

Women on top: Female Execs rise in Porn biz

Some say they're trying to instill change while others see them as 'traitors'

by **Brian Alexander**

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Joy King laughs at the stereotype of the porn king as a skeezy guy in gold neck chains, a paunch and the sunglasses Elliott Gould wore in "Ocean's Eleven".

"There is still this perception that the porn industry is all run by men. And not very nice men," said King who is vice president of special projects at major adult film company Wicked Pictures. "It is not widely known how many women executives there are in this industry."

King -- the woman who helped turn porn actress sensation Jenna Jameson into a brand -- proves her own point. For years, she has been a leading figure in the world of "Adult" (as it is commonly known). But hardly anyone outside that world has ever heard of her.

People have heard of Christie Hefner, of course. She is Hugh's daughter who runs Playboy. But from the owner of the small adult store near you to video directors, to promoters, to online porn purveyors, women have quietly become integral to the world of adult entertainment in ways that have nothing to do with wearing stripper heels and a big smile.

One of the earliest pioneers of Internet naughtiness was a woman named Danni Ashe who built her own small digital empire in the early 1990s.

The co-owner of "Digital Playground" (one of the nation's top producers of X-rated movies) is a woman who goes by the name Samantha Lewis. A mother, married to a Los Angeles television personality, Lewis used to work in real estate before investing in porn.

Susan Colvin -- who trained for a career in public administration -- owns California Exotic Novelties (one of the "Big Five" sex-toy makers).

Former performer Candida Royalle started and runs her own production company (Femme) to make X-rated movies for the "couples" market. She also endorses a line of sex toys.

Once an executive with Planned Parenthood, Diane Duke now runs the Free Speech Coalition. It is the public policy umbrella organization that advocates for the adult industry. Many other women work in upper and middle management. Some have struck out on their own to create websites. Others have started porn's version of "indie" movie outfits.

Having such women in charge might help lift the taboo that, as King says, "sort of lays like a mist over the adult industry". But it is not likely to cool the fervor of anti-porn feminists. And while female executives and owners say they hope to bring new perspectives to *erotica* so that performers receive better treatment, the product improves and there is less misogyny, they may be hindered by economics.

Surprisingly, many women who work in the business say they don't like porn. At least not the porn that takes up most of the shelf space in adult stores or is downloaded from the Internet. They do not object for moral reasons. They just think it's a crummy product and often far too misogynistic.

Even King -- who likes and watches porn even when it's not part of her job -- finds a lot of "adult entertainment" neither very adult nor entertaining. Especially the types like the "Girls Gone Wild" genre that, she says, takes advantage of drunken girls. She defends it on free speech grounds. But that doesn't mean she likes it.

Some women are trying to instill change using as leverage the fact that porn is one industry that can't exist without females (which is why women performers almost always make more money than men and call their male counterparts "furniture").

Being called 'Traitor'

But good intentions and economic empowerment certainly do not mollify anti-porn feminists. "I think the nicest word they have ever used to describe me is 'brainwashed'," said veteran performer and business owner Nina Hartley. "Usually it's more like 'traitor'."

An organization called Stop Porn Culture (a group of academics and activists who believe that "patriarchal, capitalist society" fosters porn) states that regardless of who is in charge, many female performers "are under a variety of constraints such as economic hardship and a perceived lack of options. ... We are critical of the industry that exploits these women and not the women themselves."

King finds this 30-year-old argument unconvincing. "If you look at a single mom trying to put herself through college and she works at a strip club, is she a victim? She's found a way to earn more than she could waiting tables and working 3 jobs. I don't see anything wrong with it."

University of California Santa Barbara film studies professor Constance Penley -- who studies the adult industry -- agreed. Name an industry that's different, she said. Because porn involves sex it is subject to what Penley calls "exceptionalism". It is not judged in the bigger cultural context. But it should be.

"You have to ask: Does it have more drug abuse or more suicides; more incidents of girls being sexually abused as children; more cosmetic surgery than Hollywood, TV, the recording industry?" she said. She pointed out that the answer is probably not. So why pick on sex movies?

All Business

Still, having more women signing the paychecks does not necessarily mean that the industry as a whole is better for female performers. This is because there is no such thing as "the Industry" just as there is no such thing as "the Media".

The sex business has become wildly diffuse thanks to digital technology, pirated downloads, and the ease of distribution. There are probably more producers of porn who exist outside industry organizations that try to set standards and police the business than inside them.

"We're competing with the guy with the camcorder who bought it for \$993 at Circuit City; who's got his girlfriend and somebody else; and they're gonna shoot it and have sex and put it on the Internet," director Kelly Holland told a Women in Film forum last year.

There are literally tens of thousands of "productions" made each year in the U.S. alone. Most of these are not coming from the bigger companies like the ones Holland works for.

This matters because while more executives may be women, Penley said “it is first and foremost a business.”

And at the moment, business is lousy. Profits have dropped under the onslaught of the same forces hurting newspapers, book publishers, and music companies.

“It is worse than the last recession,” King said. “We have rising fuel costs, the price of DVD cases tripled, and we cannot pass that on. And we have a very competitive industry.” More important, the Internet is stuffed with free and often pirated porn. Margins are now so bad that some companies have laid-off workers or shut their doors.

Costly Seduction

That inescapable fact works against changes women have tried to make in the products they produce and sell.

For example, several groups of women have tried to create explicit productions whether for cable TV, online distribution, or DVD purchase and rental that appeal specifically to a female sensibility. But aside from Candida Royalle’s Femme series (which gets a big boost by being distributed through mail order giant Adam and Eve), such efforts have been slow to take hold.

They may never take hold. Sensuality, seduction, plot, and even good lighting can cost money. “The bulk of pornography is being produced for \$17,000,” Holland told the forum. “My budgets are \$60,000 for a day-and-a-half shoot. We do 2 movies in 3 days and each budget is approximately \$60,000. That is astronomically high right now.”

So while more women are calling the shots, they have to respond to a market of primarily male consumers -- many of whom find plots simply a waste of time.

Many producers have to crank out sex scenes. And most non-star performers have to appear in a lot of them to make any money.

Just because Jenna Jameson got rich doesn’t mean others will. In fact, there will probably never be another Jenna.

“The average lifespan of a porn star now is anywhere from 6 months to 3 years, tops,” Sharon Mitchell (who runs the Adult Industry Medical Health Care Foundation) said in an interview with legal scholars for a 2006 article in the Vanderbilt Journal of Entertainment and Technology Law. “Then they’ve got no money ... They think the money’s not going to end. So they get a boob job and a Ferrari.”

Mitchell (herself a former actress) told the authors said that agents “are now recruiting people from literally the middle of the country who are 18 years old who haven’t remotely had any type of sex, let alone the type of sex they’re probably going to have tomorrow.” Too often, she said, “agents run them into the ground” signing them to make too many sex scenes. And that can lead to sexually-transmitted diseases.

Female directors, producers, and owners know all this and say they work to fight it -- partly by turning away young women they think are ill prepared. A few have suggested that producers should hire women who are at least 21 rather than 18.

“Do I like sleazy guys trying to take advantage of girls?” King said. “No. Nobody does.”

But they argue that tarring the entire adult world with the actions of some is like judging the entire television business by a guy eating animal guts on “Fear Factor”.

When women are making the decisions, they say that things are often different. Performers at King’s Wicked Pictures can choose their male partners, demand condoms, and command comparatively high salaries.

“We have been criticized by men in the business who say ‘Oh, you baby the girls. You pamper them too much,” said Shoosh (who uses one name), co-owner of Triangle Films, a small producer of lesbian-themed erotica. “I never set out to baby or pamper. I am just a mothering kind of person.”

Others -- such as Lewis of Digital Playground -- insist they are careful to coach actresses about the potential pitfalls of the industry.

Wicked makes about one movie per week, King said. And she watches every one for content. “If I’m offended by it, I am certainly going to say something and try to have it taken out of the movie.”

Still, as business owner Hartley explained, having a woman run the show is no guarantee of a workers’ paradise or a different kind of product. Women, she said, can be jerks and men can be gems.

“It’s not a question of gender. If being a feminist means anything at all, it means judging the content of character not the gonads they possess.”

an inside look at a Female Porn Executive's life

Joy King says she's faced some stigma, double standard in her career

by Brian Alexander
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Joy King has enjoyed her 24 years in the X-rated movie business. But that's not to say that it has always been an easy road. And especially for her personal life.

She grew up in Riverside, Calif., across the street from a horse ranch. "I moved when I could turn the key in the car," she said laughing, "and went west."

While working for an auto parts company, a girlfriend told King about a job opening at an entertainment business. "I was 19, 20 years old. And that sounded pretty good."

King was hired by a video distribution company that marketed kids' productions such as "GI Joe", "Strawberry Shortcake", "Gumby, and "Transformers." But the company also had an Adult division. And when the owners learned that King was not offended by the titles, they moved her there and she began marketing to the growing VHS adult market.



After becoming a single mother at 22, King realized she might face special challenges (not only financially but also socially). Working in porn -- even if off-camera -- was far less acceptable than it is today. She became especially vigilant to "keep work at work."

When her son was about 11, "I told him that mommy works in a business that he is not allowed to be around," King explained. "I said, 'We make adult movies only for adults. As you get older, you will understand more.'"

For her son, it wasn't the nature of the business that bothered him at first as much as it was King's hectic travel schedule once she moved to Wicked Pictures, located in California's Canoga Park. She is now the vice-president of special projects at Wicked.

But even though she works in management rather than on-camera, she's felt the stigma of her work. Once after King made an appearance on a talk show, the mother of her son's best friend refused to allow King's son to come to her home.

"That was very difficult for him. He was 13 at the time. People who meet me see that I am just a regular person. If you were to meet me at a grocery store or a restaurant and I were to say 'I promote porn. I make it. I'm not in it but I make it', well, most people are surprised. So I went over to her home and spoke to her and we resolved it. My son and her son are still close."

There is a certain irony to the story. When King was promoting Wicked's actresses, they would sometimes stay at her home (for example, the night before an early morning plane flight). "So as a 14-, 15-, 16-year-old kid, my son had Jenna Jameson staying at my house, actress Sydney Steele coming over, and actress Stephanie Swift staying over. You would think that would make him a little horndog who loves women."

But King's son, now 23, is gay. "If there was ever a situation that makes it clear being gay is not a choice but you are born that way, this is it!"

Her own love life has not been very successful she said. Mainly because of the nature of her industry.

"Men are either fans -- which is too much -- or they are maybe intimidated by the industry. Some just don't like it. So a certain portion of the population will not consider being in a relationship with me because of that."

How about dating inside the industry?

"I am not interested in dating the talent. I did that for about a minute, I admit. But I had to take a step back and think about my reputation as an executive and how my customers would feel about it."

One way the Adult industry is like any other, she said, is in its double standard for behavior in the corporate suites. "If I am whoring around, I have no integrity. If a man does it, it is just what goes on. When women have done it, it is frowned upon. Nobody thinks twice if a man does it."