Empowerment, Agency, and Nuance at the 2013 Super Bowl Halftime Show

By Claire Anderson

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Abstract: Hunter and Soto argue that women in hip-hop are either hypersexualized, or depicted as “ride-or-die” chicks who are loyal to their male companions at any cost (2009). I examine Beyoncé’s 2013 Super Bowl Halftime Show performance to see how her “female empowerment” theme fits into the dominant portrayals of women in hip-hop. “Queen of Hip-Hop” Beyoncé was criticized by some as having contributed to the further objectification of women in the public eye during the Super Bowl. I argue that Beyoncé used the Halftime Show stage to present an image of womanhood that encourages control over her own money and sexuality, demands fidelity, and encouraged others to follow her lead. Drawing on the work of McClary (1991), Davis (1998) and Peoples (2013), I contend that during the Halftime Show, Beyoncé’s song selection, pyrotechnics and stage design, choice of exclusively female dancers and band members, and interaction with audience members all reinforced the event’s “female empowerment” theme. Beyoncé demonstrates her agency in the portrayal of her body through the design of camera angles that maintain her meticulously crafted public image. Ultimately, I argue that Beyoncé used the Super Bowl Halftime Show to articulate the theme of “female empowerment” through song choices and imagery that highlight financial independence and an ideal of sexual agency that is carefully couched within the parameters of a heteronormative, monogamous and committed relationship.

> “I’m always thinking about women and what we need to hear. It’s difficult being a woman. It’s so much pressure. We need that support.”
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> --Beyoncé Knowles, discussing her motivations in her autobiographical documentary, *Life is but a Dream*[1]

In the middle of an exclusively masculine contest of muscle and strategy between the Baltimore Ravens and the San Francisco 49ers, the 2013 Super Bowl Halftime Show showcased an equally fierce image of womanhood under the official theme of “The Woman/Female Empowerment.”[2] The show featured Beyoncé, 120 female backup dancers, an all-woman 10 piece band, surprise appearances by Michelle Williams and Kelley Rolland (the other two members of the powerhouse girl-group, Destiny’s Child), and absolutely no male bodies on stage.[3]

The 2013 Super Bowl Halftime Show

That night, almost one-third of the population of the United States watched Beyoncé’s performance in the New Orleans Superdome. During her time in the Halftime Show spotlight, Beyoncé chose to highlight an image that contrasted the hyper-masculine atmosphere of the Super Bowl championship, using her opportunity to be in front of an unprecedentedly large audience to perform her ideal of “female empowerment.” During this performance, she exhibited a specific version of womanhood that values financial independence and an ideal of sexual agency that is carefully couched within the parameters of a heteronormative, monogamous and committed relationship, all while encouraging other women to follow her lead. For this paper, I examine how Beyoncé used the 2013 Super Bowl Halftime Show stage to challenge common portrayals of black womanhood in popular culture. Addressing issues of representation, race, gender and performer agency, I explore how the images of “female empowerment” are put forward in this performance and how these images are different than the traditional portrayal of black women in hip-hop.

Beyoncé is not a rap artist, but she is a prominent member of the hip-hop community, and has an unmistakable presence in the rap community due to her many collaborations with her now-husband Shawn “Jay-Z” Carter, which she emphasizes with the infusion of hip-hop sounds and imagery in her music. Rock critic Ann Powers has described Beyoncé’s music as a kind of looking glass between pop and hip-hop, drawing on influences from all ends of the spectrum to create something that is accessible to everybody (Powers 2013). Her music thrives while balancing on the edge of different genres, winning awards in R&B, pop, dance, and hip-hop categories throughout her career. For this paper, I focus on Beyoncé’s position within the hip-hop community and how her interpretation of the “female empowerment” theme during the 2013 Halftime Show compare to common portrayals of women in hip-hop and the broader pop culture setting.

Sexual Agency, Beyond the Trope of the Jezebel

Pop culture depictions of the Jezebel trope historically mapped sexual availability onto black women's bodies. In a content analysis of the top hip-hop songs from 2002 and 2003—the same era in which Beyoncé released her first solo album, including many of the songs chosen for the Halftime Show performance—Hunter and Soto found two specific variations of the Jezebel theme. In their examination of the ideals of womanhood that are exhibited within their sample, they found that the major themes describing women of color could be divided into two categories: the sex worker and the "ride or die chicks" who are loyal to their men at any cost (Hunter and Soto 2009). These images are not just found in lyrics by male artists (like Jay-Z, whose "03 Bonnie and Clyde" collaboration with Beyoncé was included in the study), but also in the work of female performers (like Lil' Kim) who they claim also draw "on the familiar, historical image of the jezebel, the hypersexual black woman" in their songs (Hunter and Soto 2009, 181). In this paper, I examine these two tropes, and how those common portrayals of hip-hop womanhood are challenged within Beyoncé's performance at the Super Bowl. I argue that, within the 2013 Super Bowl Halftime Show performance, Beyoncé models a different image of black womanhood in hip-hop that defies these categories. More specifically, she presents an image of a black woman who values financial independence and exudes sexual agency.

Although there were tens of thousands of people watching the show live in the Superdome, millions more were watching from home on their television or computer screens, meaning the primary mode of exposure for the audience was through the lens of a camera. At many points during the Halftime Show, this mediation of the imagery added nuance to Beyoncé's message to her audience, and hinted at her control over the imagery presented during the performance. Beyoncé emphasized her role in the design of the event during the pre-show press conference, and she underscored her role in the design of all of her shows in her autobiographical documentary *Life is but a Dream*, where she carefully crafts a story that emphasizes her control over her performances and public image. Beyoncé hints at her agency in the design of the camera angles throughout the show, when with every close-up she is staring straight into the camera. In the opening sequence of the Super Bowl Halftime Show, Beyoncé used camera angles to establish herself as the powerful main attraction. In three separate ways (her image as a part of the stage, the larger than life outline of her body in fire, and with herself being raised on a pedestal [see the Halftime Show video 0:40-1:25][4]) she established her presence and her body as the focal point for viewers both at home and in the stadium.

The outfit Beyoncé chose for her Super Bowl Halftime Show (a black leather/lace sleeveless leotard with a v-neck cut down to her stomach, with matching black leg and wrist-warmers, all on top of a nude body suit) was the focus of much criticism. Anne Helen Peterson wrote on her blog *Celebrity Gossip, Academic Style*, that the outfit "basically taught my lesson on the way that the male gaze objectifies and fetishizes the otherwise powerful female body" (Winfrey Harris 2013). In response to Petersen, feminist writer Tamara Winfrey Harris argues that "Beyoncé's use of body is criticized as thoughtless and without value beyond male titillation, providing a modern example of the age-old racist juxtaposition of animalistic black sexuality vs. controlled, intentional, and civilized white sexuality" (Winfrey Harris 2013). Building from Winfrey-Harris, I further argue that the risqué elements of the ensemble were dramatically downplayed by choices in camera angle and perspective. Almost all close-ups of the singer were focused on her face, showing no more of her body than from her shoulders up. All other angles would show her full body, and in most cases the emphasis was on her movements and dance, giving an impression of avoidance of the hypersexualized depictions of women performers of Halftime Shows past.[5]

According to self-described hip-hop feminist Gwendolyn Pough, the choice to sing sexually explicit lyrics or wear revealing outfits in a hip-hop setting is a form of defiance, and is bringing wreck (a hip-hop term that connotes fighting, recreation, skill, boasting, or violence) to the limited interpretations of black women's bodies in the public sphere (Pough 2004, 17). In her 2004 book *Check It While I Wreck It*, she addresses the role that black women play both in hip-hop and the greater US public sphere. Pough analyzes how love is expressed in the hip-hop community, and argues that hip-hop is a space to push black men and women into a more progressive dialog about gender and sexuality. She examines the portrayals of black womanhood through lyrics performed by male artists like Biggie Smalls, who idealizes the role of his "bitch," a submissive lover who is willing to die for her man (Pough 2004, 178). These images are reinforced by rappers Lil' Kim, who raps about her sexual escapades and the compensation she gets from her partners, and Foxy Brown, who raps about being willing to die for her man (Pough 2004, 183-184). Pough's findings agree with Hunter and Soto, in that these are limited portrayals of black womanhood in hip-hop culture. However, Pough argues that these expressions of sexual agency **"**offer Black women a chance to face old demons and not let the stereotypes of slavery inform or control their lives. After years

of black women being read as supersexual—or asexual, in the case of the mammy stereotype—the lyrics of these women rappers offer black women a chance to be proud of—and indeed flaunt—their sexuality" (Pough 2004, 188). Pop culture stereotypes of black women are generally boiled down to the images of the hyper-sexualized "Jezebel" or the asexual "mammy" character. According to Pough, performances of sexuality and sexually explicit lyrics offer a chance for black American women to reclaim their sexual agency in the face of those stereotypes, which was one component of how Beyoncé performed her sexuality on stage.

In the Super Bowl performance, Beyoncé complicates the idea of women in hip-hop as merely sexual objects. In her performance of "Baby Boy," for example, Beyoncé is rejecting the idea of women in hip-hop as merely sexual objects by expressing her sexuality, and establishing sexual agency within the boundaries of her adherence to a dominant ideal of a monogamous relationship (See Halftime Show video 5:55 to 7:20)[6]. In terms of sexually explicit lyrical content, the song "Baby Boy," a collaboration with Jamaican rapper Sean Paul from 2003, is the raciest example from Beyoncé's Super Bowl set. In the lyrics of this song, Beyoncé is demonstrating her sexual agency by discussing her fantasies and desires as a part of this duet, and is exerting her influence on her male partner, rather than being submissively objectified. "Baby Boy" was originally marketed as a follow-up to Beyoncé's 2003 collaboration with Jay-Z called "03 Bonnie and Clyde" (Kaufman 2003). By connecting the fantasies described in "Baby Boy" with the song she sang with her now-husband, Beyoncé's carefully controlled image as a woman in a committed relationship remains unsullied by her singing about her sexual fantasies in a duet with another man. With this narrative surrounding the setting for the expression of her sexual desires, Beyoncé is also constructing clear parameters around her perceived sexual availability. In a way that echoes Pough's descriptions of demonstrating sexual agency through explicit lyrics, Beyoncé uses this song to establish her agency by defining the situation in which this expression of sexuality is appropriate.

I argue that in "Baby Boy", Beyoncé is balancing the demonstration of agency and control over her desires and her body, within the parameters of the politics of respectability, which is described by Durham, Cooper and Morris as "a range of strategies, largely regarding notions of honor, self-respect, piety, and propriety, deployed by progressive black women to promote racial uplift and women's rights and to secure broader access to the public sphere" (Durham et al, 724). The parameters of "the politics of respectability" were a reaction to the hyper-sexualized image of black women and an attempt to reclaim an image of respectability in the public eye. These limitations make for a difficult terrain for women performers, like Beyoncé, who are attempting to reclaim sexual agency and rebel against the category of "Jezebel". With the song "Baby Boy," Beyoncé is skirting the line between being respectable and bringing wreck to hip-hop by emphasizing her fidelity to her now-husband, then boyfriend, when expressing sexual desires or showing sexual agency.

In their study of images of womanhood in hip-hop, Hunter and Soto also described the recurring theme of a "ride or die chick," or a woman who is loyal to her man at any cost. The Beyoncé/Jay-Z collaboration from 2003 called "03 Bonnie and Clyde" (which was not featured in the halftime show) was a specific example cited by Hunter and Soto that illustrates the portrayal of an unequal relationship between a woman and her boyfriend. The song and its video tell the story of a man and woman running from the law, in which it is implied that the man makes the decisions and holds the cash. In the Super Bowl performance, however, Beyoncé chose to perform songs that illustrate the opposite dynamic: that of a truly independent woman.

A subtle, but recurring, way that the 2013 Halftime Show emphasized its "female empowerment" theme was through example, with songs like "Independent Women Part I." After the members of Destiny's Child appear on stage, the show's light display is simplified to spotlights on the three women. Removing the extra-musical components of the performance puts the attention of the viewer on the lyrics of the songs, right when the members of Destiny's Child launch into their girl-power anthem "Independent Women Part I," giving the audience the first image that defies this concept of devoted, one-sided fidelity (see Halftime Show video 8:10 to 9:20).[7] In this example, "Independent Women Part I," establishes a model of a woman who is financially independent, going against the dominant portrayals in hip-hop as described by Hunter and Soto. The opening lines of "Independent Women Part I" ("Tell me what you think about me/I buy my own diamonds and I buy my own rings") emphasize the novelty of financial independence in this context. The singer is challenging her audience to see if they would dare speak out against the idea of a financially independent woman, which goes towards the event's "female empowerment" theme. Then the trio tells the independent women in the crowd to "Throw your hands up at me," encouraging women to show pride and to see that there are other "independent women" in the community, and in this case the audience, around them.

In *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, Angela Davis examines the ways in which early blues women Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday, expressed the traditions and culture of women in working-class

black communities, which provides a means to further understand the cultural work Beyoncé was doing through her performance at the Super Bowl. Davis uses detailed examinations of the lyrics of Rainey, Smith and Holiday, three early recording-era stars, in the context of the history of the black community in the United States to show how feminist attitudes are expressed through song. Looking at this oral tradition of black feminism, Davis asked what could be learned from these blues women and "how their work addressed urgent social issues and helped to shape collective modes of black consciousness" (Davis 1998, p. xiv). Through this musical and cultural analysis, Davis explores how issues of sexuality and community building were expressed through a fluidity of language and in the way these women chose to accent and twist the words of the songs they sung. In the lyrics of songs performed by Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, Davis finds an emotional stance that emphasizes independence and assertiveness (Davis 1998, p. 21). According to Davis: "One of the principal modes of community-building in women's blues is that of sharing experiences for the purpose of instructing women how to conduct their lives" (Davis 1998, 53). At the Super Bowl, Beyoncé appeared to demonstrate a connection to these founding women of blues in how she used the lyrics of the songs she chose for this performance to emphasize the "female empowerment" theme, and go against dominant portrayals of gender roles in a hip-hop setting. In doing so, she created a space for women to build solidarity around those unorthodox ideas. Beyoncé's lyrics add another layer to what Davis calls the "jagged continuum of group experiences" started by women like Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, whose songs "encouraged intimacy and familiarity between women" (Davis 1998, p. 62).

"Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It)" is another song that adds a layer of defiance to the message of "female empowerment" in a hip-hop context (see Halftime Show video 9:45 to 11:20). Dismissing this rhythmic and catchy tune as a pseudo-feminist anthem due to a materialistic message that equates love with diamonds, as some have done in the past,[8] misses much of the cultural context that surrounds the messages the song carries. Like the call-and-response section of "Independent Women Part I," the opening of "Single Ladies" asks single women to "put your hands up." Again, by asking women to identify themselves as single, Beyoncé is normalizing this idea of independence. Further emphasizing this image of empowered women, Beyoncé uses this point in the Halftime Show to bring out all 120 female backup dancers, filling the stage with energetic and strong examples of womanhood. The lyrics of this song are informing a former lover that he lost his girl because he failed to commit to her. The song is not giving an ultimatum, but rather saying that the "ex" missed his chance, and now the singer has lost interest. This narrative defies the usual depiction of "ride or die" women in hip-hop, as committed to their partners at all costs. Instead, the message puts the needs of the woman above those of her partner, giving a different example of empowerment though solidarity with other women who put their needs above those of their (now-former) partners.

A "Feminine Ending"

After the final percussive hits of "Single Ladies," as all the dancers leave the stage, Beyoncé takes a moment to connect to the crowd in the stadium. "Everybody put your hands towards me. Everybody. I want to feel your energy," she says as the lights dim to just an electric blue hue behind the cool white spotlight. Just then, the band signals the beginning of the final song: "Halo" (see Halftime Show video 11:20 to 13:55). Beyoncé begins the power ballad standing, but by the end of the first lines ("Remember those walls I built?/Baby they're tumblin' down") she falls down on one knee. The camera cuts to a close-up and catches the teardrop she mimes on her face as she hits the last note of the following phrase ("Didn't mean to put up a fight/Didn't mean to make a sound") which ends on the lowest note Beyoncé sings in the entire performance. Though she is kneeling, from that point on television viewers are not given a perspective of her being below them, cowering or defeated. The perspective on the television screen is as if viewers were a part of the crowd below her, looking up between outstretched hands that wave back and forth with Beyoncé's body. It quickly becomes clear that her decision to kneel down is not invoking images of defeat but instead is a way to create a more personal connection with her audience as she reaches into the crowd and enthusiastically tosses her blond hair from side to side, making the television audience forget she is performing for a stadium full of tens of thousands of people. The cameras switch to an overhead view, which reveals that white sheets have been opened up around the stage, creating an image that replicates the way Beyoncé's hair was waving back and forth for the crowd. Beyoncé stands to her feet and with a sense of great purpose, strides to the other side of the stage where she again kneels down and reaches into the crowd. Her voice, stronger than ever before, indicates that she is nowhere near defeat, though somewhat exhausted after thirteen minutes of all-out singing and dancing.

The performance analysis in this paper is influenced in part by the work of Susan McClary. In her book, *Feminine Endings*, McClary constructs a framework for feminist music criticism, which addresses issues that have historically been of little interest to musicologists. McClary discusses how broad issues of musical signification and, more

specifically, underlying fear of women and of the body should not be ignored in the analysis of music and performance. The chapter "Living to Tell: Madonna's Resurrection of the Fleshly" looks at the way Madonna uses music to create images of liberation in the generally repressive arena of pop music. In her analysis of "Here I go again" McClary looks specifically at how Madonna defies tonal expectations by using cadences that end on the "feminine" sixth scale degree, never resolving down to the "masculine" fifth. McClary sees this as an attempt to subvert the traditional gender ideas in music theory, and her use of musical analysis in the discussion of pop styles addresses the aspect that is often ignored by musicologists, which is why listeners experience the emotional reactions they do to a piece of music. Beyoncé uses similar forms of subtle subversions of "masculine" ideals of traditional music theory in her performance of the song "Halo." Beyoncé finishes the song with one long melismatic line that ends on the fourth beat of the measure. The band follows, two beats later, on the two. Both of these endings are what Susan McClary would refer to as "feminine endings" or cadences that fall on the "weaker" up-beats of the measure, rejecting (as she says) "the hegemonic control of the barline" (McClary 1991: 9, 11). A fitting end for a song whose chord progression of I-ii-vi-IV completely omits the strong dominant ("masculine") chord, in favor of the more "feminine" sixth and sub-dominant chords. The common imagery of a defeated woman at the end of a performance, as referenced by McClary in her analysis which compares the end of the opera "Carmen" to Madonna's performance, is further complicated by the larger than life image of Beyoncé in the stage. In the final beats of the piece, Beyoncé throws her body backwards to the floor, jubilantly, just as a last blast of fire leaves the stage. The angle of the camera made it appear as if the explosion came directly from her womb, again complicating the traditional image of defeat. Immediately following the end of the piece, Beyoncé stands and does something unusual for a performance in this setting: rather than disappear in a cloud of smoke (like Madonna did at the end of her 2012 Super Bowl performance) she stands up and thanks the crowd, taking a well-earned moment in the spotlight. She does not disappear or cower from the crowd or the camera, as McClary argues historical depictions of women in music have conditioned us to expect. Instead she stands proudly, and takes a bow.

Conclusion

> "It really pisses me off that women don't get the same opportunities as men do, or money, for that matter. Because, let's face it, money gives men the power to run the show. It gives men the power to define our values and to define what's sexy and what's feminine, and that's bullshit. At the end of the day, it's not about equal rights; it is about how we think. We have to reshape our own perception of how we view ourselves. We have to step up as women, and take the lead, and step as high as humanly possible."
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> --Beyoncé Knowles, discussing her song "Girls" in her documentary *Life is But a Dream*[9]

In this paper, I attribute a huge amount of creative control to Beyoncé. Though she is listed as a writer and co-producer for all of the songs in this performance (with the exception of "Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It)" for which she is attributed with only a writing credit) I acknowledge that her music, performances and videos are no doubt the result of a collaborative process that includes many co-producers, co-writers, studio musicians, backup singers, choreographers, designers and image consultants. Through all of this, however, Beyoncé maintains control of the presentation of her image and her message to the public. In the press conference leading into the Super Bowl she emphasized that the stage, design and flow of the show were all a part of her vision for the event.[10] The success of a mega-star like Beyoncé is never in the hands of the artist alone. However, Beyoncé has gone to great lengths in recent years (especially since she separated from her former-manager and father Matthew Knowles) to claim full responsibility for her image and her work.[11] These points were highlighted at length in her autobiographical documentary *Life is but a Dream*, which was controversial precisely because Beyoncé maintained control over the process and the final product of the film, which was criticized as a "feature-length advertisement" (Rosen 2013). Beyoncé has gone to great lengths to demonstrate her agency, especially in the sense that she has final control over her various products, but it would be a mistake to ignore the undoubtedly extensive work done by those around her. In this project, I am stressing her agency in the design of the final product because it conforms to the narrative that Beyoncé herself tends to expound in interviews and through social media.

Beyoncé's careful presentation of her public persona and tightly guarded private life dramatically shapes how we perceive her as a performer. Beyoncé has adopted the dual roles of "America's Sweetheart" and "Queen of Hip-Hop," a title she earned through her own music and is only strengthened by her marriage to a Hip-Hop mogul. As Ann Powers wrote in her review of the Halftime Show "When artists take on the burden of being role models, adapting themselves to an ideal, the pressure for them to be authentic increases a million-fold" (Powers, 2013). In

many ways, this is why it was vital that Beyoncé's Super Bowl performance be above and beyond all expectations for her as a performer. For 16 years she has been cultivating a presence that creates a new image for womanhood in hip-hop culture, and in order to maintain her crown and her influence, she will have to continue to confound expectations.

Beyoncé used her time in the Halftime Show spotlight to highlight an image that contrasted the hyper-masculine atmosphere of the Super Bowl championship, using her opportunity to be in front of an unprecedentedly large audience to perform her ideal of "female empowerment." She exhibited a specific version of womanhood that values financial independence and an ideal of sexual agency that she places within the parameters of a heteronormative, monogamous and committed relationship, all while encouraging other women to follow her lead. I do not suggest that all of Beyoncé's material supports a more complex understanding of black womanhood in the public eye. I do, however, argue that in this performance, the song choices and presentation of her 16-year career present a more nuanced identity.

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[1] *Life is But a Dream,* HBO documentary

[2] “Super Bowl Entertainment” http://www.nfl.com/superbowl/history/entertainment [2]

[3] There were, however, five men’s voices heard throughout the performance including: an announcer promoting Pepsi in the introduction, Vince Lombardi during the presentation of “Girls”, Shawn “Jay-Z” Knowles-Carter during “Crazy in Love”, Sean Paul during “Baby Boy”, and “Charlie” of the *Charlies Angels Full Throttle* movie at the end of “Independent Women (Part I).”

[4] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kKVorba5GLs&feature=youtube_gdata_player

[5] The only exception to this close-up rule happens when all three Destiny’s Child members are present on stage. At that point, the camera works to keep the faces of all three women in the middle of the screen, which forces the shot to include a slightly larger portion of their bodies. See examples of Janet Jackson (and her infamous “nipple slip”) and closeups of Britney Spears during their respective Super Bowl appearances for other examples of the portrayal of women in the Halftime Show.

[6] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kKVorba5GLs&feature=youtube_gdata_player [3]

[7] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kKVorba5GLs&feature=youtube_gdata_player [3]

[8] “Top 5 Pseudo-Feminist Anthems” WashingtonCityPaper.com

[9] *Life is But a Dream,* HBO documentary

[10] “Beyoncé - Super Bowl XLVII Press Conference – January 31st” youtube.com

[11] I do not mean to say she claims full credit for her work, but rather that she takes responsibility for the image and work she shows to the public. One example of how this was how she responded to criticism of her decision to sing to a recorded track during President Obama’s second inauguration. She discusses this in the pre-Super Bowl press conference, which can be found here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PUT05IeHu4s [4]

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Links:
[1] http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1470568/beyonce-shares-fantasies-with-sean-paul.jhtml
[2] http://www.nfl.com/superbowl/history/entertainment
[3] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kKVorba5GLs&feature=youtube_gdata_player
[4] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PUT05IeHu4s