

Hear Holly Dunn, don't suppress her



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Country singer-songwriter Holly Dunn has asked radio stations to stop playing her hit record, *Maybe I Mean Yes*. Feminists had criticized the song for lyrics such as these:

*When I say no, I mean maybe/Baby don't you know me yet
Nothing's worth having if it ain't a little hard to get
So let me clarify so you won't have to try to guess
When I say no I mean maybe or maybe I mean yes.*

The activists said the song sends the message that "women don't know what they want" and it thereby contributed to date rape. But banning the song is like killing the messenger rather than dealing with the regrettable truth of the message. Holly Dunn is not the sole nor even primary source of the idea that "maybe" can mean "yes." Her lyrics merely acknowledge publicly that many women can and often do derive power, satisfaction and control from dealing with men's yearnings and emotions in ways that are less than straightforward and honest.

In her book *Swept Away*, sex educator Carol Cassell describes women's attitudes toward sex in marketing terms. "To be blunt," she writes, "sex has historically been a commodity. It's a valuable source of power. . . . Traditionally . . . [a] woman's most reliable currency was the *potential* of sex. . . . Sexual power is . . . the female commodity." Cassell also says, "Buried in the recesses of [women's] memories are years of messages telling us that sex is our most important asset if rationed, if kept out of reach."

Quoting a *Cosmopolitan* interview with Nancy Friday, author of *My Mother/My Self*, Cassell goes on to point out, "women have always derived power from withholding sex. . . . This power in women produces an enormous rage in men but since their need for us is equally powerful, they bury their anger."

When attributed to men, "rage" and "anger" seem somehow wild and dangerous, proper targets for suppression and control. Sometimes they are a symptom providing clues to a proper diagnosis of bigger problems. Male rage and anger — and the behaviors they spawn, like date rape — will not be alleviated by female denial and censorship.

I cannot help suspecting that an unacknowledged reason for feminist suppression of Holly Dunn's musical slice of real life is that it calls attention to women's misuse of their power, thereby refuting the one-two punch of feminist ideology: (1) Women don't have any power, and (2) even if they did they'd use it only unselfishly for the betterment of all living things.

The anti-sexist movement has long called upon men to confront and take responsibility for the ways male attitudes and behaviors are harmful to relationships between the sexes. It is true that men still have some changes to make.

But it is also right and necessary to suggest that women as well have some work to do. To be sure, there are complex and understandable reasons for women regarding sex as they do.

Cassell, in fact, says, women "don't act consciously on this powerful idea [of sexual power]; it operates like a muffled drumbeat." But by the same token, there are similar excuses available to men who do not wish to examine, acknowledge and improve their attitudes toward women.

We should deal with women's use of sex as a power tool not by banning Holly Dunn's lyrics, but by listening to them, even studying them with open hearts and minds. Rather than telling Dunn to hush because men might be listening, we should thank her for her candor and ask ourselves, now that we see plainly where we are, where we might wish to go from here.



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