

Independent Women: The Impact of Pop Divas on Stand-up Comedy

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Introduction

This chapter will focus on the ways in which the enduring cultural fascination with the pop diva can be witnessed within contemporary stand-up comedy performed by women. Comedy requires shared understanding upon which to base joking – without awareness of the underpinning cultural or societal concepts being subverted in joking, access to the humorous meaning is impossible. During a period of heightened awareness of popular and celebrity feminisms, and the dominance of neoliberal female empowerment narratives, comedians have been able to draw on more direct intertextual references to the lives and work of pop divas within their routines. Beyoncé is perhaps the most referenced pop diva on the comedy stage, and references to, critiques and celebrations of her work and performance persona have been included in sets by comedians such as Bridget Christie, Miranda Hart, and Katherine Ryan. In this chapter we argue that reference to Beyoncé's diva performances may exist on a spectrum from admiration to critique, and we look at an example from each end of this spectrum. We highlight the ways in which these references to Beyoncé's work are often not just straightforward, but also reveal the problematic racial blindspots in mainstream white feminism and forms of appropriation. Finally, we consider some of the commonalities of the career trajectories of women in both the music and comedy industries.

Our arguments are based on the textual analysis of recorded performances of two established female contemporary UK stand-up comedians, Jayde Adams and Luisa Omielan. Both comics have worked on the live comedy circuit for many years before their performances were recorded and disseminated to wider audiences (e.g. on the BBC and Amazon Prime). Close attention has been paid to the ways in which Beyoncé is not only discussed, but also how visual signifiers from her music videos and

performances are utilised on the comedy stage. We argue that this intertextual referentiality is one of the many ways in which diva performances make lasting impact in popular culture. At the same time, we acknowledge that this approach to analysis does not capture the full artistic experience of each complete stand-up set. Multi-layered comedic engagements with feminism and femininity are evident in both sets, which we take into account as context, but cannot analyse fully in the space of this book chapter.

Originating from the Italian 'diva', meaning female deity, the term diva in popular culture is usually used to describe a female star, originally in opera, but also the theatre stage, film and popular music. Transforming her personal suffering into art, the diva transgresses normative configurations of womanhood (Bradshaw, 2008; Doty, 2007; Weidhase, 2015). In contemporary popular culture, diva, when directed at Black women in particular, often has negative connotations (Springer, 2007) and Beyoncé has remarked on the ways in which the term is instrumentalized against her (Kooijman, 2019). Beyoncé's career trajectory – starting out in the mid-1990s with girl group Destiny's Child and focusing on her solo career after the band's final album in 2004 – has regularly been framed 'within the narrative of the black diva leaving her singing group behind to achieve superstardom' (Kooijman, 2019: 6).

Beyoncé is a Hip Hop and pop icon. Her cultural and artistic significance lies in the ways in which she embodies and performs gender, race and sexuality in popular music (Kooijman, 2019). While her performance in front of a large, illuminated 'FEMINIST' sign at the MTV Video Music Awards in 2014 is often seen as her coming out moment, her work with Destiny's Child and early solo work are equally important for the ways in which she performed and spoke 'to Black working and middle class sensibilities while fulfilling her dynamic roles as both a hip hop belle and a US exotic other globally' (Durham, 2012: 25). At the same time, she must

negotiate the commodification-empowerment divide along gender lines ... and also along racial lines, moving between a position of the politics of respectability on the one hand, which prescribes the "acceptable" way black women are to present themselves in public, and a position of sexually [sic] provocativeness, yet

without reinforcing persistent stereotypes of the sexually unrestrained black woman, on the other. (Kooijman, 2019: 13)

The diva is also often seen as an object of gay white male imagination and worship (O'Neill, 2007), a potentially outdated notion (Kooijman, 2019). Beyoncé, too, is considered a gay icon (Kooijman, 2019) and is noted for her devoted fandom, the Beyhive. While the diva thrives on and cherishes the adoration of her audience, divas also offer their audience inspiration on how to live a life that transcends normative conceptions of gender, sexuality and race (O'Neill, 2007). This chapter, too, is concerned with the diva audience, in this case the ways in which female comedians engage with Beyoncé's work on stage. We will focus on the ways in which female comedians incorporate the diva spectacle and diva worship into their performances, and how Beyoncé in particular is mobilised as both inspiration and 'danger' to the feminist project.

Divas in comic material

An initial question to consider might be why divas are of interest to comics when preparing their material? Fundamentally, humour requires a shared understanding or collective awareness between performer and audience to be in place, as 'in order for an audience to laugh, some form of identification (or disidentification) must occur' (Gilbert, 2004: 163). Unless both parties have all the information needed to interpret the joke as *a joke*, it is going to fail to provoke the intended laughter. Comedians develop their routines by trying out jokes with live audiences and deciding, based on the humour responses they evoke, whether a topic is fertile ground for humour and to keep or scrap the material. Choosing an obscure or niche reference point when a performer is unaware of the audiences' cultural backgrounds is a risky business. As divas are well-known public figures whose behaviour fills column inches and whose music and performance styles are widely (though not universally) recognisable, they are a relatively safe bet. This could of course be said of any person or group holding a celebrity status, however the stereotypical hyperbolic behaviour associated with divas

(as considered in the introduction to this volume) means that the opportunity for ridicule is inherently ingrained in their public personas. Some divas themselves are aware of this and perform self-parody in relation to their diva-like behaviour. An example here is Mariah Carey's inclusion in a 2019 UK Walkers Crisps advert, the narrative for which is contingent on awareness of her 'demanding' and 'irrational' behaviour.

Double contends that in addition to the intention to provoke laughter stand-up comedy 'puts a *person* on display in front of an audience ... involves *direct communication* between performer and audience ... like a conversation' and finally that it 'happens in the present tense, in the here and now. It *acknowledges the performance situation*' (Double, 2014: 19, our italics). Thus, for a woman performing solo on stage, in the traditional stand-up comedy performance mode outlined by Double, bringing a well-known diva character into the routine can be achieved fairly easily. Mimicry through impressions or replication of performance behaviours such as singing voice or dance moves, along with costumes referencing the diva in question, are all relatively easy to achieve with low/no budget as a solo performer.

The contemporary UK live comedy circuit includes a significant number of women comics dealing in explicitly feminist or postfeminist comic material (Tomsett, 2018). Divas have clear links to celebrity feminisms and therefore inclusion of rhetorical positions taken by divas are an obvious choice. Pop stars who fall into the diva category are amongst the most well-known self-identified feminists of the present day (e.g. Taylor Swift, Beyoncé, Miley Cyrus). To provide clear examples here we will focus on the work of two women comics currently working on the live circuit in the UK. Both have recorded their shows for media outlets and incorporate references to Beyoncé into their material.

Our first example is Jayde Adams, a comedian, actress and presenter from Bristol, UK. Adams is, in addition to her solo work as a comic, a self-taught singer and co-presents live comedy night (and podcast) *Amusical* with Kiri Pritchard-McLean and Dave Cribb. The premise for *Amusical* involves comedians celebrating their favourite musicals by singing (with varying degrees of professionalism) songs from West

End/Broadway shows. Adams' show *Serious Black Jumper* was recorded for Amazon Prime in 2019 (released 2020). The show was originally entitled *The Ballad of Kylie Jenner's Old Face* when on tour live, but was changed for legal reasons for the recording. Prior to this particular solo show Adams, a comic vocal about her working-class identity, was known for spectacle in terms of costume and staging. Notably Adams' first solo show in 2016 entitled *31* directly referenced pop icon Adele's album *21*, a nod to Adams' work as an Adele impersonator. Adams' time performing in sequins and glitter aligns her performance persona in many ways to diva traditions through allusions to drag performance, with many reviewers of her earlier work citing cabaret performance (e.g. Ensall, 2016). Adams is associated with body-positive comedy, as typified by her contemporary, Danish comic Sofie Hagen. Adams is also therefore aligned with the operatic divas of the past who also embodied performance talent but were stereotypically known for being fat.

Our second example, Luisa Omielan is a critically and commercially successful comic who developed *What Would Beyoncé Do?* in 2013. Omielan toured the solo show for several years nationally and internationally before finally recording the performance for dissemination via BBC3 in 2017. When advertised by the BBC much was made of Omielan being the 'voice' of millennial single women and the romantic comedy themes of the show were foregrounded. The performance strikes a postfeminist tone in that 'the context of postfeminist humour is the world of leisure and consumption rather than politics or work' and the focus is on 'sexuality as a means of empowerment and goal achievement' (Shifman and Lemish, 2010: 875). To set the scene for audiences in the auditorium (which Ellie experienced as an audience member for Omielan's show) a hen-night feel was deliberately created (think pink, glitter, loud sing-a-longs to pop music and group dancing) to bond the predominantly female spectators into a coherent group – repeatedly referred to throughout the performance as Omielan's 'bitches'. Omielan's Polish heritage is often explored through the inclusion of routines about her family, especially her mother, whose broken English accent she affectionately mimics.

As noted in the introduction, comedy performed by women that includes references to divas is relatively commonplace. The solo shows of these two performers were selected as examples as we believe they exist at two ends of the spectrum of engagement with Beyoncé in current comedy by women stand-ups. Independently we watched the shows several times and made notes in relation to the performance style, content and inclusion of feminist positions. We then discussed our findings and worked towards synthesising an argument which included an identification of the spectrum we discuss here. It is worth noting that our interpretation of the humour of these performances varied, but our overall analysis of the performances as indicative of wider tropes did not. At one end we have a very critical reading of Beyoncé's star-text and at the other uncomplicated hero worship. Both these positions are complexified when held by those who do not share the lived experiences of Black women, and (despite other intersectional dynamics such as class) undoubtedly benefit from white privilege. This inclusion of Beyoncé within comedy is of course a reflection of wider media discussion or Beyoncé's work, body, branding and business decisions in relation to contemporary understandings of feminism. As Gilbert reminds us comedy 'is a cultural barometer, revelatory and liberating' (2004: xvii). Thus, we present these examples as indications of what the cultural weather is like in relation to pop music divas in the UK.

Jayde Adams:

Adams can be seen to exist at the 'criticism' end of our proposed spectrum. The premise of Adams' show is an exploration of the way high-profile women (Beyoncé, Jameela Jamil, Kylie Jenner) use their platform to espouse certain views. The humorous critiques of these women centre on the discrepancy between their lived experiences or behaviours and the principles they claim to embody. Beyoncé's feminist credentials are questioned in light of her sexualized performances. Jamil's I Weigh (@i_weigh) campaign for body positivity is mocked as Adams highlights that Jamil typifies many mainstream body and beauty norms. Lastly Jenner (the titular character of the original show) is ridiculed for being promoted as the 'youngest self-made billionaire' when she is from one of the most famous and wealthy families in America.

Adams' inclusion of Beyoncé into the routine rests solely on a take-down of the diva's complex relationship to feminism and the seeming contradiction between her sexualised performances and the political principles of the feminist movement. Beyoncé is introduced into the routine through Adams recounting a trip to a Beyoncé concert. She admits that she was 'not into it initially, but I liked the hand song' a reference to the track 'Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It)' (2008) and its accompanying choreography. As the story continues Adams considers how she tried hard to appreciate the concert but was aghast at the discrepancy between the heavily made-up and spectacularly-costumed Beyoncé, and her husband Jay-Z's appearance on stage in an anorak. When the singer revealed the now well-known giant 'FEMINIST' sign Adams explains that she was glad she took a friend with her to the concert as 'had I not taken him along I would have been like that one guy in Germany in 1936 thinking "something's not right here"'. Here Adams is, for comic purposes, comparing Beyoncé's brand of feminism to Nazism. She continues to clarify that 'The images and message aren't matching up with each other ... I could stand in front of a sign saying Weight Watchers, wouldn't mean I am doing it though'.

Whilst Adams' show is more recent than Omielan's this particular line of criticism of Beyoncé in comic material, and popular culture more broadly, is not new. Comedian Bridget Christie made similar (whilst notably less contentious) points about Beyoncé in her Edinburgh Comedy Award winning show *A Bic For Her* in 2013. Christie compared Beyoncé to the late UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, highlighting that both openly rejected the term feminism (Thatcher famously referring to it as poison, Beyoncé rejecting the label initially – in a time before *Beyoncé* [2013]). Christie made the point that whilst both women were incredibly successful in their fields and we can respect them for that, we do not need to claim them for feminism – not all women by default are feminists (Tomsett, 2017). Our argument is not that Beyoncé should be above criticism, more generally or within comic material. Both of us have concerns about her role in Uber, a company with appallingly bad working conditions for a majority Black and

minority ethnic workforce, for example, and we acknowledge that Beyoncé's performances always also operate within and profit from capitalist modes of production (hooks, 2016). However, critiquing Beyoncé's feminism based on her supposedly hypersexual performance on stage reveals a lack of intersectional thinking in white mainstream and celebrity feminism (Weidhase, 2015).

Western mainstream feminism has consistently foregrounded the needs and views of white cisgender women as explored extensively by Alison Phipps (2020). It has actively and passively excluded Black women and women of colour and often presented a homogenised view of women's lives that did not take account of the differences of women's experiences (Crenshaw, 1991). Critiques of Beyoncé, who did not explicitly embrace the term 'feminist' until 2013 (but did engage with feminist topics such as financial autonomy in songs like 'Independent Woman Pt.1' [2000]), often focus on the tension between supposed feminist beliefs and a perceived hypersexual performance on stage. Here it is necessary to account for both the particularities of the pop stage, which has always been a space for supposedly outrageous expressions of sexuality (Whiteley, 2006) and Beyoncé's embodiment on stage as a Black woman. White mainstream feminist thought may thus be an insufficient intellectual framework to critique Beyoncé. Black feminist approaches such as Hip hop feminism refuse 'easy and essentialist political stances about what is right or wrong or who or what gets to be called feminist' (Durham, Cooper and Morris, 2013: 723) and reject respectability politics, while talking about 'both the pleasures and pain of sex and sexuality outside a singular heteropatriarchal lens while also looking at the nexus of hierarchical structures that shape our sexual selves' (Durham, Cooper and Morris, 2013: 724). Thus, they offer both a critique of white feminist mainstream approaches and provide a more intersectional analytical framework suitable to make sense of diva performances on the pop stage.

When Adams critiques the way in which Beyoncé dances with Jay-Z (her husband) in the live performance, mimicking sexualised dance moves, the argument being made is that this presentation is not compatible with women's empowerment.

When we consider the way in which Black women's bodies have long been sexualised to produce capital for others (Collins, 2004), the very opportunity for a black woman to control the way her body is seen and sexualised is in and of itself political. There are plenty of examples of white popstars displaying similar behaviours to Beyoncé, yet we can see Adams' comedy as symptomatic of social handling of Black women, in that they are held to a higher standard. Therefore, in addition, the lack of balance with white examples (see Snapes [2020] on Lana Del Rey's recent example of this phenomenon) further enhances the critique's problematic nature. Potentially the show becomes another media portrayal that is disproportionately negative about Black women. Thus, these critiques often reveal more about the whiteness of mainstream feminism than the actual performance of the diva.

Luisa Omielan:

Omielan's solo show *What Would Beyoncé Do?*, as the title suggests, exists at the other, drastically less critical end of this spectrum. Within the show Beyoncé is held up as an inspiration to Omielan (and by extension the audience) and portrayed as a universally aspirational model of womanhood. Omielan thus reproduces deifying elements of diva reception, and mirrors some of the common fandom receptions of Beyoncé's work (Toone, Edgar and Ford, 2017). The show intersperses more traditional stand-up routines (direct address and storytelling) with musical sing-alongs to Beyoncé's back catalogue, dance routines and audience interaction. Similar to Adams, Omielan's own performance borrows from the diva's dramatic embodiment on stage, and a close relationship to her audience. The content of this show is highly sexual, both in terms of the language choices and narrative joke-work (which involves detailed description of [hetero]sexual acts) and physical performance (which includes lap-dancing on members of the audience and miming sexual positions). Omielan makes full use of the comic licence afforded to stand-up comedians to engage with cultural taboos. In some ways, then, Omielan's work mirrors Hip hop feminism's (and Beyoncé's) embrace of messiness and performance of femininity and female sexuality. However, as

we detail below, this often veers into problematic territory and the appropriation of Black femininity.

Beyoncé is introduced into the narrative of the show early on when Omielan reflects on the difficulties of moving back in with her mother and brother following a relationship break-up. Omielan describes considering how Beyoncé would act in the situation she finds herself in (in this case searching in the garden for an appropriate stick with which to unclog a toilet). Thus, Beyoncé's arrival within the narrative of the show is in relation to notions of overcoming adversity in hard times. Omielan uses Beyoncé as a cultural touchstone through which to discuss the need to develop resilience and self-reliance in order to deal with various emotionally challenging events. Omielan refers to her breakup and her brother's suicide attempt in relation to this. This neoliberal self-actualisation is in line with the empowerment messages contained within 'Independent Women Pt. 1', a track included in the show and used for humour when positioning Omielan as a modern independent woman, yet one not paying rent, living at home and thus to some extent still financially reliant on her mother. It is in this way, as well as through the inclusion of the song 'Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It)' that the contradictions of mainstream postfeminist personhood are included in this show without systematic critique. Beyoncé's self-proclaimed independence is foregrounded in Omielan's routines (alongside Omielan's wish to emulate this) whilst the contradictory need to engage with capitalism through ownership of possessions/ property and (arguably) people through heteropatriarchal norms of marriage, are presented as uncomplicated, universal and framed as aspirational.

The issue at the god-like worship end of the spectrum of Beyoncé's inclusion into stand-up comedy by women is that Beyoncé is presented without nuance or critical examination of her work. Omielan presents Beyoncé as a hero-like figure that inspires imitation, and this occasionally tips over into what could be considered cultural appropriation when done without reflection on Beyoncé's Black identity, or the specific racial context of Black women in the US. One of the ways in which this show can be

seen as trading in racial stereotypes is Omielan's use of comic accents. An example early on in the routine is when she mimics an East Asian beauty therapist (no specific country is mentioned, but it is clearly coded in this way) by saying with a pronounced accent 'ahh you want your chin done too?'. Yes, of course comedy is a form within which boundaries of acceptable behaviour and taboo language can be explored (as part of comic licence, see Double, 2014) but moments like this, within a show so connected to the work of Black performer, whose race is being ignored, is problematic.

Omielan's use of American accents is particularly concerning in the way that she seems unaware of some of the connotations of these voices. Her use of a southern US accent when *pretending to be Beyoncé* (who is from Houston, Texas), for a section with dialogue that is overtly humble and grateful for success, is arguably evocative of the Black mammy stereotype (Sewell, 2013). Putting on a southern American accent in general is clearly not offensive, however when a white comic is performing in the character of a Black woman, the southern US context and its history of segregation and slavery, is relevant. A very similar Americanized accent is also deployed when portraying an interaction with a job centre official when 'signing on' for benefits (although in this instance, despite the accent, Omielan is playing a version of herself). In this job centre section the low status character (Omielan) is evoked through an Americanized pleading twang as well as stooping and submissive postures.

It is notable that Omielan has been accused of culturally appropriating aspects of Black culture in relation to this show. The imagery produced for the poster for the original tour shows Omielan with big curly afro-like hair and hoop earrings clearly emulating a Hip Hop aesthetic. Comedian Dane Baptiste has been very critical of the way comedians cherry pick aspects of Black culture whilst not engaging with the political struggles of Black people: Without directly naming Omielan, during the 2020 Black Lives Matter Protests across the globe following the killing of George Floyd, Baptiste argued that comedians:

co-opt Black culture when it suits them – whether its talking about pop stars du jour, or they want to be like Whitney or Mariah, or I guess Beyoncé being the star du jour. They'll co-opt that or they'll co-opt Hip Hop music ... but when it comes to issues that are a plague and the plight of Black women they now become strangely silent, or they are waiting for the green light from their agents or managers (Radio 5 Live, 2 June 2020)

Therefore, Omielan's approach to incorporating Beyoncé into her work is arguably just as problematic as being overly critical (as is evident in the work of Adams). Even though a significant amount of *What Would Beyoncé Do?* is about overcoming challenges and barriers to success, the fact that there are specific challenges that are unique to Black experience (e.g. having to deal with structural racism) remains totally unacknowledged. The attraction of the audience to this show, especially in the early days of its run when Omielan was little-known, is linked to the success and name recognition of Beyoncé as a Black diva. In many ways then this could be seen as indicative of the way that white women have used or co-opted the work of Black women for their own commercial gain - it is certainly no surprise that others within the comedy industry have picked up on the racial dynamics of this marketing strategy.

Concluding thoughts:

In this chapter we have analysed the work of two comedians and discussed how this comic material can be seen as part of a wider cultural referencing of Beyoncé (and diva figures more broadly). There are however, wider similarities between the careers of women comics and pop divas than a simple content analysis may demonstrate and it is to these broader ideas that we now turn as part of the conclusion of our argument.

Both stand-up comedy performance and pop music performance (as a solo artist) are similar in that they are examples of embodied art forms, where a body is placed before an audience to demonstrate a specific skill (e.g. musical or comic talent). In this

way both the positive opportunities for self-definition, as well as the negative challenges/ barriers that women face in these professions (such as gendered aesthetic scrutiny, policing of feminine behaviours, sexualization) are comparable. When performing as either stand-up comic or pop diva there is no fourth wall between the stage and the audience, and interaction is a key part of the experience of seeing these performances live (explored in relation to arena concerts by Spelman, 2016). This close performer-audience relationship enabled by the performance space mirrors the diva's close relationship with her fans. The interaction in the current digital environment is also part of the building of fan communities. Omielan provides a good comic example of this as she makes use of social media platforms such as Facebook Live, Twitter and Instagram to connect with fans outside of the live environment to maintain a presence.

In this way both roles require performers to put a version of themselves on display for audiences (especially when undertaking 'traditional' stand-up comedy as our two examples evidence), and to embody and manipulate specific identifiable traits, but in different ways. Diva status is arguably contingent upon being 'exceptional' in some way (there is only one Houston, Franklin, Turner, Carey etc.). Comedians however, rely on their similarities to their audiences, physically and experientially, for their comic material. There needs to be an element of recognition with the content of a comedian's jokes, similar to the themes of popular music being overwhelmingly related to shared human experiences such as love/ relationships etc. However, this recognition may also result in the reproduction of problematic tropes about Black women, reflecting and feeding into existing inequalities in comedy and the creative industries.

It is understandable why women comics might see their own experiences reflected in the treatment and challenges experienced by their musical counterparts and thus decide to integrate these into their material. Both comedy and popular music as part of the wider creative industries are still dominated overwhelmingly by white men in positions of power. It is therefore, no surprise that these industries have similarities in their treatment of up-and-coming talent (especially young women) and established artists who are not immune to these gendered and raced power dynamics. Both the

comedy and the music industries in the wake of the #MeToo movement have had high profile scandals involving abuses of power and sexual assault. At the same time, the popularity of diva performances in stand-up comedy demonstrates the lasting impact divas such as Beyoncé have on popular culture. Whilst we appreciate these engagements are framed as comic in our examples, they are symptomatic of wider engagements with Beyoncé across the spectrum we have identified.

This chapter has demonstrated that these similarities between women comedians and musical artists are not only individual, but also structural and industrial. The reception of a Black diva such as Beyoncé in a sphere of mainstream, white-dominated aspect of popular culture reveals not just problematic forms of cultural appropriation in the creation of comedy performance, but arguably is also indicative of the continued lack of intersectional thinking in mainstream popular feminism.

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