

LEE AARON

Canada's premier woman rocker makes peace with her bad girl image

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LEE AARON, at Rock 'n' Roll Heaven (2 Bloor East), New Year's Eve (Sunday, December 31), \$32.50, 968-2711.

By KIM HUGHES

Toronto-based singer Lee Aaron is a rarity in the male-dominated Canadian metal and hard rock scene. With five records, countless tours and a fan base here and in Europe, Aaron has shown in no uncertain terms that she has the gusto, commitment and understanding of the medium to bang heads with the best of the boys.

Aaron is gorgeous, and in the glam-rock game that's instant points — especially in the video age. Her sexuality charges through, and when she grins at the camera the look is all sweet girl hopelessly compelled by the music to submit to its trashy muse.

But beyond her looks, Aaron's voice is her fortune. She can sound powerful and rugged, rising above the muscular metal of guitar and drums, or vulnerable and tender on power ballads. Her songs may not sparkle with innovation, but they're always the anthemic odes that are the essence of fist-raising rock.

In spite of her talent, or perhaps because of it, Aaron has been accused of reinforcing negative female stereotypes. Leather jackets, lingerie and skin-tight pants, along with undeniably sexual gestures on stage and in video, reinforce her lyrical penchant for sex, love, and more sex — anything but a typical feminist framework.

Aroused critics

And that has roused the ire of critics who suggest Aaron is pandering to a medium that freely degrades women, when she could — should — be working to change it. Yet Aaron doesn't depict other women, or even men, as "objects" in her videos, only herself. And

DISCOGRAPHY: Lee AARON

- 1984 METAL QUEEN (Attic)
- 1984 THE LEE AARON PROJECT (Attic)
- 1985 CALL OF THE WILD (Attic)
- 1987 LEE AARON (Attic)
- 1989 BODYROCK (Attic)

there's never any question, for all her leather and lace, that she's the one leading the band. This is the stuff this music is made of — why should she as a woman act demure and retiring? Her male counterparts certainly don't. A big part of it all is musical theatre, and like any actor, Aaron prefers a strong

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reaction, even a negative one, to no reaction at all.

She's never made apologies for herself or her image. Aaron insists, in fact, that behind the cheesecake she's a businesswoman who takes her job seriously, watches her money carefully and manipulates her sex appeal very much to her own advantage. She has to, she says. If she doesn't, someone else will.

"I'll be honest. In the early part of my career I had a very manipulative manager. But I didn't know he was manipulative at the time — that was the strange thing. I was naive, and I let myself get talked into a lot of promotional things I didn't feel comfortable with — the way I dressed, the way I was posing. I was not responsible for my image.

"I was 17 years old when I started. It's easy to be manipulated when you're that young, and also when you're fresh into the business and you don't know anything. But I don't regret anything I did in the past. Every mistake that I've made has been a learning experience. And I'm thankful for that because I'm all the wiser today."

No image

"Now," Aaron continues, "especially with the new Bodyrock album, it's not really an image. It's just me. To me an image suggests something that is false. Artists should just be themselves."

A stranger could chat at length with the warm, soft-spoken Aaron and probably never guess this was the woman causing all the fuss. As she talks about gearing up for the

holidays and visiting family in the States before performing New Year's Eve at Rock 'n' Roll Heaven, it's clear Aaron's priorities are in order.

And it's also apparent that living with controversy has made her somewhat guarded with the press. Still, Aaron doesn't shy away from tough questions, and it seems having a chance to air her views and justify her work is worth the risk of opening up.

She doesn't mind being called Canada's "Metal Queen," a label she's worn since her 1984 release under that title. But Aaron admits that it's helped promote misunderstanding as well.

"As far as the fans are concerned, the tag Metal Queen doesn't really bother me, because I know they think something different. I get a lot of requests from kids at shows for autographs, and they say, 'Sign it to John, love, the Metal Queen, Lee Aaron.' I know to them it just means I'm the queen in this field, and it's flattering. It's special to me.

"But the press really jumps on that whole image and they blow it out of proportion. People will meet me and say, 'God, you're much smaller and softer than I thought you'd be.' I mean, what did they expect?"

"As for the press," she continues, "who'd never even come to see my

“I don't regret anything I've done in the past — every mistake has been a learning experience.”

live shows, never spoken to me personally, I was amazed at the things that were written about me. They had me depicted as some hard, foul-mouthed wench or something. That hurt me and it hurt me with radio, too, on that album. It was all the bad connotations that go along with the word metal."

It's sad but true that most people view metal — and much of hard rock — as something that belongs only on the turntables of troubled teenage kids.

The fact is, bands like Black

Sabbath, Aerosmith and, more recently, Metallica and Megadeth, are addressing social issues far beyond the standard metal takes on sex, drugs and driving fast cars. While Aaron's songs tend to be less topical than fun, she's never vulgar, offensive or ridiculous — other standard criticisms of metal.

"I possibly have a different attitude than a lot of entertainers out there," Aaron says. "I've always strived to do better. Put it this way: it's very important to me, with every album, to make a better album than my last, both musically, and personally — all around."

Mostly authoritative

Very much a hard rock album, her new Bodyrock LP has Aaron mostly in authoritative, not submissive, roles. And when she sings one song, Nasty Boyz, about a female groupie who helplessly falls for anything that plays a guitar, Aaron takes a sympathetic view of the girl's position.

Says Aaron, what was also different with the Bodyrock album was that she and longtime collaborator/guitarist John Albani "didn't use any band at all. We used computers, though we made all our own samples.

"But we didn't credit that on the album because, well, with rock and roll, the kids don't like to think anything's made by computers. It scares them. They think it's going to be synthetic. But all those samples on the album are real. A computer only sounds as good as the person doing the programming."

And while Bodyrock may not alter any perceptions about Aaron's feminist views, neither will she deviate from a formula that's so far proved successful. Says Aaron, "So far in my career, each album has sold better than the last one. It's been a steady progression.

"Had you talked to me two years ago, I might have sounded unhappy. There have been times when I've lost control over the way an album was going, a producer who wanted things his way, and in the end I wasn't totally happy. But this new record, this is the first time I can honestly say in my whole career I've had total creative control.

"Also with this new album and tour, I'm happy to say most of our shows are sold out coast to coast. I didn't always have that type of support, and western Canada was a hard market for me to crack in the early days. But it's turned around with the last few records."

It's a fact that, by and large, metal audiences are overwhelmingly young audiences, and metal bands — at least those that stay on the scene for a while — are forced

to pick up new fans when old fans grow up.

But Aaron maintains that one reason she's remained popular is that her fans have stuck with her. "I'd like to think of my audience as consistent," she says. "I know that it's the nicest feeling in the world when you're playing in Montreal again, or in Vancouver, and you see the same people you saw five years ago. Or people who bring every single album you've ever made backstage for you to sign. Having fans like that is the nicest feeling in the world, and I know I do. But then again, I know with every album you pick up new ones.

"Just for instance, I was doing this show in Oshawa recently and this 10-year-old boy who couldn't see the show phoned the club. He was crying. His mother got on and said, 'This is Nicholas' mother and

“People will meet me and say, 'you're much smaller and softer than I thought you'd be.' I mean what did they expect?”

he's very upset.' So I got on the phone with him, asked him how old he was, he asked how old I was, how many albums I had out. I said five, he said he thought it was two. He was obviously a new fan, so I made arrangements with my management office to have a couple of colour posters delivered to his house. I mean, things like that are important.

"When I was younger, I didn't even know about the business end of things. And then I signed a couple of bad contracts and realized, 'Gee kiddo, you better smarten up.'

"So it's been very important to me that I get my act together and learn a lot about the business, so I understand why things are happening the way they are.

"And it's a weird business. I still don't have it figured out, and I don't think I'll ever figure out the ins and outs of why it works like it does. It's a matter of learning how to work within it, and make yourself happy.

"And sure, it would be wonderful someday if I had the status of Madonna. However, if that never happens for me in my lifetime it's not going to break my heart. I'm not going to give up music, because I love music and I love what I do, and I can make a good living doing it. I'd rather do this than anything else."

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