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### **'I'm Not Some Cock-Hungry Groupie': Negotiating the Rock Groupie Stereotype**

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I went to see Jimmy Savile lying in state at the Queens Hotel, Leeds. When I told my Leeds friends, they told me of his sexual harassment of nurses at a local hospital. As it turned out my friends were not the only ones who knew about Savile's crimes before they hit the headlines: one of the shocking things about the case is that so many people were aware and said nothing.

This unwillingness to speak out is symptomatic of the common sense idea of women as 'fair game' and particularly, in the context of Savile's role on Top of the Pops, of the idea of women music fans as sexually available, especially to male rock musicians. The problems of exploitation in this relationship can be seen in the recent trial of Ian Watkins, amongst others.

These cases of powerful men in the music industry exploiting vulnerable people, especially women, are (hopefully) the extreme, but the portrayal of women music fans as available for sex because they are interested in the musicians rather than the music remains a salient idea in the music media, and one that leaves all women fans vulnerable to sexual exploitation.

In my doctoral research I investigated how the myth that all women rock fans are groupies is created and how it affects such fans. First I examined *Kerrang!* magazine's letters pages at the beginning of the twenty-first century in order to qualify the media representation of women fans, then I spoke to British women who enjoyed bands covered in the magazine so that I could understand the impact of that representation.

The research is important because it demonstrates the link between representations and the way women feel about their position in the world, a crucial area for discussion, particularly with regard to the impact of sexualised images of women. Moreover, it challenges the sexist assumption that women are more interested in sex with musicians than their music. Vitally, though it is imperative that we re-think what it means to be a 'proper' fan: why should it be that only those who disinterestedly value music be considered the real fans when compared with those who gain pleasure from the erotic and visual appeal of musicians as well as their music?

Examining UK hard rock and metal magazine *Kerrang!*'s letters pages, I found that women are most frequently depicted in letters and photographs as fans who adore male musicians; men are usually shown as musicians. In photographs typically young, pretty women stand close to male musicians. The men tower over them, placing their arms about the women's shoulders. The women lean in, smiling. In the published letters – and it is important to remember that these have been selected for publication by the magazine's editors and are therefore a media representation – women write in defence of male musicians. For instance when The Daily Mail blamed My Chemical Romance for the suicide of Hannah Bond, many

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letters from young women denounced the newspaper (Hill 2011). Women's letters also frequently express appreciation of, including sexual attraction to, male musicians.

These images and letters work with notions of women as more interested in the musician than the music, i.e. in this representation women fans are portrayed primarily in sexual terms. My work is concerned with the myths in popular culture; a myth in this sense is something we believe is true and rarely challenge, even though the idea is created for the purpose of furthering the needs of a particular group (Barthes 2009). In this case the group is the male-dominated rock and metal culture that *Kerrang!* is part of. Thus *Kerrang!* (and other media) produces a myth of all women fans as sexually available: as groupies. To be a woman fan, then, is to be assumed to be sexually attracted to male musicians.

This representation is a myth because most women fans do not sleep with musicians, but if they do or want to this does not mean that they do not love the music in passionate and thoughtful ways too. However, in spite of the myth's currency, we know little about how it impacts upon women fans' experiences as fans. To address this gap I interviewed 19 British women between the ages of 16 and 69 about their fandom, their experiences and the myth of the groupie. I then closely examined the language that the women used when answering my questions.

I found out that most did not want sex with musicians; in fact many of them were furious about the stereotype of the groupie and worked hard to show that they were not groupies, that they were 'proper' music fans. It goes to show that even when women are not being exploited by male rock musicians they still feel the effect of the myth.

For example, Laura\* expressed no attraction towards My Chemical Romance, and she described what might happen if she met them:

I would have to think very carefully about what I would want to say 'cos at the end of the day I'm not going to say 'I really like your music, thank you for making good music; please continue to do so...' I don't really want to have the thought of [...] 'oh I love you'. (Laura)

Laura viewed musicians as always interpreting women's fandom as sexual, even when it was specifically about the music. Therefore being seen to not be a groupie in the eyes of her favourite musicians was important. She thought the concept of the groupie was so powerful in the minds of her preferred musicians that it would discredit her fandom. Therefore, she was cautious about saying she would like to meet the band, although this may have been desirable to her.

In fact all of the women distanced themselves from the moniker 'groupie' and nearly all were critical of it in some way: a few women were critical of groupie behaviour (Dolly called it 'stalker-ish'); others felt that a sexual encounter with a musician would damage the fan's appreciation of the music; still others offered a feminist critique of the concept of the groupie, arguing that it is a media creation which devalues women fans. For some women

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this meant downplaying their attraction to musicians to ensure that they did not draw attention away from their 'serious' engagement with the music.

However, in spite of their criticisms, quite a few of the women did describe erotic feelings towards particular musicians. Their attraction was bound up with musical pleasure in complex ways. For instance, Aime described her passion for Avenged Sevenfold's drummer, The Rev, as 'almost the way he plays his instrument, the way he talks, the way he sings that attracts me to him'.

This indicates that the relationship between women's musical pleasure and their feelings about musicians is more complicated than the groupie myth allows. The women I spoke to were neither solely concerned with the musicians, nor solely interested in the music. Erotic and visual pleasure took up an important position alongside musical pleasure. This is a crucial point to make because it reinstates women as sexual subjects rather than as passive sexual objects available for exploitation by musicians.

These sexual desires that the women described do not, I judge, lend credence to the myth of the groupie. Rather they suggest that we need to understand musical pleasure in a new way. We need to acknowledge enjoyments other than those which are traditionally valued, i.e. those which are based purely on aural or intellectual enjoyment. We need to change the way we think about fandom itself, and not just re-appraise women fans' pleasure. Ignoring our sexual experiences and the bodily pleasures music affords us gives a very limited understanding of what it is to be a fan. We need to bring sex into our questioning of hard rock and metal fandoms in order to better understand the complex ways in which we make connections to particular kinds of music.

If we admit that desire can be a normal part of fandom then we can stop sensationalising women rock fan's sexuality. Perhaps then we can begin to see when a fan-musician relationship is exploitative, rather than thinking of it as 'normal' groupie behaviour.

\*All names of interviewees have been changed.

#### References:

Barthes, R. (2009) *Mythologies*. Translated from the French by A. Lavers. London: Vintage.  
Hill, R. L. (2011) Is emo metal? Gendered boundaries and new horizons in the heavy metal community. *Journal for Cultural Research*, 15(3), 297-314.

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