

Free To Be... You and Me: the Best-Selling Record and Popular Show Which Made America Rethink Gender Stereotypes

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ABSTRACT

Long before wide-spread discussion of “toxic masculinity,” “mansplaining” and “gender identity,” we had Free To Be... You and Me by Marlo Thomas and friends. This paper will examine the cultural and historical impact of this ground-breaking record album, illustrated booklet and television special from 1972 and 1974 respectively. This project was the brainchild of the popular actress and social activist Marlo Thomas, with the proceeds from the project going to support the Ms. Foundation For Women, an extremely influential feminist organization. A number of leading entertainers participated in the project: Michael Jackson, Diana Ross, Alan Alda, to name but a few. Although initially met with great skepticism, the record and consequent television show became huge hits, becoming the sound-track for a generation of children growing up in the 1970s. I would argue that this project, more than anything else up until that time contributed to feminist consciousness raising and awareness of gender stereotyping and still has much to teach us today.

KEYWORDS

feminism, gender identity, television, children's entertainment

I was recently reminded of Marlo Thomas' influential project when watching the excellent new television series *Mrs. America*.¹ The show covers the feminist movement, specifically the Equal Rights Amendment, and the consequent backlash of the mid 1970s. At the end of episode 5, the leading feminist protagonists, with Gloria Steinem at the forefront, settle down after a long day of political maneuvering to watch the first broadcast of *Free To Be... You and Me*, making it 1974. The familiar sound of the opening song with its catchy banjo riff is heard from their respective televisions and you see the tension of the day melting away.

The writers of *Mrs. America* saw fit to include the broadcast of the program because the profits went to *Ms. Foundation for Women* founded by Gloria Steinem, Marlo Thomas, etc., but also because *Free To Be... You and Me* embodied much of the agenda of second wave feminism. The record with an accompanying booklet was released in 1972, followed by the TV special in 1974; there are some differences between the two. Thomas was an actress most renowned for the sitcom *That Girl*, a television program focused on a single woman (a quite radical notion at the time) which ran from 1966 to 1971. *Free To Be... You and Me* became a huge hit, with the television show winning an Emmy, and the record becoming a diamond seller, with over 10 million copies sold. A follow up project, *Free to Be... a Family*, designed to break down barriers between the US and the Soviet Union was also a success, although less so than its predecessor.

Free To Be... You and Me was a celebration of possibility, openness, and breaking of boundaries. It arguably did more than anything else, up to that time, to questioning traditional gender roles and definitions. Stress was placed on acceptance of everyone, regardless of gender, race, masculinity/femininity. In contrast to the often gloomy, strict, shrill and even schoolmarmish

1 Davhi Waller, *Mrs. America* (Shiny Penny Productions, 2020).

stereotypes sometimes associated with feminism at present, particularly here in the Czech Republic, the program radiated joy and optimism.

Marlo Thomas describes her motivation to come up with the project in the chapter “Growing Up Free” in her memoir *Growing Up Laughing*. Thomas, who never had children of her own, relates of time spent with her niece Dionne at the age of five. “I was reading to her from the books she had in her room, and I was shocked by how outdated they were. They all told the same old stories, starring the same old prince, promising the same old happy ending. None of the books had any new ideas encouraging Dionne to dream her own dreams.”² Upon raising objections about the less than inspiring content with her sister Terre, she was challenged to find something more inspirational. To her great chagrin, she was unable to. She mentions one book she did come across dealing with gender identity.

One book I’ll never forget was called *I’m Glad I’m a Boy! I’m Glad I’m a Girl!* The pictures were cute, but the captions were appalling. “Boys are pilots, girls are stewardesses.” “Boys are doctors, girls are nurses.” “Boys can eat, girls can cook.” “Boys invent things, girls use what boys invent.” I almost had a heart attack in the children’s book section.³

Thomas decided to take things into her own hands and rectify the situation. “How hard could it be to create an album for Dionne, with stories and songs that she could lie on the floor and listen to, and see pictures in her head that would awaken her imagination instead of putting her mind to sleep?”⁴ She went on to enlist in her efforts some of the most talented entertainers and writers of the day including Carl Reiner, Mel Brooks, Sheldon Harnick, Herb Gardner and Shel Silverstein. They did meet, however, with some resistance to the project as the writer and producer Carole Hart, one of the founders of *Sesame Street*, among other things, mentions in her contribution “In the Beginning” from *When Were Free to Be*. She recounts being turned down by a number of record executives with one even using the following words. “What would I want with a record produced by a bunch of dykes?”⁵

To everyone’s surprise both the album and the television special met with both popular and critical acclaim. Thomas herself puts it best in her memoir.

The show won an Emmy and a Peabody, the book became number one on the *New York Times* best-seller list and the record went gold. We were floored by the impact it all had. My little message for Dionne had gone straight to the hearts of moms and dads and aunties and uncles and, most of all, teachers, who embraced it as a way to teach the kids in their lives a new way of thinking about themselves.⁶

Like many great works of art, the project was admired by both children and adults alike. The editors of the first collected essays on the phenomenon, Lari Rotskoff and Laura L. Lovett, explain why, “Free to Be’s creators didn’t talk down to children but instead took them seriously, inspired their

2 Marlo Thomas, *Growing Up Laughing* (New York: Hyperion, 2010), chap. 36, epub.

3 Thomas, *Growing Up*, chap. 36, epub.

4 Thomas, *Growing Up*, chap. 36, epub.

5 Carole Hart, “In the Beginning,” in *When We Were Free To Be*, ed. Lori Rotskoff and Laura L. Lovett (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 35.

6 Thomas, *Growing Up*, chap. 36, epub.

curiosity, and made the world seem like a more welcoming place.”⁷ *Free to Be... You and Me* was also quickly adopted by progressive teachers and educators welcoming its message of tolerance and open-mindedness. Letty Cottin Pogrebin, consultant for the project and one of the founders of Ms. Magazine, speaks of the impact of the project in this area, “It challenged teachers to face up to their entrenched, often unacknowledged, gender biases and to cast a more critical eye on the books they were assigning, whom they called on most often in class, whom they allowed to dominate the block corner or the dress-up box.”⁸

Arguably the most important lasting influence of the project has been its liberating influence on individuals struggling with their identity or entrenched views concerning gender or sexuality. Thomas relates various accounts of thanks she has heard over the years, having heard “... from innumerable gay men: ‘William’s Doll’ and ‘It’s All Right to Cry’ were the first inklings that I was going to be okay.”⁹

She also relates a surprising response from the recently deceased Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, a woman who met with great success in a traditionally male-dominated profession.

When I left a message at her office, I wasn’t sure she’d even know who I was. But when she returned my call, she told me that she had always loved *Free to Be*. “Really?” I asked. “Did you read it to your children?”

“Oh, yes,” she said, “and I always take it with me when I speak on feminism.” That was the best review of all.¹⁰ I would like to focus on some of the “greatest hits” from the project. All the song lyrics and excerpts from the poems and prose are taken from the recording of 1972, unless noted otherwise.¹¹

The music for *Free to Be... You and Me*, the first and title song, was by Stephen J. Lawrence (who also composed several other songs for the project) and the text by Bruce Hart (the author of the legendary *Sesame Street* theme song *Sunny Days* among other things). The popular folk band The New Seekers recorded the song. The upbeat melody and catchy tune perfectly evoke a picture of a new world free of prejudice and limitations.

There’s a land that I see where the children are free
And I say it ain’t far to this land from where we are
Take my hand, come with me, where the children are free
Come with me, take my hand, and we’ll live

In a land where the river runs free
In a land through the green country
In a land to a shining sea

7 Lari Rotskoff, and Laura L. Lovett, “Introduction,” in *When We Were Free To Be*, ed. Lari Rotskoff and Laura L. Lovett (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 7.

8 Letty Cottin Pogrebin, “A Thousand Fond Memories and a Few Regrets,” in *When We Were Free To Be*, ed. Lari Rotskoff and Laura L. Lovett (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 44.

9 Marlo Thomas, “Prologue,” in *When We Were Free To Be*, ed. Lari Rotskoff and Laura L. Lovett (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 13.

10 Thomas, *Growing Up*, chap. 36, epub.

11 Marlo Thomas, *Free To Be... You and Me*. Bell Records, 1972, LP record.

And you and me are free to be you and me

I see a land bright and clear, and the time's comin' near
When we'll live in this land, you and me, hand in hand
Take my hand, come along, lend your voice to my song
Come along, take my hand, sing a song

Every boy in this land grows to be his own man
In this land, every girl grows to be her own woman
Take my hand, come with me where the children are free
Come with me, take my hand, and we'll run

Although fairly innocuous by today's standards, the song seemed to usher in a new, hopeful era of endless possibility regardless of one's gender, ethnicity, etc, along with a vision of a healthy, clean planet. If one did not know what was to follow, the lyrics would seem ambiguous, but within the wider vision of the work, it becomes apparent that the song consists of a liberating vision of future freedom for both boys and girls, men and women.

The skit *Boy Meets Girl* follows, written by the legendary actor and director Carl Reiner and Peter Stone and voiced by the famous actor and comedian Mel Brooks along with Marlo Thomas herself. The piece is a witty take on gender stereotypes which are often enforced on children from day one. Two babies in the maternity ward are trying to figure out their sexes. The boy in the story is convinced he is a female while the actual girl is uncertain.

Girl: You think you're a girl?

Boy: I don't know, I might be. I think I am, I've never been anything before, let me see, let me take a little look around...hmmm, cute feet, small, dainty...yep, yep! I'm a girl, that's it! Girl time.

The boy tells the girl with confidence that she must be a boy because she is bald. When she tells him he is bald as well he resorts to additional stereotypes.

Boy: See, that proves it! Girls are patient, boys are impatient!

Girl: Yeah? What else?

Boy: Can you keep a secret?

Girl: Absolutely.

Boy: There you go, boys keep secrets, girls don't.

The boy reinforces his argument by telling her he is terrified of mice and finally asks her what she wants to be when she grows up.

Girl: A fireman.

Boy: What'd I tell ya?

Girl: What about you?

Boy: A cocktail waitress! Does that prove anything to you?

Girl: Hm, you must be right.

Boy: I told you, I'm always right. You're the boy and I'm the girl.

Their debate is interrupted by the arrival of a nurse to change their nappies and their anatomical features reveal their actual gender, much to the boy's surprise. The girl accepts the situation, in

contrast, with aplomb. The skit gently draws attention and criticizes the social conditioning which forms us often from the earliest age. The humorous approach and quirky animation make it possible to get across a truly radical and progressive message for the time and place.

The following song *When We Grow Up*, also by Stephen J. Lawrence, was recorded by the Motown legend Diana Ross on the record, singing both characters, while in the television special it became a duet between the pop singer Roberta Flack and a fifteen-year-old Michael Jackson. The song acutely captures early adolescent concerns about body issues, including height and looks. It also touches on stereotype male and female professions.

When we grow up, will I be pretty?
 Will you be big and strong?
 Will I wear dresses that show off my knees?
 Will you wear trousers twice as long?
 Well, I don't care if I'm pretty at all.
 And I don't care if you never get tall.
 I like what I look like, and you're nice small.
 We don't have to change at all.

When we grow up, will I be a lady?
 Will you be an engineer?
 Will I have to wear things like perfume and gloves?
 I can still pull the whistle while you steer.
 Well, I don't care if I'm pretty at all.
 And I don't care if you never get tall.
 I like what I look like, and you're nice small.
 We don't have to change at all.

The choice to use the African American Flack, thirty-seven years old at the time, and not endowed with the figure of a model, makes the lines about not having to change all the more poignant. Thomas in *Growing Up Laughing* points out the irony of the most celebrated line from the song. "A line of the song would one day be haunting. 'We like what we look like. We don't have to change at all.' If only Michael had held on to that notion."¹²

Parents Are People was written by another one of the main collaborating composers and lyricists Carol Hall and sung by Thomas once again alongside the celebrated Jamaican-American singer and civil rights activist Harry Belafonte. The song celebrates possibilities and opportunities for everyone regardless of their gender.

Mommies are people, people with children
 When mommies were little, they used to be girls
 Like some of you, but then they grew
 And now mommies are women, women with children
 Busy with children, and things that they do
 There are a lot of things a lot of mommies can do
 Some mommies are ranchers, or poetry makers
 Or doctors or teachers, or cleaners or bakers

¹² Thomas, *Growing Up*, chap. 36, epub.

Some mommies drive taxis, or sing on TV
Yeah, mommies can be almost anything they want to be.

The fact that these lines are being sung by a mixed racial couple, still a rare and controversial issue in 1974, only gives an increased impact to the lines questioning traditional gender roles.

Well, they can't be grandfathers, or daddies
Daddies are people, people with children
When daddies were little, they used to be boys
Like some of you, but then they grew
And now daddies are men, men with children
Busy with children, and things that they do
There are a lot of things a lot of daddies can do
Some daddies are writers, or grocery sellers
Or painters or welders, or funny-joke tellers
Some daddies play cello, or sail on the sea
Yeah, daddies can be almost anything they want to be.

This song brings home the fact that feminism is not necessarily a victory for women and a defeat for men, but a win-win situation; men are also free to explore themselves, liberated from old-fashioned notions of manliness.

They can't be grandmas or mommies
Parents are people - Parents are people
People with children - People with children
When parents were little, they used to be kids
Like all of you, but then they grew
And now parents are grown-ups - Parents are grown-ups
Grown-ups with children - Grown-ups with children
Busy with children, and things that they do
There are a lot of things a lot of mommies
And a lot of daddies, and a lot of parents can do

Thomas points out the controversy which the song met with.

In one of the scenes, Harry was pushing a baby buggy, singing about daddies, while I pushed a buggy alongside him, singing about mommies. That caused a furor. We were already "corrupting" little boys with songs about dolls and crying. But now we were insinuating that Harry and I were married. The racial implications were way too threatening to the network, especially for a primetime children's show.¹³

The final lines are sung in harmony demonstrating how liberated feminist ideas are also a boon for parents and their children. As with all of the songs and poems in *Free to Be... You and Me*, the message is all the more effective due to its humorous and joyful delivery and of course the undeniable good looks of the glamorous mixed couple.

The spoken piece *Housework* written by Sheldon Harnick (most famous for writing the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*) was voiced by the comedian Carol Channing. Her quirky delivery

13 Thomas, *Growing Up*, chap. 36, epub.

ideally parodies the ubiquitous television commercials of the day featuring attractive, blissful housewives merrily carrying out their household chores.

You know, there are times when we happen to be
Just sitting there, quietly watching TV,
When the program we're watching will stop for a while
And suddenly someone appears with a smile,
And starts to show us how terribly urgent
It is to buy some brand of detergent,
Or soap or cleanser or cleaner or powder or paste or wax or bleach,
To help with the housework.
Now, most of the time it's a lady we see,
Who's doing the housework on TV.

The piece goes on to describe vividly all of the awful everyday tasks women are expected to do with a cheerful disposition, only pointing out that the woman being portrayed is actually an actress and is getting paid to pretend to enjoy it. The conclusion of the piece brings the message home forcefully without resorting to vindictiveness.

So, the very next time you happen to be
Just sitting there quietly watching TV,
And you see some nice lady who smiles
As she scours or scrubs or rubs or washes or wipes or mops or dusts or cleans,
Remember, nobody smiles doing housework but those ladies you see on TV.
Your mommy hates housework,
Your daddy hates housework,
I hate housework too.
And when you grow up, so will you.
Because even if the soap or cleanser or cleaner or powder or paste or wax or bleach
That you use is the very best one,
Housework is just no fun.
Children, when you have a house of your own,
Make sure, when there's house work to do,
That you don't have to do it alone.
Little boys, little girls, when you're big husbands and wives,
If you want all the days of your lives
To seem sunny as summer weather,
Make sure, when there's housework to do,
That you do it together!

Once again, instead of taking an aggressive, possibly alienating tone, the piece argues for egalitarian cooperation, bringing home the point that housework is a necessary evil which can perhaps be made more bearable when done as a team.

Brief mention should be made of the poems *Helping* and *Ladies First* by the legendary children's writer and musician Shel Silverstein, the latter of which graphically demonstrates what being a little lady can lead to.

Did you hear the one about the little girl who was a tender, sweet young thing?
Well, that's the way she thought of herself

And this tender, sweet young thing spent a great deal of time just looking in the mirror and saying:
“I am a real little lady. Anybody could tell that
I wear lovely starched cotton dresses with matching ribbons in my lovely curly locks
I wear clean white socks and shiny black patent leather shoes, and I always put just a dab of
perfume behind each ear.”
When she was at the end of the lunch line at school, all she had to say was:
“Ladies first, ladies first.”
And she’d get right up to the front of the line.

This strategy serves her very well until she ends up in darkest Africa captured by a gang of voracious tigers along with a group of other children. The big cats cannot decide who to eat first and the little girl cannot help coming to their assistance. The poem ends with the typical black humor Silverstein is known for.

“Looks tender... smells nice. In fact I never saw anything quite like it before. I wonder what it is?”
“I am a tender, sweet young thing.”
“Oh, far out,” said the tiger chief
“I am also a little lady. You should know that by my lovely clothes and my lovely smell
And if it’s all the same to you, Tiger Tweetie, I wish you’d stop licking me
And untie me this instant! My dress is getting mussed.”
“Yes... uh...” the tiger said. “Well, as a matter of fact, we were all just... uh... trying to decide who to untie first.”
“Ladies first! Ladies first!” she said. And so she was
And mighty tasty, too.

It’s All Right to Cry, again by Carol Hall, was sung unforgettably by the hulking African American, former football player, Rosey Grier. The contrast between the imposing physical size of the athlete and the sentiments of the song was part and parcel of the impact of the piece. Thomas comments on the songs once again in her memoir:

My friend (and co-producer) Carole Hart and I began to develop the album by sitting around with the writers and talking about our own childhoods, and what we would have liked to change about them. “I’d like to have heard that it wasn’t a sissy thing for a boy to cry,” Herb Gardner said. And Carol Hall wrote the terrific song ‘It’s All Right to Cry.’¹⁴

It’s all right to cry
Crying gets the sad out of you
It’s all right to cry
It might make you feel better

Raindrops from your eyes
Washing all the mad out of you
Raindrops from your eyes
It’s gonna make you feel better

It’s all right to feel things
Though the feelings may be strange

14 Thomas, *Growing Up*, chap. 36, epub.

Feelings are such real things
And they change, and change, and change.

The arguably most controversial piece in the collection *William's Doll* was the work of Mary Rodgers and Sheldon Harnick and performed by the acting legend Alan Alda and Thomas once again. It was based on a book by Charlotte Zolotow from 1972 which was one of the first children's books to address gender stereotypes.

When my friend William was five years old
He wanted a doll, to hug and hold
"A doll," said William, "is what I need
To wash and clean, and dress and feed
"A Doll to give a bottle to
And put to bed when day is through
And any time my doll gets ill
I'll take good care of it," said my friend Bill
A doll, a doll, William wants a doll
Don't be a sissy said his best friend Ed
Why should a boy want to play with a doll
Dolls are for girls said his cousin Fred
Don't be a jerk, said his older brother.

His father comes to the rescue and buys him traditional masculine toys hoping to cure him of his quirky interest. William enjoys these "manly" pursuits and even excels at some of them, but still insists on the doll. He is mocked once again, until finally his grandmother comes for a visit and is finally the first to accept his request with understanding. When her son, William's father objects, she reminds me wisely that this will make him a better father one day.

So William's grandma, as I've been told
Bought William a doll, to hug and hold
And William's father began to frown
But grandma smiled, and calmed him down
Explaining, William wants a doll
So when he has a baby someday
He'll know how to dress it, put diapers on double
And gently caress it to bring up a bubble
And care for his baby as every good father
Should learn to do
William has a doll, William has a doll
'Cause someday he is gonna be a father, too.

This, once again, relatively innocuous piece actually became the most difficult contribution to push through. Thomas explains: "The execs at the network were terrified of the program's messages. They begged us to take out "William Wants a Doll," ... Telling little boys that "It's All Right to Cry" was bad enough. But telling little boys it's okay to cuddle a doll? That was dangerous."¹⁵ The poem's message, of course, is that not allowing this behavior or drawing increased attention to it

¹⁵ Thomas, *Growing Up*, chap. 36, epub.

is far more dangerous in the end to a child's psyche and development and will eventually hamper an adult man's ability to care for his own children down the line.

The story *Atalanta* is based on the Greek legend revolving around a proto-feminist character of sorts. This updated version was written by Betty Miles and voiced once again by Alda and Thomas. In classic fairy-tale fashion, the king decides to marry off his daughter to the best suitor, disregarding the wishes of the princess Atalanta despite her reasonable request. "You don't have to choose, Father," Atalanta said. "I will choose. And I'm not sure that I will choose to marry anyone at all." The race is organized, with the winner supposed to win her hand in marriage. Atalanta, however, decides to run in the race herself and ends up crossing the finish line in a dead heat with Young John, the only one of the suitors who seems to respect Atalanta's person. The king insists on giving his daughter to him in marriage, only to be surprised by the young man's response. "Thank you, sir," said John to the king, "but I could not possibly marry your daughter unless she wished to marry me. I have run this race for the chance to talk with Atalanta, and, if she is willing, I am ready to claim my prize." The two young people become fast friends and decide to seek their fortunes on their own. We are left with a variation on the fairy-tale "happy ending": "Perhaps someday they will be married, and perhaps they will not. In any case, they are friends. And it is certain that they are both living happily ever after." The ancient origin of the story lends the message weight and legitimacy.

These songs and stories have been part of the soundtrack of my life. I was personally exposed to the album and program at around the age of eight or nine and was immediately attracted to not only the music but the joyful message. Upon having my own children, I began to pass this message on. I would occasionally sing *It's Alright to Cry* to my wife and children when they were upset. I have recently included the title song *Free To Be... You and Me* in my own occasional performances for children, accompanying myself on the banjo. Most recently, I gave a dramatic reading, along with a colleague, of *Boy Meets Girl* at the conference in Pardubice where I first presented this paper, hopefully to the enjoyment of the admittedly small online audience. In a recent review of the series *Mrs. America*, the critic Jen Chaney also draws attention to the use of *Free to Be... You and Me* in the fifth episode. Chaney first makes note of the contrast between the events in the episode of *Mrs. America* involving misogyny and homophobia and the hopeful message of *Free to Be... You and Me*. She writes that "It blew our little minds ... It was conditioning the next generation to see the world, and gender, in a healthier way."¹⁶ Marlo Thomas and her project contributed to the liberation and pleasure of not only myself, but millions of others and will hopefully continue to find an audience in the years to come.

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¹⁶ Jen Cheney, "Mrs. America Recap: Free to Be You and Me," *Vulture*, April 29, 2020, available at: <<https://www.vulture.com/2020/04/mrs-america-episode-5-recap-phyllis-and-fred-and-brenda-and-marc.html>>.

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