

## case one

# Madonna

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## ■ THE STRUGGLE ■

In July 1978, shortly before her 20th birthday, Madonna Louise Ciccone arrived in New York City with \$35 in her pocket. She had left Ann Arbor where she was majoring in dance at the University of Michigan. Madonna was raised in the suburbs of Detroit. The third of eight children, her mother had died when she was 6 years old. Her prospects in the world of show business looked poor. Apart from her training in dance, she had little musical background and no contacts.

Life in New York was a struggle. "I worked at Dunkin' Donuts, I worked at Burger King, I worked at Amy's. I had a lot of jobs that lasted one day. I always talked back to people and they'd fire me. I was a coat-check girl at the Russian Tea Room. I worked at a health club once a week."<sup>1</sup> She spent a few months training with the Alvin Ailey Dance Theater and had a succession of modeling engagements for photographers and artists. During 1979, Madonna explored a wider range of opportunities. With new boyfriend Dan Gilroy, his brother Ed, and bassist Angie Smit, "Breakfast Club" was formed, with Madonna sharing vocals and drums with Dan. For 6 months Madonna was dancer and backup singer to French singing star Patrick Hernandez, during which time she performed in Paris and around Europe and North Africa. In August 1979, Madonna was offered the lead role in underground movie director Stephen Lewicki's low-budget film *A Certain Sacrifice*.

After breaking up with Dan Gilmore, Madonna was nomadic, sleeping on the couches of various friends and acquaintances before finding a commercial loft in the garment district. "There was no hot water. There wasn't even a fucking shower."<sup>2</sup> "At one point I was living in a New York flophouse and eating out of garbage cans."<sup>3</sup>

In a new effort to form a band, Madonna invited her former Michigan boyfriend, Steve Bray, to New York. They moved into the Music Building – a converted 12-story building crammed with studios, rehearsal rooms, and striving, impoverished young bands. Together they worked on writing songs and developing their sound. The result-

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ing rock band, “Emmy,” made little impression, but Madonna maintained a continuous stream of calls to managers, agents, record companies, and club owners. Camille Barbone offered a management contract – but only for Madonna. However, Barbone was unable to deliver success fast enough for Madonna and after 18 months Madonna fired her.

### Finding a Sound, Finding a Style

During 1981, Madonna’s music and image moved in a new direction. Influenced by the emerging dance scene in New York, Madonna moved increasingly from Pretenders/Pat Benatar rock to the dance music that was sweeping New York clubs. In addition to working with Steve Bray to develop songs and mix demo tapes, she worked on her image – a form of glam-grunge that featured multilayered, multicolored combinations of thrift-store clothing together with scarves and junk jewelry. She adopted “Boy Toy” as her “tag name” and prominently displayed it on her belt buckle. It was a look that she would continue to develop with the help of jewelry designer Maripole. Her trademark look of messy, badly dyed hair, neon rubber bracelets, black lace bras, white lace gloves, and chunky belt buckles would soon be seen on teenage girls throughout the world.

Madonna was quick to recognize the commercial implications of the new musical wave – it was the dance clubs that were key inroads and the DJs who were the key gatekeepers. Armed with her demo tapes, Madonna and her friends increasingly frequented the hottest dance clubs where they would make a splash with their flamboyant clothing and provocative dancing. At Danceteria, one of the staff referred to her as a “heat-seeking missile targeting the hottest DJs.” There she attracted the attention of DJ Mark Kamins who introduced her to Mike Rosenblatt and Seymour Stein of Sire Records. A recording contract and \$5,000 were soon hers.

The first release was a 12-inch single with different versions of *Everybody* on each side. The record gained extensive dance-club play. Madonna began working on her first album. Although she had promised both longtime friend and music collaborator Steve Bray and DJ Mark Kamins the job of producer, she dumped both in favor of Warner Records’ house producer, Reggie Lucas. Together with Warner Records’ national dance promoter, Bobby Shaw, Madonna began a relentless round of courting DJs and pushing her record for play time. Central to the promotion plan was New York’s hottest DJ, John “Jellybean” Benitez, who Madonna began dating in November 1982.

Her second single, *Burning Up*, with *Physical Attraction* (written by Reggie Lewis) on the B-side, was released in March 1983. It too was a dance-club hit and bounded up the dance charts to number three. With full attention and full resources of Warner Brothers and a network of DJs, Madonna had most of the pieces she needed in place – but not quite. Early in 1983 she flew to Los Angeles to visit Freddie DeMann, then manager of megastar Michael Jackson. DeMann remembers the meeting vividly: “I was knocked off my feet. I’ve never met a more physical human being in my life.” In a short time DeMann dropped Michael Jackson in favor of managing Madonna.

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**Breakthrough**

The record album *Madonna* was released in July 1983. By the end of 1983, the record was climbing the US album charts supported by the success of single release *Holiday*. In April 1984, another single release from the album, *Borderline*, became Madonna's first top-10 hit. At Madonna's national TV debut on *American Bandstand*, presenter Dick Clark asked Madonna "What do you really want to do when you grow up?" "Rule the world," she replied.

Within little more than a year Madonna was partway there. The fall of 1984 saw Madonna filming in *Desperately Seeking Susan*. Although initially hired as support for the movie's star, Rosanna Arquette, Madonna soon turned the movie into a vehicle for herself. By the time the shooting was complete, it was essentially a movie about Madonna playing herself, wearing her own style of clothes, and featuring her own music. The release of the movie coincided with a surge of Madonna-mania. Her second album, *Like a Virgin*, had gone triple-platinum in February 1985, while the singles charts featured a succession of individual tracks from the album. Madonna's first concert tour was a sell-out. Her marriage to bad-boy actor Sean Penn on August 16, 1985 further reinforced her celebrity status. When Madonna took up residence in Los Angeles during 1985, she was already a star and seldom far from the popular press headlines.

**■ FAME, FORTUNE, NOTORIETY ■**

During the next two decades, little would come between Madonna and her quest for fame. Between 1986 and 1990, she released six record albums. The 16 single releases from these albums gave her a near-continuous presence in the charts including a remarkable seven number one hits.<sup>4</sup> In the process, Madonna rejected the industry's conventional wisdom of "Find a winning formula and stick to it." Madonna's career was a continuous experimentation with new musical ideas and new images, and a constant quest for new heights of fame and acclaim. Having established herself as the queen of popular music, Madonna did not stop there. By the end of the 1980s she was destined to be "the most famous woman on the planet."

**Madonna in Charge**

Behind Madonna's rags-to-riches story is her own drive, determination, and appetite for hard work. "I'm tough, I'm ambitious, and I know exactly what I want – and if that makes me a bitch, that's okay," she told the London *News of the World* newspaper in 1985. On the set of *Desperately Seeking Susan* she maintained a blistering pace. "During the shoot we'd often get home at 11:00 or 12:00 at night and have to be back at 6:00 or 7:00 the next morning. Half the time the driver would pick up Madonna at her health club. She'd get up at 4:30 in the morning to work out first."<sup>5</sup>

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There was never any doubt as to who was in charge of managing and developing Madonna's career. While Madonna relied upon some of the best minds and strongest companies in the entertainment business, there was never any ambiguity as to who was calling the shots. In addition to Freddie DeMann as manager, Madonna hired top lawyer Paul Schindler to represent her business deals. Her swift exit from her marriage with Sean Penn further emphasized her unwillingness to allow messy personal relationships to compromise her career goals. When it came to her third album – *True Blue* – released in June 1986 – Madonna insisted on being co-producer.

The best evidence of her hands-on management style is the documentary of her 1990 “Blonde Ambition” tour, *Truth or Dare*. The tour itself was a masterpiece of the pop concert as multimedia show embracing music, dance, and theater. The tour's planning began in September 1989. Madonna was involved in every aspect of the show's design and planning, including auditioning dancers and musicians, planning, costume design, and choice of themes. For example, Madonna worked closely with Jean-Paul Gaultier on the metallic, cone-breasted costumes that became one of the tour's most vivid images. On the tour itself, the *Truth or Dare* movie revealed Madonna as both creative director and operations supremo. In addition to her obsessive attention to every detail of the show's production, she was the undisputed organizational leader responsible for building team spirit among the diverse group of dancers, musicians, choreographers, and technicians, motivating the troupe when times were tough; resolving disputes between her fractious and highly strung male dancers; and establishing the highest standards of commitment and effort.

The summer of 1990 marked new heights of international obsession with Madonna. The “Blonde Ambition” tour was the must-see concert of that summer in North America, Europe and Japan. The tour coincided with the release of *Dick Tracy*, the Disney movie that was a vehicle for the high-profile lovers – Madonna and Warren Beatty. The film did much to rectify a string of Hollywood flops and scathing reviews of Madonna's own acting capabilities. Madonna's portrayal of Breathless Mahoney exuded her natural talents for style and seductiveness and became her biggest box office hit to date, and allowed her to indulge in her seductiveness. In the September 4, MTV annual music awards, Madonna yet again stole the show with a version of her *Vogue* single in which she portrayed French queen, Marie Antoinette.

### Fame and Controversy

From her initial launch into stardom, Madonna's fame was tinged with notoriety. From the early days of her singing career, her overt sexuality was reinforced by her “Boy Toy” moniker. This combined with her sexually audacious, expletive-laced talk and use of crucifixes as items of jewelry raised disquiet within conservative and religious circles. Madonna's explanation only added fuel to the fire: “Crucifixes are sexy because there's a naked man on them.” With every video and interview, Madonna was pushing a little harder against the boundaries of acceptable language, behavior, and imagery. Her *Like a Prayer* album, released in March 1989 proved to be a landmark in this process.

Pepsi Cola saw the opportunity to piggy-back on the surge of Madonna-mania by making an advertising video based upon the album's title track *Like a Prayer*. Madonna

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received \$5 million for appearing in the video. What Pepsi had not taken into account was that Madonna was making her own music video of *Like a Prayer* to accompany the launch of the record. The day after the first broadcast of the Pepsi commercial, Madonna's own *Like a Prayer* video appeared on MTV. The video was a stunning mixture of sex and religion that featured Madonna dancing in front of burning crosses, making love on an altar, and revealing stigmata on her hands. The video outraged many Christian groups and the American Family Association threatened to boycott Pepsi products. Pepsi pulled its Madonna commercial, leaving Madonna with \$5 million in the bank.

The explicit sexuality of the "Blonde Ambition" tour and its mixing of sexual and religious imagery resulted in Madonna achieving new heights of controversy – and public awareness. In Toronto, city authorities threatened to cancel the show. The Vatican condemned the show as "blasphemous." Her *Justify My Love* video released in November 1990 set a new record for Madonna – it was banned by MTV on the basis of its inclusion of homosexuality, voyeurism, nudity, sado-masochism, and oral sex. Again, Madonna was quick to turn controversy into profit: as soon as MTV refused to air *Justify My Love*, the video was rush released for retail sale. The publicity generated helped the *Justify My Love* single to the top of the charts.

During the early 1990s, Madonna continued to break new ground in sexual explicitness. Her photographic "art" book *Sex* featured Madonna in an array of sexual poses. The book itself introduced several marketing and design innovations from its unusual size (14 by 11 inches), its stainless steel covers and spiral binding, its sale in sealed wrapping, and its inclusion of Madonna's latest CD, *Erotica*. And it was a smash hit. Despite its high price (\$49.95 for 120 pages) the book sold half a million copies in its first week. The record too went beyond any of Madonna's prior albums in terms of the sexually explicit content of its lyrics and supporting videos.

## ■ EVITA ■

While Madonna has been compared to previous superstars and goddesses of sex and glamour – Greta Garbo, Marilyn Monroe, Mae West, Brigitte Bardot – she has gone further in creating a persona that transcends her work as an entertainer. All the prior-mentioned female superstars were defined by their movie roles. The same is true of the big names in popular music, from Lena Horne to Janet Jackson. Madonna achieved a status that was no longer defined by her work. By the 1990s, Madonna was no longer famous as a rock singer or an actress – she was famous for being Madonna. For the next decade she worked to reinforce this status. Strategically, superstar status has much to commend it. Joining the pantheon of superstars acts as insulation from comparison with lesser mortals. As her website proclaims, she is "icon, artist, provocateur, diva, and mogul."

In her acting roles the key has been to take roles which are primarily vehicles for Madonna to be Madonna. Her successes in *Desperately Seeking Susan* and *Dick Tracy* were the result of roles where Madonna could be herself. However, both these roles were to be eclipsed by Madonna's portrayal of Eva Peron in the movie version of the Andrew Lloyd Webber musical *Evita*. Madonna had coveted the role for years and mounted a vigorous campaign to gain the support of director Alan Parker and Argentine

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President Carlos Menem. While in previous roles Madonna had been able to use her talents as a singer, a poser, a sharp talker, and a seductress, in *Evita* Madonna could present her own life. Like Madonna, *Evita* had working class origins, a burning ambition, and had used sex and shrewd judgement to become a legend in her time. The film, released in December 1996, was a huge commercial and critical success. As *Q* magazine's Paul Du Noyer remarked, "If ever there was an ideal vehicle for Madonna's dream of transcendent stardom, this must be it."<sup>6</sup>

### ■ MOTHERHOOD, AND MORE ■

During most of the filming of *Evita*, Madonna was coping with her pregnancy. On October 14, 1996, she gave birth to Lourdes Maria Ciccone Leon at the Good Samaritan Hospital in Los Angeles. The baby's father was Carlos Leon, Madonna's personal trainer.

In terms of her life, image, and career, motherhood was a major discontinuity for Madonna. The press began reporting a host of life style changes: Madonna abandoned pumping iron in favor of yoga, she had begun to study Kabbalah ("A mystical interpretation of the Old Testament," she explained), she developed a closer circle of women friends, she spent increasing amounts of time writing music, she became less available to the media. Her interviews were amazingly devoid of sex, expletives, and shock value. "I think [motherhood] made me face up to my more feminine side. I had a much more masculine view of the world. What I missed and longed for was that unconditional love that a mother gives you. And so, having my daughter is the same kind of thing. It's like that first, true, pure, unconditional love."<sup>7</sup>

The clearest revelation of these changes was in Madonna's new album, *Ray of Light*, which was unlike any previous Madonna album. Working with William Orbit, the album incorporated a host of new influences: electronic music; traditional Indian music; Madonna's thoughts about the troubles of the world and the hollowness of fame; Madonna's own emotional development and her reflection on her unhappy childhood. In performing tracks from the album both on TV and on video, Madonna revealed a series of entirely new looks including Madonna as Goth-Girl (black hair, black clothes, black nail polish), Madonna as Shiva (multi-armed with henna tattoos on her hands), Madonna as geisha (straight black hair, kimono, and white makeup).

The new persona was the most ambitious and risky reinvention of Madonna's career, insofar as it was the first that was not founded upon sexuality and sexual aggression. Yet this transformation was met with no loss of popularity or worldwide acclaim. *Ray of Light* hit number two on the album charts and went triple platinum (over 3 million copies) on the basis of US sales alone, and at the MTV Music Video Awards she walked away with a total of six awards followed by three Grammy Awards.

### ■ MADONNA AS INVESTOR AND BUSINESS MANAGER ■

Not only did Madonna maintain control over her own content; she increasingly wanted a cut in distribution too. In April 1992 she signed a \$60 million deal with Time Warner,

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Inc. The joint venture, Maverick Records, was a music production company (together with TV, video, and music publishing wings) that was to provide a vehicle for Madonna's creative and promotional talent. Warner Records provided distribution. Although Madonna remained contracted to Warner Records for her own recordings, Maverick offered an avenue for her to develop and promote other singers and musicians.

During the late 1990s her efforts became increasingly focused towards identifying and nurturing emerging young singers and musicians, relying upon her creative and promotional intuition and experience, the wealth of talented specialists and media moguls who were part of her personal networks, and, above all, her ability to open any door in the business. Among Maverick's early signings was Canadian singer/songwriter Alanis Morissette, whose *Jagged Little Pill* album sold over 30 million copies. Through Madonna's links with director Mike Myers, Maverick released the soundtrack for the Austin Powers movie *The Spy Who Shagged Me*. Other Maverick artists included William Orbit, Prodigy, Ben Jelen, Muse, the Deftones, Erasure, Tantric, and Michelle Branch. Madonna also teamed up with British comedian-rapper Ali G, and helped him to launch himself on to the US market.

Madonna's interest in new musicians and in developing and producing their music was linked closely to her own widening musical interests. Her involvement with William Orbit on *Ray of Light* was followed by increased interest both in electronic and world music, including collaboration with the French electro-boffin, Mirwais. But Madonna's interests also embraced more standard popular music. In February 2000, Madonna's recording of the 1971 hit *American Pie* became an international best-seller.

Madonna's business interests extended beyond records. Through a series of collaborative ventures, Madonna became involved in a series of movie, TV, and pop video productions. With her Maverick Records partner, Guy Oseary, Madonna set up Madguy Films. Among the Madguy projects were several television films based on music history and culture, including *The Dusty Springfield Story*. In collaboration with New Line Films, Madguy also produced the 2002 movie *Turn It Up* featuring the Fugee's Pras.

## ■ THE NEW DECADE ■

During the new millennium, neither Madonna's career nor her popularity showed much sign of flagging. In 2000 Madonna set up home in London with a new partner, the actor and director Guy Ritchie. In August, shortly before her 42nd birthday, Madonna gave birth to her second child, Rocco. In the following month, her new album, *Music*, was released. The album was an immediate hit, topping the album charts within two weeks. In October, the *Music* single from the album became her 12th number one single in the US. On December 22, Madonna and Ritchie were married at Dornoch Castle in Scotland.

After an 8-year lapse, 2001 marked Madonna's return to concert touring. The "Drowned World" tour opened in Europe with shows in Barcelona and Milan followed by a run of shows at London's Earls Court before moving on to its US leg. Like prior Madonna concert tours, the show was a sophisticated and meticulously planned multimedia event embracing music, light, video projection, elaborate dance scenes, and pure theater – including Madonna riding a mechanical bull. Observations of

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Madonna's audience for the shows suggested that the adoring fans who bought tickets for Madonna's "Drowned World" concerts were not the same people who had attended her earlier tours – they were, for the most part, simply too young. Unlike the aging fans of aging rock stars from Bob Dylan to Tom Jones, Madonna's successive reinventions had been successful not just in renewing her appeal to existing fans, but in creating new audiences in entirely new generations, some of whom had not been born when she recorded her debut album.

With the 20th anniversary of Madonna's first album release, she celebrated the occasion by topping the album charts in March 2003 with her new release *American Life*. Outside of music her artistic efforts met less success. Her 2002 London stage performance in the leading role of the comedy *Up for Grabs* and her *Swept Away* movie co-starring with Guy Ritchie were both panned by the critics. These set-backs do little to dent Madonna's entry into new fields. During 2003 she published the first two in a series of children's books. The first, *The English Roses*, was printed in 42 languages and launched in 100 countries. As part of a deal with The Gap in which Madonna promoted Gap clothing, the book was distributed through Gap stores.

## APPENDIX

### Madonna's Biographical Timeline

- 1958:** Born August 16 in Bay City, Michigan to Sylvio Ciccone (design engineer for Chrysler and General Motors) and Madonna Ciccone.
- 1964:** Mother dies of breast cancer.
- 1973:** Starts at Rochester Adams High School.
- 1976:** Freshman at University of Michigan, Ann Arbor; majoring in drama.
- 1977:** July: arrives in New York City with \$35.  
September: begins training with Alvin Ailey Dance Theater.
- 1979:** Flies to Paris, becomes back-up singer for Patrick Hernandez.  
Joins Dan and Ed Gilroy to form "Breakfast Club."  
Lands part of Bruna in underground movie *A Certain Sacrifice*.
- 1980:** Forms rock band "Emmy" with Steve Bray.
- 1982:** Establishes friendship with DJ Mark Kamins.  
Signs recording contract with Sire Records (division of Warner Brothers).  
First record release, *Everybody*, goes to #3 in the dance charts.  
Begins dating DJ John "Jellybean" Benitez.
- 1983:** Second single, *Burning Up/Physical Attraction*, reaches #3 in dance charts.  
Release of first record album, *Madonna*; first top ten hit, *Borderline*.  
Persuades Freddie DeMann (Michael Jackson's manager) to become her manager.  
Appears in the movie *Vision Quest*.
- 1984:** TV appearance on *American Bandstand*.  
Appears and performs on annual MTV Awards.  
Release of second record album *Like A Virgin* (produced by Nilas Rodgers); sells 7 million copies worldwide.  
Begins work on major studio movie *Desperately Seeking Susan*.

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- 1985:** “Virgin” tour opens April 10 in Seattle.  
Signs merchandising deal for official Madonna Boy-Toy clothing designs sold under the Wazoo label.  
Appears in *Live Aid* charity concert (London/Philadelphia, July 13).  
Marries Sean Penn.
- 1986:** Releases *True Blue* album.  
Shoots *Shanghai Surprise* with Sean Penn.  
Establishes her own film production company, Siren Productions, backed by Universal Studios.
- 1987:** “Who’s That Girl” tour opens Osaka, Japan on June 14; closes in Turin, Italy. *Who’s That Girl* album and film also released.
- 1989:** Divorce with Sean Penn (January 10).  
Signs contract with Pepsi to produce video commercial based upon *Like A Prayer*.  
Pepsi pays Madonna \$5 million.  
Madonna’s own video *Like A Prayer* creates storm of protest from Christian groups.  
Pepsi pulls its commercial after just one showing.  
Releases *Like A Prayer* album.  
Plays Breathless Mahoney in *Dick Tracy*, co-starring with Warren Beatty.  
Begins affair with Warren Beatty.
- 1990:** Album releases: *I’m Breathless* and *The Immaculate Collection*.  
“Blonde Ambition” world concert tour kicks off in Tokyo, April 13. Shows in Toronto and Italy threatened with closure because of their explicit sexual content.  
MTV refuses to screen Madonna’s *Justify My Love* video.
- 1991:** *Truth Or Dare* documentary of “Blonde Ambition” tour is released.  
Appears in Woody Allen’s *Shadows and Fog*.
- 1992:** Grammy Award: Best Music Video (Long Form), *Madonna: Blonde Ambition World Tour Live*; award shared with Dave Mallet, Mark “Aldo” Miceli and Tony Eaton.  
Release of photographic book *Sex*: sells 500,000 copies in first week; tops *New York Times* best-seller list.  
Release of feature movie, *A League of Their Own*.  
Madonna signs deal with Time Warner to create Maverick, her own record label.
- 1993:** Movie releases: *Body Of Evidence* and *Dangerous Game*.
- 1994:** *Bedtime Stories* album released.
- 1995:** Releases *Something to Remember* album.  
Movie releases include *Blue In The Face* and *Four Rooms*.
- 1996:** Release of *Evita* in which Madonna plays Eva Peron. Wins Golden Globe Award for Best Actress in a Motion Picture (Musical or Comedy).  
Also release of the movie *Girl 6*.  
Gives birth to Lourdes Maria Ciccone Leon, October 14; father is Carlos Leon.
- 1997:** Release of *Ray of Light* album, which in 1998 wins three Grammy Awards in the categories Dance Recording, Pop Album, and Music Video, and two MTV Video Music Awards.
- 1999:** Grammy Award for *Beautiful Stranger* – best song written for a motion picture, television or other visual media (shared with William Orbit).  
Release of movie *The Next Best Thing*.
- 2000:** Son, Rocco Ritchie born August 11, 2000; father is actor/director Guy Ritchie.  
Release of new album, *Music*.  
Wins WIPO arbitration to gain control of Madonna.com domain name.  
Marries Guy Ritchie at Dornoch Castle, Scotland.

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- 2001:** July–Sept. “Drowned World” concert tour kicks off in London prior to US.
- 2002:** US release of movie *Swept Away* – goes direct to video in UK.  
Lead role in London stage comedy *Up for Grabs*.
- 2003:** Release of *American Life* album.  
Publication of children’s books *The English Roses* and *Mr Peabody’s Apples*.

## NOTES

1. Mark Bego, *Madonna: Blonde Ambition*, Cooper Square, New York, 2000, p. 46.
2. Bill Zehme, “Madonna: Candid about music, movies, and marriage,” *Rolling Stone*, March 23, 1989.
3. Scott Cohen, “Confessions of Madonna,” *Spin*, May 1985.
4. Her Billboard number ones during 1986–90 were: *Live to Tell* (1986), *Papa Don’t Preach* (1986), *Open Your Heart* (1986), *Who’s that Girl* (1987), *Like a Prayer* (1988), *Vogue* (1990), *Justify my Love* (1990).
5. Carl Arrington, “Madonna,” *People*, March 11, 1985.
6. “Commanding” (Review of *Evita*), *Q*, December 1996.
7. Mary Murphy, “Madonna Confidential,” *TV Guide*, April 11–17, 1998.