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In Defense of Groupies: A Creative Investigation of Gendered Fandom

When I think back to my early years of teendom, I reflect fondly on my chaste enthusiasm for Northwest music culture. Growing up in Portland, Oregon my high school musical awakening was a little more “Indie grunge” and a little less rock ‘n roll or “mainstream pop.” Regardless, I was a 15 year-old girl, and so my taste was inherently more “mainstream” or mockable to slightly more knowledgeable elders such as my brother, six years my senior. Although he now holds a degree in Ethnomusicology and is an ardent admirer of African and other non-western Indigenous musics, his taste at the time was rooted in classic rock such as the Grateful Dead, Creedence Clearwater Revival, and, like a true University of Vermont alum-Phish. His musical tastes informed mine ever so slightly, enough to give me notable standing with my male counterparts in high school, those who played in bands and cultivated a taste in both classic rock and northwest indie grunge.

This inherent and early disapproval of my teenage musical tastes is not unique to my experience, but rather a phenomena illuminated in two of the primary sources for this project. In her 2007 essay, “Teenyboppers, Groupies and Other Grotesques: Girls and Women and Rock Culture in the 1960s and early 1970s”, Dr. Norma Coates discusses “displaced abjection” theorized by literary critics Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, a social behavior in which a marginalized group reflects disdain towards a “lower” group to assert dominance:

Although rock culture, as it emerged in the late 1960s, was largely populated by upwardly-mobile white middle class youth, it embraced and honed an oppositional relationship to mainstream culture. It was not enough to designate women as low Others and to ignore their contributions to rock culture. They had to be actively disdained and kept in their place. At the same time, women were very necessary for the maintenance and coherence of rock masculinity, as sexual objects as well as adorning subjects...masculinity became naturalized in rock in the 1960s and, as a result, women became marginal and/or subservient to men in rock culture and its discursive formations. (Coates, 67)

In both 1960s-70s rock journalism and culture, women- regardless of their role as a fan, rockstar's girlfriend or even prominent musician-- were subjected to "displaced abjection" which Coates skillfully illustrates in her article. As many musical genres such as Blues and classic rock originated on the outskirts of mainstream American culture, the participants of such music cultures were by virtue, on the fringe of normative American society. Ironically, the countercultural movement of early rock music was not entirely liberated from the confines of gendered hierarchies.

I remember fondly my first viewing of *Almost Famous*; being seduced by the lifestyle and music culture of the late 1960s. I pined for a contemporary equivalent, I longed for a long-haired, guitar playing boyfriend whose band I could travel alongside. In my research on rock journalism of the 1960s and 1970s however, I have become increasingly disenchanted by misogyny prevalent in the culture. My younger self would've swooned over the pages of Rolling Stone's 1969 issue detailing the lives of groupies. Yet today, I am concerned with the problematic (mostly male) perspective that these rock journals are written from.

Coates investigates the marginalization of women, their limited roles during the time, and the apparent refusal in rock journalism to validate female musicians of the time as anything but: “The use of ‘teenyboppers’ or ‘groupies’ to identify female fans of popular music belies a disturbing reality of rock culture for women: for decades, those were essentially the two ways to imagine the relation of women to rock. The normative power of these prescribed identities remains potent, even though women are increasingly visible in rock culture as musicians and critics” (Coates, 65). She continues to describe the distinction made in publications such as *Rolling Stone*, between “groupies” seen ultimately as sex objects of famous musicians, and the contrastingly “unsexy” female performers of the time like the legendary Mama Cass and Janis Joplin. In discussing figures such as Cass and Joplin, rock critics of the time struggled to accredit these musicians as equals to their male counterparts, and often had to de-feminize them to see them as such. Coates presents an argument that eloquently articulates the problematic nature of male-dominated rock culture of the 1960s and 70s, one that fueled my fire for this creative project.

When I was 17, I landed a my first “job” as a booking agent on a non-profit student-run organization called Music In The Schools (MITS). My role in the committee was to communicate with local high school bands and curate a combined bill of popular Portland-based bands, and hopeful young amateurs. At this time in my life, I naively applied for the job hoping to meet “cute boys” who played in bands. Subsequently, I was selected over far more musically inclined male peers because I was a “cute girl” and the president of the organization had a crush on me. As soon as I started working however, my cultivation of musical tastes and marketing knowledge flourished as my interest in boys slowly declined. I became an equal to my male

peers, and at the same time funneled natural sexual and emotional expressions into a more meaningful aspect that would later inform my “adult” life. In retrospect, I sometimes look back sheepishly at my slightly younger self, blushing when I remember how “boy crazy” I was thought to be. Yet after a moment of reflection, I have little shame about my (mostly) uninhibited teenage pursuits of crushes, exploration, flirtation, and unconscious sexual agency through a social channel of music appreciation.

Another primary source that influenced my research, specifically the contemplation of “girlhood” and its significance to music and fan culture is Gayle Wald’s 1998 article, “Just a Girl? Rock Music, Feminism, and the Cultural Construction of Female Youth.” I was initially drawn to this reading as she writes about female rock musicians from the late 1990s such as my long time favorite, Gwen Stefani during her time with No Doubt, and various Riot Grrrl bands who came before her. Although Wald’s research is not specifically “groupie” oriented she taps into a more subtle issue surrounding depictions young women in music culture, one that fits congruently with the undercurrent of my creative project. Essentially, Wald writes of female musicians and fans who subversively re-appropriate “girlhood,” or youthful femininity in a term described by Ernesto Laclau called “disarticulation-rearticulation,” or “the process of symbolic struggle through which social groups reformulate dominant codes as a means of negotiating political-cultural agency (Laclau 1977)” (Wald, 591). Like Coates, Wald writes substantially about the objectification and marginalization of women in rock journalism prevalent in the 1960s, continuing into the 90s. While she reflects on more contemporary examples of female youth and musical feminism, Wald highlights sentiments that align closely with Coates:

My interest in this article is neither to celebrate nor to denigrate the girl as a new modality of female rock performance but to argue that the emergence of the girl signals an important moment of contradiction within contemporary youth/music cultures...the strategy of appropriating girlhood, like the word *girl* itself, signifies ambiguously: as a mode of culturally voiced resistance to the patriarchal femininity; as a token of a sort of 'gestural feminism' that is complicit with the trivialization, marginalization, and eroticization of women within rock music cultures; and as an expression of postmodern 'gender trouble' that potentially recuperates girlhoods in universalizing, ethnocentric terms. (Wald, 588)

In my final project, I'm interested in creating my own token of "gestural feminism" and instigating a third-wave feminist discourse on the potential subversive or conforming nature of self-proclaimed "groupies" of the 1960s and 70s. Furthering the conversation, I wanted to consider similar expressions of fandom, extending the study of groupies to a slightly earlier age--to Beatlemania, teenyboppers, and also considering more contemporary expressions of idolization. In my video collage, I am interested in comparing found footage from popular culture and media such as *Almost Famous*, VH1's documentary *Let's Spend the Night Together*, and 1960s TV broadcasts to parallel them with my own contemporary creative research exploring slightly more nuanced perspectives of fandom in my immediate environment. The video collage explores themes and questions surrounding sexual expression and identity, objectification, heteronormativity, adolescence, devotion, homosociality, and female empowerment/ disempowerment. The material ranges from the mid- 1960s to present day. Throughout my creative research, my objective shifted from a position of arguing on behalf of the "groupie" to a genuine interest in the complexities of women in rock culture, and advocating

for a more compassionate lens in which we view the relationship between female youth and their musical idols.

In my exploration of “groupiedom” I found various layers of gendered discourse unfolding in front of me, and while the role of the groupie is not central to my personal experience or conclusions in this project, I find the contemplation of this female role to be useful in a feminist dialogue. The video collage along with this essay, aims to illuminate that not all devoted fans need be sexualized, furthermore- musical fandom is not limited to the female sex. Even if we are to consider the role of a groupie or young female fans as sexual- what’s wrong with that? It is not the sexual behavior of groupies that should be scrutinized, rather the way in which the media, throughout history has distorted women with sexual agency as sexual objects. “Youth music cultures continue to offer girls important sources of emotional sanctuary and vital outlets for the expression of rage and pleasure, frustration and hope” (Wald, 608). In recounting my own musical awakening, first crushes, and excitement that graced teendom, I feel profound compassion for the notorious young women who proudly sport the “groupie” title. I even feel slight compassion for modern-day Justin Bieber fans, those who display a striking resemblance to early Beatlemania fans. Be it groupies, Justin Bieber fans, or a teenage boy hanging Jim Morrison posters about his bedroom- musical fandom is socially binding and identity forming, regardless of sexual expressions.

Barres, Pamela Des. *I'm with the Band: Confessions of a Groupie*. New York: Beech Tree, 1987. Print.

Coates, N. (2003), *Teenyboppers, Groupies, and Other Grotesques: Girls and Women and Rock Culture in the 1960s and early 1970s*. *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, 15: 65–94.

Dr. Robin James - Assistant Professor, UNC Charlotte

Talk Title: *If You Hate Justin Bieber, Patriarchy Wins*

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Wald, Gayle. "Just a Girl? Rock Music, Feminism, and the Cultural Construction of Female Youth." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 23.3 (1998): 585-610. Web. Published by: University of Chicago Press