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Embracing My Inner Fool: How I Got Seduced By a Rock Star

For a period of time last summer, people driving past the Alps Road branch of SunTrust Bank would have been treated to the very odd sight of several bankers clustered together by the back door of the bank. At first glance, we probably appeared to be engaged in some sort of illegal activity. Were we sorting out counterfeit money to be distributed to innocent customers? Were we dealing crack or crystal meth from the drive-thru lane? No. Instead, we were engaged in an intense, heated discussion of the latest developments on our new favorite show, VH-1's "Rock of Love." Several of my coworkers and I had become hopelessly addicted to "Rock of Love," and we were simply too embarrassed to discuss the show inside the bank, where we might be overheard by customers. I was blindsided by my immediate addiction to the show because I have never been the type of person to enjoy the sleazier variety of so-called reality shows.

For the most part, I consider myself to be an intelligent woman. I am mature, fairly sophisticated, and not easily taken advantage of. Other than reading *People* magazine, I don't usually pay attention to the more sensational media that saturates our world. For example, most of the TV shows I watch can be divided into two categories. The first category is made up of the relatively clever, well-written, and well-acted popular series. Some examples of these shows are "Grey's Anatomy," "Lost," "Ugly Betty," and "Private Practice." The second category is made up of the home improvement or home design shows found on HGTV and TLC. While I have not

watched many of the so-called reality TV shows, I am aware of their growing popularity. According to Eric Deggans, “Reality TV, once considered the weird uncle of network programming, has found enough acceptance by young viewers and advertisers that it's now an essential part of every network's programming.” Whereas a few of the reality shows do offer a bit of quality, most simply seem to compete with each other to offer increasingly outrageous scenarios and an intensified “ick” factor. So, imagine my shock and surprise when I discovered I am just as susceptible as anyone else to the lure of trash TV. For some reason, I still cannot fathom, I tuned into Episode 1 of “Rock of Love” on VH-1. Unlike the big fish in all the stories, I was not the one that got away. Instead, I was caught fast-hook, line, and sinker. I can honestly say “Rock of Love” is absolutely the worst show I have ever loved, and I found my fascination with the show to be a bit disturbing. The realization that I could be entertained by a show whose central focus is the objectification and exploitation of women was very disconcerting.

I found nothing about “Rock of Love” to be admirable, thought-provoking or even slightly intelligent. The basic idea is that the lead singer of the glam-rock band Poison, Bret Michaels, is looking for love. He has been set up in a flashy bachelor pad in Hollywood, with 25 eager young ladies ready to compete for his attention and affection. The first problem with the premise is the choice of Bret Michaels as the intended object of desire. After all, Bret Michaels is an immature, washed-up, still-trying-to-live-out-his-fantasy, clueless has-been from whom a smart woman would run as fast as her legs would carry her. He appears to think his main contribution to a relationship should be flipping his long, stringy blond hair around while he gazes at a woman through his smudged eyeliner and grants her the opportunity to capture his interest. I had to ask myself, “what kind of a woman could possibly be attracted to him?” Well, therein lies the second problem—the women themselves. The “ladies” chosen to be on “Rock of

Love” embody the most sexist, damaging stereotypes that intelligent women have been working to overcome for decades. As far as physical appearances go, everything about the women on the show is completely fake, from the silicone boobs, which would each fit neatly into a toilet plunger, to the puffy lips, huge hair and sprayed on, no-line tans. All of the ladies are decked out in the latest fashions from the clearance racks at Sluts ‘R Us, and they each seem to be quite skilled at applying makeup with a garden trowel. When the women are on camera, they can be counted on to be drunk, profane, catty and crude. Comparing the ladies of “Rock of Love” with the ladies from another VH-1 show, “Flavor of Love,” Lyndsey Parker observes that “some of the prospective Bret Michaels trophy girlfriends on this show were freaky-deaky enough to make even Flav girls Toastee and Pumkin look like Amish nuns.”

These ladies would go to any lengths, and I do mean *any*, to impress the supposedly lovelorn Bret Michaels. Fueled by seemingly limitless alcohol, the women performed spontaneous lap dances, they pole-danced, they exposed themselves for photographs, they slapped, shoved and yelled at each other, they tongue kissed each other, and they fondled each other with as much breathless enthusiasm as they would summon up for a porn film audition. Astonishingly, almost every one of these activities happens in the very first episode. I laughed so hard I cried, and I wondered what in the world could possibly happen next. But even while laughing at the crazy behavior and contrived antics, I could sense my own uneasiness. Many of the women on the show came across as genuinely dim-witted, not just silly. I felt almost ashamed of myself for laughing at them, in the same way I would be ashamed to laugh at a person with a physical handicap. A couple of the women display an almost manic, frenzied enthusiasm for humiliating both themselves and the other women. In her review of “Rock of Love” for the *New York Times*, Virginia Heffernan noted when discussing the ladies: “Many of

them seem dangerously unwell, discolored, surgically altered, physically unbalanced and worryingly mood-disordered.”

I began to wonder what my enjoyment of “Rock of Love” said about the kind of person I am. I certainly do not share the values the show seems to convey. I know the worth of a woman is not measured in silicone and hair extensions. I am fortunate to know many women who are strong, smart, confident and wickedly funny, and also many men intelligent enough to find those qualities very sexy. I believe a successful relationship is based on trust, love and mutual respect, not on partying and instant sexual gratification. While most of us might not be as particular about the type of person we would find acceptable for an occasional hook-up, we tend to be much more specific about the qualities we want in a long-term partner. The type of woman exemplified by the women of “Rock of Love” really has no more to offer in a genuine relationship than the blow-up dolls sold in the back of porn magazines.

I have never before been so engrossed in a TV show that made me feel so exasperated and disgusted. When one of the women, Brandi, presses her chest up against the chest of another woman and declares, “With our boobs pushed together, we can think better,” I can only groan at her utter stupidity. When another woman, Tiffany, is lurching around and drunkenly slurring something about her daughter, the realization that she is a mother adds an element of tragedy to the whole scenario. When the women were instructed to compete to see who could offer Bret the hottest phone sex, I thought I had surely reached the end of my rope. I just did not see how I could watch any more, but the next week I found myself right back in front of the TV. As it turned out, I was not alone in my helpless fascination with “Rock of Love.” On Sunday, September 16, 2007, “Rock of Love” became the highest-rated cable television show airing that day, with 3.5 million viewers (Levin 2007). I wondered how many other viewers shared my

dilemma; I knew the show was going to be awful and it would make my skin crawl, but I was powerless to stop watching. Despite all the drawbacks, “Rock of Love” is one of the funniest shows I have ever seen on television. I realized my addiction had grown too strong to be denied, so I attempted to stop focusing on the bigger picture and just enjoy the ride.

I know that many people might tell me not to take a TV show so seriously. After all, “Rock of Love,” like most TV shows, is only intended to provide entertainment, right? That is true, but shouldn’t a network also bear responsibility for content? VH-1 is a network created to appeal to young people, and all of the programming found on VH-1 is clearly aimed at the target audience. The ratings success of “Rock of Love” will encourage VH-1 to create even more shows that follow the same format. This programming trend was observed by Steven Zeitchik of *Variety*: “VH1, meanwhile, continues to turn out so many celebrealty creations it could be pulling them from a clown car.” When we turn on our televisions and select a show to watch, we are making a choice about what we allow into our minds. A little snack of trash TV now and then won’t do any real damage, but a steady stream flowing into the brain will eventually cause our minds to become a flabby, mushy mess. On a regular basis, a small, but blessedly rational, part of my brain would pose the question, “Why are you watching this crap?” The rest of my brain, which was both in the majority and in the driver’s seat, apparently did not care about the answer. But in the same way that the human body cannot thrive on a steady diet of Twinkies and HoHos, the human mind cannot thrive on a steady diet of trainwreck TV. Input determines output, so if I start with junk, I end up with junk. Conversely, if I start with quality, I will end up with quality. This caveat could also be applied to Bret Michaels’ and his search for a quality woman. In order to find such a woman, Bret might have to consider looking beyond the human Twinkies and HoHos.

While I did watch and enjoy every episode, I was never able to feel comfortable about the amount of time I wasted on a TV show that was completely devoid of any discernable redeeming value. I wasted many hours actually watching the show, and then wasted even more time discussing the details with my unfortunate friends who were equally addicted. On the Sunday before the final episode aired, I wasted approximately nine solid hours watching the “Rock of Love” Marathon, when VH-1 re-aired all the episodes back to back. Undoubtedly, I could have found better ways to invest my time. There are many projects around my house I could have completed. Had I been able to resist being sucked into the vortex of sleaze that was “Rock of Love,” I might have organized my closets or remodeled my bathroom. I could have learned to cook something new, or spent more time with my non-“Rock of Love” obsessed friends. Quite frankly, even cleaning out the lint tray of my dryer would have been a better use of my time. Thankfully, I was never able to completely shut down the rational part of my brain. The small part that managed to remain sensible understood the big difference between something that is only funny and something that is also worthwhile. Now that I have experienced the powerful temptation of trash TV, I have newfound empathy for those who allow themselves to become ensnared. I also have to admit to a grudging respect for the network executives who choose this type of programming. After all, their job is to select a lineup of shows that will deliver high ratings and lots of advertising dollars. As long as trash TV is what viewers respond to, we will continue to have lots of trashy shows to choose from.

Was I foolish to squander my time on something so meaningless? Well, yes. But most of us harbor a little bit of an inner fool, which doesn't mean we're bad people—just human. I have realized it is okay to indulge my inner fool occasionally. I can love her and let her out from time to time for a little fun, but in the future I will try to keep her from hogging the remote. I am

grateful I can still tell the difference between quality programming and trash TV. If admitting that I got hooked on “Rock of Love,” even though I was aware it was a complete, brain-sucking waste of time makes me a bit of a hypocrite, I can live with the label. Fortunately, trash TV has not become a habit for me. I don’t know or care who loves New York at the moment, or who is in Celebrity Rehab. I am very proud to report I have actually managed to resist watching “Rock of Love 2.” My withdrawal symptoms were not quite as bad as I had anticipated, but that may be because the new season of “Lost” has started. Above all, whether I’m watching trash TV or the somewhat higher quality network fare, I am at peace with myself. Bret Michaels may have seduced me, but I managed to emerge from the encounter with a little bit of my dignity intact, which is more than most of his women can say.

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