of angry young woman was calculated to hit the market just when it was most susceptible to such an onslaught.”⁷

Journalists argued that Morissette's international success proved she was not genuinely alternative. Barry Grills explains the paradox of this belief: “When the sixties alternative was cool, everyone who got involved was cool. When the

⁴ Alanis Morissette, *Now Is the Time*, MCA Canada MCAD-10731, CD, 1992.

⁵ Barry Grills, *Ironic: Alanis Morissette: The Story* (Toronto: Quarry Press, 1997), 64.

⁶ Alanis Morissette, “You Oughta Know,” *Jagged Little Pill*, Maverick/Reprise 45901, CD, 1995.

⁷ Stuart Coles, *Alanis Morissette: Death of Cinderella* (London: Plexus, 1998), 70.

nineties alternative is cool, well, it isn't cool anymore.... Because, as nineties people will quickly tell you, there is no alternative that isn't a lie."⁸ Once millions of people bought into the alternative movement, alternative music became mainstream pop, which was a branding that other artists found insulting. With *Jagged Little Pill's* popularity, Alanis "mainstreamed, if you will, the alternative."⁹

For fifty-nine consecutive weeks, the album sold 100,000 copies every week with sales equal to the other twenty albums on *Spin's* Best of 1996 list.¹⁰ While sales of this magnitude are financially rewarding, they are looked down upon by parts of the music industry. The unspoken rule of alternative artists is "the less you sell, the less you sell out."¹¹ By this philosophy, Alanis was a sellout thirty million times over, and critics searched for any evidence to substantiate this conclusion. They found their confirmation in her first two albums, deciding that a teenaged pop star could not grow up to be an angry and outspoken alternative singer-songwriter. Therefore her music and persona had to be fake.

Helen Davies states that "in order to be viewed as 'authentic,' a performer's music must be seen as an accurate representation of him or herself, produced for personal self-expression rather than financial gain."¹² But in fact this was Morissette's goal from the beginning, as she has said in countless

⁸ Grills *Ironic*, 54.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Paul Cantin, *Alanis Morissette: You Oughta Know* (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing, 1997), 161.

¹¹ Cantin, *Alanis Morissette*, 164.

¹² Helen Davies, "All Rock and Roll Is Homosocial: The Representation of Women in the British Rock Music Press," *Popular Music* 20 (March 2002): 305.

interviews: “When you’re doing work that is a completely truthful side of yourself, each time you express it you can get back to the creative place you were when you initially discovered it, and I love it there.”¹³

The record's success was an unexpected outcome of her honest, straightforward confessional style. Whether or not the critics believed in Morissette's integrity, her fans sensed that she was sincere. One fan exclaimed, “It feels like, spiritually, she is my best friend.... She has the same emotions as the rest of us. She goes through similar situations as the rest of us. She's no different.”¹⁴ After a year of “Alanismania,” even the critics were swayed. Grills recalls the phenomenon: “After ink stopped being spilled over the question of her artistic integrity, most of 1996 was spent keeping track of Morissette's various awards, the way *Jagged Little Pill* continued to break records as a multimillion selling album[,] and even her status in critic polls.”¹⁵

For those people who still doubt her authenticity, I suggest that they listen to her other albums. Many have based their opinions on one song, or one premise. She will always be known to some as the “angry white female” and to others as a “spiritual flake,” but her style and content vary greatly throughout her career. Whether this validates or refutes her legitimacy is a matter of opinion. If Morissette's angry persona was formulated, then why did she not capitalize on this emotion in every album? And why did she include songs from the opposite

¹³ Timothy White, “Morissette’s New 17-cut Set Is All It’s Supposed to Be,” *Billboard* 110 (October 3, 1998): 1-4.

¹⁴ Craig Tomashoff, *You Live, You Learn: The Alanis Morissette Story* (New York: Berkley Boulevard Books, 1998), 133.

¹⁵ Grills *Ironic*, 193.

end of the spectrum on *Jagged Little Pill*? When so many pop stars achieve fame singing songs by other people, why does Alanis insist on revealing her inner thoughts and struggles? If her only motivation was money, I would expect her to return to the style that made her rich. And I would not expect her to continue down a path that was less successful, including her songs about religion, which never reached the airwaves.

It is obvious to me that Alanis is emotionally involved in her music. She transforms her autobiographical storytelling into a form of therapy:

Everybody has to release it somehow. If you don't, it'll take its toll on you, and it'll either be a physical thing, or all your relationships will be really negative and full of conflict or something. So you have to deal, whether you go through therapy or get into relationships, or music, or write it out in diaries. Smoking cigarettes isn't enough. There's no way around pain. That's part of the charm of being alive.¹⁶

Once Alanis expresses her emotions through song, she is freed from them.

"People are surprised to see I'm not angry like my music," she says, "but there's nothing festering in me – I release it all."¹⁷ As Julius Portnoy explains, "Music permits us to discharge pent up emotions to drain the pus that might poison us from festering wounds."¹⁸ We have evidence that music can release muscle tension¹⁹ and lower pulse, respiration, and blood pressure.²⁰ Since this has

¹⁶ James Hannaham, "Alanis in Wonderland," *Spin* 11 (November 1995): 48-54.

¹⁷ Timothy White, "Morissette's 'Jagged' Self-Healing," *Billboard* 107 (May 13, 1995): 1-10.

¹⁸ Julius Portnoy, *Music in the Life of Man* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), 106.

¹⁹ Edward Podolsky, "Moderating Anger with Music," *Music Journal* 23 (November 1965): 41.

worked so well for Alanis, she continues to use music to heal from every new pain, calling heartbreak her “greatest muse.”²¹

Morissette's most recent album, *Flavors of Entanglement* of 2008,²² follows her journey from heartbreak to healing. She wrote the album in real time as she recovered from the break-up with her fiancé, Ryan Reynolds. Alanis admits, “This record helped me through some fragile moments. Every song was a life raft.”²³ The songs chart her experiences and emotions as she makes the long trek from “rock bottom” through the stages of grief. She can now identify the stages – shock, bargaining, anger, depression, and acceptance – as she listens to the record: “Looking back, I realized that they're all on there.”²⁴ Songwriting brought her to a “pivotal time of healing and growth.”²⁵

Alanis has come a long way, but I do not mean to suggest that she has reached some higher plane of thought where she is no longer susceptible to pain. She admits that she is still working towards self-acceptance. She says,

²⁰ Makoto Iwanaga, "Subjective and Physiological Responses to Music Stimuli Controlled Over Activity and Preference," *Journal of Music Therapy* 36 (1999): 26-38.

²¹ Whitney Pastorek, “Alanis Morissette,” *Entertainment Weekly* 995/996 (June 6, 2008): 20-21.

²² Alanis Morissette, *Flavors of Entanglement*, Maverick 480316-2, CD, 2008.

²³ *International Musician*, “Alanis: Disentangled” 106 (March 2008): 18-19.

²⁴ Alanis Morissette, interview by Rachel Martin, *The Bryant Park Project*, National Public Radio, June 12, 2008.

²⁵ Alanis Morissette, interview by Cynthia Bowers, *CBS Sunday Morning*, CBS News, June 8, 2008.

“The struggle of resisting certain parts of myself, trying to hide it, is gone,” but she adds, “Well, it's going away, it's not entirely gone.”²⁶

In her song “Eight Easy Steps,” Alanis acknowledges all her shortcomings, conceding that overcoming them will take “the course of a lifetime.”²⁷ Evolution is her main goal in life, and she realizes that it takes time: “All I can really do is sing about where I'm at today and how I'm evolving at this snail's pace that I'm evolving at [laughs], and encourage myself and others to evolve as quickly as we can.”²⁸

Since the release of *Flavors of Entanglement*, Morissette's life has taken a happy turn. She married rapper Mario “Souleye” Treadway in May of 2010 and gave birth to her first child, Ever Imre Morissette-Treadway, on Christmas Day of the same year. Her new family has opened her eyes to emotions she never experienced before, as she writes on her web page:

Ever has cracked open a door in my heart that I had been dusting off for years in anticipation of this kind of opportunity to love. And what I found on the other side is no less than a golden healing balm and celebration...and a responsibility that I feel blessed to take on.... Privileged. Inspired. Ready. The softest and cuddliest sucker punch.²⁹

Her next album might not sound like nursery rhymes, but it will probably reflect the new directions she has taken.

²⁶ Jennifer Vineyard, “Alanis Morissette: The Silence Is Over,” MTV News, January 31, 2002.

²⁷ Morissette, “Eight Easy Steps.”

²⁸ Karen Bliss, “Alanis Morissette,” *Canadian Musician* 26 (July-August 2004): 34-37.

²⁹ Alanis Morissette, Official Site <<http://www.alanis.com>> (1 March 2011).

The only thing certain about Morissette's music is change. After all, she believes her true purpose in life is “to evolve, express, define, accept, and love myself and to honor and encourage this in others as best as I can.”³⁰ The most constant aspect of Morissette's career is the aesthetic power of music. Karl Heinrich Heydenreich wrote in 1790, “Sounds are thus symbols that truthfully imitate emotions and passions in a universally comprehensible manner, awakening reactions that the human heart is powerless to resist.”³¹ Morissette's music combines poignant lyrics with passionate sounds to express intense emotions that connect her to her listeners. As long as Alanis projects her emotions into her music, someone will listen.

³⁰ Alanis Morissette, foreword to *Conversations with God for Teens*, by Neal Donald Walsch (New York: Scholastic, 2002), xiii.

³¹ Karl Heinrich Heydenreich, *System der Aesthetik* (Leipzig, 1790), in Peter le Huray and James Day, *Music and Aesthetics in the Eighteenth and Early-Nineteenth Centuries*, Cambridge Readings in the Literature of Music (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 53.

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