

No One's Getting Fat Except

Mama Cass

In fat politics so much is made of role models.

Being a contrary sort of gal I am mistrustful of them, I think we should be our own goddesses, and I believe that worshipping a brittle pedestal-dweller only leads to disappointment.

By Charlotte Cooper

I secretly resent the relentless jolly emphasis on positive, upbeat, good, and when no one is looking I sneer at those women who appear to have got it made, who paper over the cracks in my life of poverty, guilt, and sadness. This is not to say that I am a complete stick-in-the-mud; the fat women I admire are bad ladies, nasty girls, spiky in their lives, real, unmanicured. Cass Elliott has caught my attention; she was a prominent fat woman, someone human and complex, someone who's life and death contradicts her mythology, and Cass is dead, she'll not dismay me, she's made her mistakes.

What I know about Mama Cass Elliott is scratchy. In rock and pop histories her entry is so often reduced to a sniggering coda. Everybody knows that Cass died alone choking on a ham sandwich, trying to jam it down her neck, greedy hateful fucking fat bitch. How can I know about her? Cass was fat and famous at a time when my popular history constructs this era as mini skirts, Twiggy, and diet pills. The Fat Underground and NAAFA had recently been born and I wonder whether she knew she had any public support for being fat, was she politicized? Did she feel lonely? Cass and those who love(d) her had no way of refuting the lies about her life, and the death rumor has outlived her, alongside all fat mythology: in life and death fat women are a ridiculous tragedy, always the source of our own downfall.



Front cover of *Mama's Big Ones; Mama Cass, Her Greatest Hits*; a product of ABC/Dunhill Records/L.A. Calif. Produced by Steve Barri. Art Direction & Design by Tom Gundelfinger

Cass Elliott was a symbol of an era, but her death is

Cass was the star of the *Mamas and Papas* because her voice and her fatness is memorable. Even a fan like me has difficulty naming the other three, who fade into a kind of pretty, bland, blond-ish hippie-ness. I saw the other female singer on daytime TV a couple of years ago demonstrating “Boxercise,” the “new exercise craze that’s sweeping the nation.” I can’t recall her face, her body was like every other Californian I ever get to see on telly, ditto her bizarre exercise demonstration; I just remember thinking “Cass knew this woman?!” Cass was cool, she was friends with cool people, she sang with The Mugwumps and Tim Rose, cool music, hell, even The Beatles called round her place and got blasted the day they finished *Sergeant Pepper*. How many cool famous fat women are there today? Excluding all the women who contribute to *FaT GiRL*, how many famous fat women would your groovy daughter, your fashionable friend, your hip self rate at all? Roseanne? Kathy Bates? Really?

Cass was a white singer named in the tradition of fat black women, and I might say that the name was appropriated. Ma Rainey, Big Mama Thornton, and the Mammy connection too; all painted as gutsy, rootsy, powerful women. Earth Mothers, all flowing fecundity and wide childbearing hips. I don’t care to say how truthful was this “strong black woman” trip, how it reflected the reality of life, just that the mythology around any fat women who sing, who are sexual, is as tight as can be. For Cass, a cool countercultural fat white bird who sang like a dream, I guess the Mama prefix was inevitable.

Cass was sexy too, with a famous libido “When Zally met Cass she gave him lovebumps.” Assuming she had much say in the matter, Cass played with her sexuality. I think that even if it was some record company marketing arsehole’s idea of fun, calling your record *Mama’s Big Ones* is cheeky enough, but draping your fat body provocatively over the cover is nothing short of saucy innuendo. People bought this record too. How did they feel about it? Did they approve?

As well as being an incongruent embodiment of the glamorous hippie, Cass was also very much of her time. I’ve heard people criticize the *Mamas and Papas* for commercializing what was originally not for sale, for being clean and perky when dope fiends were queuing up for treatment at the Haight-Ashbury free clinic. Cold-hearted post-modern me, *The Mamas and Papas* were the least of it, and anyway



Back Cover of *Mama’s Big Ones*; *Mama Cass, Her Greatest Hits*

I find the sell-out too kitsch. I like *The Monkees*, I like *The Sonny and Cher Show*, and I hope one day I’ll get to view tapes of Cass’ sold-down-the-river hippie TV program. In the meantime I’ll just have to rewind my childhood memories of seeing her as Witchipoo in that scary kid’s show *H.R. Puffn’Stuff*. Such inspired casting!

Cass Elliott was a symbol of an era, but her death is rarely chalked-up with those other sixties casualties. The ham sandwich slander scuppered her inclusion alongside Brian Jones, Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, is not her death just as tragic? She died young. I read that she had a heart attack, which, for a fat woman, is as much a

dismissal as the ham sandwich lie, because don’t all fat people explode, or collapse, or just die from being fat? No.

The other Mama and the two Papas had famous booze and drug addictions, maybe Cass didn’t get to Boxercise her way out of her habit. Someone else told me she’d “finally wanted to do something about her weight,” maybe because of the pressures in her TV career, anyway she’d been on a heavy diet and was weakened, and she just disappeared one day. *Evaporated*.

Most people reading this live in a culture that does not want fat women to succeed and thrive. When one of us dies the worms wriggle out and snigger and gloat. When we lose the power to speak for ourselves, lies germinate and are fed and watered. Cass’ death was a political death, about power and representation, it sparked a good deal of public activism (the Fat Underground protested loudly) and was an important event in the nascent fat rights movements. Her death was not a lonely joke. Twenty years later I am calling Fat Girls to remember Cass Elliot, to be proud of our ancestry, and to read behind the lies.

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