

## ***Still kissing their posters goodnight: Female fandom and the politics of popular music***

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### **Abstract**

Through an ethnographic investigation of adult female fans of '80s heart throbs Duran Duran, this article will explore the motivations and complications inherent in women's lifelong participation in pop music fandom. Finding that adult female pop fans experience a euphoric empowerment from performing the same fannish activities they did as teens, this article will consider how continued involvement in a fandom discovered in one's teenhood may be appealing because it approximates a 'reclaimed youth' for adults who are approaching midlife. However, dominant cultural politics characterise such female fan behaviour in adulthood as pathological. This article will scrutinise the bases and consequences of such prejudice, including fan reaction in the form of shame and 'closet' fandom.

**Keywords:** bedroom culture, closet fandom, Duran Duran, fan shame, female fandom, lifelong fandom, pop idolatry, popular music fandom.

### **Introduction**

*They think we're all crazy and we did not really grow up.  
They probably think we are a bunch of girls who lust after an 80s band.  
They ask me 'Still? They still exist?'  
'Aren't you people out of that?'  
Friends that are non-Durannies just sigh and shake their heads.*

(2009 Fan Interviews)

The comments above are a sampling of testimonies taken from an ethnographic field investigation of adult female fans of '80s pop icons Duran Duran. As early as Elvis and the Beatles, every generation of women has embraced its own version of the teen pop pin-up.

The origin of such fandom for most begins in adolescence, a formative period in which cultural influences like pop music have a significant impact. And while most girls grow out of this phase, for some, the attachment is carried into adulthood.

Matt Hills (2010) refers to the music of artists like Duran Duran as 'post-popular music', that is, music that was once mainstream and topping record sales, but which now has a 'cult' following. As of yet, there are very few academic accounts of research on lifelong fandom of such post-popular acts. But Lucy Bennett's (2012) research with fans of R.E.M, Nick Stevenson's (2009) study on fans of David Bowie, and Joanne Garde-Hansen's (2011) analysis of diachronic Madonna fandom are some examples. Outside the realm of popular music, there is also Rachel Moseley's (2002) audience study on fans of Audrey Hepburn and Annette Kuhn's (1999) research on fans of 1930s film stars, which are noteworthy due to their consideration of ageing, memory, nostalgia, and 'loyalty to a star which continues throughout the fan's life' (Kuhn 1999, p. 135).

According to Lee Harrington and Denise Bielby (2010), adult fans in general 'remain under-theorized and under-studied by media scholars' (p. 444). Stevenson claims that such studies are rare because they are not consistent with the 'usual way in which celebrity culture is understood' (2009, p. 83). Celebrity status is often fleeting; a star is in the public's favour one season, out of favour the next. So not only is it less common for individuals to maintain loyal fandom long-term, it is also not an area to which cultural studies has historically paid much attention as of yet (*ibid.*). And because such lifelong attachments are rare, they are also often misunderstood. This is especially true for adult female pop fans, who tend to experience derision and judgment from forces outside of their fan community, particularly their spouses, families, and peers, pressure which sends a message that their fan attachments would have best been left in their teenhoods. Sheila Whitely (2000) argues that young women's taste has been largely ignored in pop history, even though pop music is clearly a force to which young women can relate. Perhaps this is because 'discourses concerned with 'teenyboppers' (young girls aged 8-15) construct them in terms of their naiveté, as immature and undiscerning consumers or cultural dupes entering into fandom as a time filler between adolescence and adulthood' (Andrews & Whorlow 2009, pp. 255-256).

This article will explore the motivations and complications inherent in women's lifelong participation in pop music fandom. Applying theories from a variety of disciplines including fan studies, popular music, feminism, sociology, and psychology, it will investigate the euphoric empowerment that adult female pop fans experience from engaging in activities that are widely considered to belong to the teen domain. And because many of these women claim that their teen idols stirred their first sexual desires, I will argue that it is possible the notion of a first crush may have instigated the formation and continuance of their fan attachment. Paradoxically, and as the case study data reveals, today this attachment has less to do with sex and more to do with memory and a nostalgic identification with one's 'teen' self. I will consider the sociological and psychological underpinnings of this tendency to propose that a continued participation in a fandom

discovered in one's teenhood may be appealing because it approximates a 'reclaimed youth' for fans who are approaching or have reached midlife, as many Duran Duran fans have.

As suggested previously, cultural politics persist that attempt to characterise such female fan behaviour in adulthood as pathological. This article will scrutinise the bases and consequences of such prejudice, including fan reaction in the form of shame and 'closet' fandom. Consulting prior feminist scholarship, I will examine how this bias derives from a persistent denigration of women's media, which in itself originates from a deep-seated historical fear and pathologisation of anything associated with feminine sexuality. Although similar issues have been studied by others, this research is distinctive in how it considers all these issues in conjunction to investigate women's lifelong engagement in pop idolatry and society's reception of that fan practice.

## **Methodology**

Informing my decision to study Duran Duran's fan community, in particular, was my personal experience as a Duran fan for the past 30 years. I share this fact because I want to make evident my own stake in this project, and I acknowledge that my data and analysis was inevitably influenced by my own experience and frame of reference. It is also pertinent to this discussion of lifelong fandom to share the impetus for my embarking upon this study. In 2005 I attended one of Duran Duran's much-hyped 'reunion' concerts, and my best friend was with me, telling me later that she had not seen me act that animated since we were teens, dancing, jumping, singing, screaming. These men were my Beatles, and I had rediscovered them. I went home and realized I had to have that back in my life again. If that single concert experience affected me so profoundly, I wanted to understand what happened. Was there some element of reclaimed youth at play? Did other fans have similar experiences?

By sharing my personal story here, I hope that I have shed light on my interest in conducting and being part of this study. This 'aca-fan' approach to fan studies has long been debated, yet supported, by scholar-fans such as Hills (2002) and Henry Jenkins (2006), who agree that strategies of immersion and engagement can provide the most thorough account of a chosen culture, as suggested by netnographer Robert Kozinets (2010, p. 60). Even then, the decision to immerse oneself and participate in that culture can be a complicated issue, as noted by Sarah Thornton when discussing the challenges she faced in investigating club cultures (1995, p. 106). For my research, there was no question, participation and immersion were a must, especially given that I was already a member of the fan community. I also suspected that the nature of the fan behaviours and motivations I sought to query would only be visible and accessible to other fans. Much of my analysis, therefore, stems not only from 'official' participant responses, but also from behaviours I witnessed and experienced in an unofficial capacity as a member of the fan culture.

With respect to my ethnographic approach, I investigated fan practice directly and indirectly using a variety of techniques, which occurred both online and offline. Methods of data collection included observation, questionnaires, polls, interviews, and focus groups.

Direct online data collection included email, an online questionnaire, and an online discussion forum. A total of 49 completed questionnaires were received from Duran fans and 24 questionnaires were received from fans in other communities (Backstreet Boys, New Kids on the Block, and Take That) who were surveyed for comparative purposes. Additionally, approximately 100 fans (many of whom overlap the questionnaire participants) signed up to a discussion forum that I created, and much of my field data comes from the resulting discussion threads. Observational and participatory methods of online data gathering included interaction on Duran Duran's official online fan community at Duranduranmusic.com, a paid membership forum. Additional online observation and participation was enacted on social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, and a number of other fan-created forums such as the Duran Duran Message board, Durantard.com, and fan sites dedicated to specific band members.

In addition to the online methods of ethnographic data gathering, a variety of traditional methods were also employed. Two focus groups were conducted, one in the United States with 6 participants and another in Europe with 8 fans in attendance. Additionally, a number of informal discussions, usually follow-up interviews, were conducted at fan-related gatherings in both the United States and the United Kingdom. Observational data of participant behaviour and interaction was also obtained from indirect contact in a variety of settings such as at concerts, fan parties, and conventions.

Additionally, I conducted an auto-ethnography that ran parallel to my field work. For this purpose I consulted old journals and engaged in activities to prompt memory recall, including using Heewon Chang's (2008) 'border crossing' technique to identify milestones in the chronology of my fandom. According to Chang, a border crossing is a transitional life experience, which she describes as 'extraordinary events such as childbirth, new relationships, new jobs/schools, immigration/moves, a death, divorce, and other life crises' (2008, p. 74). Examining such experiences is an exercise which 'can lead to a new understanding of self and others' (ibid.). This method proved so effective when I used it on myself that I decided to use it on my study participants as well. The significance of transitional experiences and objects in fandom has been noted by other scholars (Sandvoss 2005; Hills 2002), a tendency that is also reflected in the findings from my case study, so I will return to these ideas later in this discussion.

In the analysis that follows, I use several theoretical modes of inquiry from a variety of disciplines, including media studies, cultural theory, fan studies, feminist criticism, gender studies, sociology, and psychology. And as I will elaborate more upon in a moment, the topic of fantasy was not an easy one for fans to discuss. So while the identities of all respondents were disclosed to me during the data gathering stage, out of respect for their privacy, every participant has been assured that I will protect their anonymity here and elsewhere when reporting my findings.

## The Bedroom Culture of Duran Fans

*When you say 'bedroom culture', I know exactly what that means [sic] ... The mags, music, posters, prints, articles, pictures, folders, cards, quips, videos, TV appearances, everything and anything I could get with my pocket money.*

*We had shrines to our favorite member in our lockers ... We had posters covering the walls and ceilings of our bedrooms.*

By Duran fan standards, these fan practices are not unusual. An overwhelming 97% of the Duran fans I surveyed reported having a poster of their idols on their walls at some point. One of the pleasures of teen pop for women is that it gives them free license to objectify men (Kidder 2006, p. 84). Describing this as an 'inversion of a cultural stereotype', Kristin Kidder recalls Laura Mulvey's (1975) concept of the 'male gaze', only in this case women reverse traditional gender roles, not only by being those who do the looking, but also through dramatic public expressions of adoration (Kidder 2006, p. 84). Sociologist Angela McRobbie's (1991) 'bedroom culture' theory proposes that adolescent girls' consumption of posters of male pop idols is related to their emerging sexuality:

The pictures which adorn bedroom walls invite these girls to look, even stare at length, at male images (many of which emphasise the whole masculine physique, especially the crotch). These pin-ups offer one of the few opportunities to stare at boys and to get to know what they look like. While boys can quite legitimately look at girls on the street and in school, it is not acceptable for girls to do the same back. Hence the attraction of the long uninterrupted gaze at the life-size 'Donny Osmond Special' (McRobbie 1991 p. 23).

Many Duran fans confirm this idea, claiming that their pop idols stirred their first sexual desires:

*It was ... the first time I felt real attraction someone (John Taylor) nothing dodgy, but [I] just was infatuated with them (and him).*

For me personally, I will never forget the first time I saw a Duran poster on the back of my best friend's bedroom door. Compounding my interest was the first time I saw one of their videos at a friend's slumber party. The other girls sat with their noses glued to the TV screen, squealing and drooling. I stood at the back of the room and watched from afar, perplexed by everyone's behaviour. The truth is I was not comfortable enough in my own skin to have expressed how I was feeling openly, and I was afraid to participate. At only 12 years old and relatively frightened of anything sexual, I was embarrassed not only by

everyone else's actions, but also confused by the fact that I, myself, was developing a crush on the band's lead singer. In retrospect, this moment of conflicted adolescent desires signalled a defining moment for me in terms of my own sexuality. And I suspect that this notion of a first crush during adolescence may have sparked the beginning of a lifelong fan attachment.

In this instance, McRobbie's theory about girls' consumption of posters can be equally applied to video. It is the idol's image or even his 'essence' that matters, regardless of which medium is used to consume it. Today girls and grown women alike, including the Duran fans I surveyed, perform these same functions by viewing images and video on the Internet, illustrating how bedroom culture can continue right into adulthood. And the activity need not be about image alone, fans today can follow their idols' daily activities and thoughts on Twitter and Facebook.

A number of Duran fans cite their attraction to a particular band member as the primary reason for entering into fandom as teenagers. When I asked participants "Why did you become a fan of Duran Duran?", I received responses of this nature:

Duran Duran... at the time? Their looks... I was 12 and shallow. Now? Definitely their sound which hasn't seemed to change much... and yes, I'm still shallow... their looks.

The music and the good looks.

John Taylor. 😊

SIMON LE BON! As soon as I saw him (those eyes! Those lips! THAT voice!) I was smitten!

I was all of 10 years old, and it was love at first sight once I saw John Taylor.

I was in love with Simon Le Bon in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade!

[I] always have been a Simon girl. Always. From the moment I first saw him, he was terribly sexy, incredibly confident, not the best dancer but doesn't care, and his lyrics are crazy, poignant, rocking, silly and entertaining. Oh, and he's sexy and has aged very well. Hard to look at some of the idols from the 80's and see how they've aged but for some reason, the members of DD all seem to have aged like fine wine. Oh, and he's sexy too.

According to McRobbie, adolescent infatuations of this nature are a form of fantasy construction, as 'buying time... from the real world of sexual encounters while at the same time imagining these encounters, with the help of the images and commodities supplied by

the commercial mainstream' (1991, p. 24-25). Sheryl Garratt offers a similar explanation: 'Falling in love with posters can be a way of excluding real males and of hanging on to that ideal of 'true love' for just a little longer' (1990, p. 401). And Lisa Lewis (1992) proposes that for young girls, a remote 'relationship with a band' is appealing because it 'avoids many of the traumas of teenage sexuality' (Lewis 1992 qtd. in Andrews & Whorlow 2000, p. 261). This vicarious relationship to celebrity as a safe method of objectifying the male body, may be one application of J.B. Thompson's (1995) 'non-reciprocal intimacy at a distance' with media texts (p. 219). Thompson suggests that this type of interaction may be appealing to adolescent girls because it offers them the 'opportunity to explore interpersonal relations' with the opposite sex 'in a vicarious way, without entering into a web of reciprocal commitments' (ibid.). Many girls practice their first kisses on posters, according to sociologist Mark Rubinfeld (Beck 2012).

Whether it is via posters, video, or following their idols on social networking sites, the bedroom culture practice of fantasising is instrumental in teen girls' identity construction and sexual expression (McRobbie 1991; Andrews & Whorlow 2000). When I asked adult Duran fans if they have ever day dreamt or fantasised about Duran Duran or its individual members, many were hesitant to respond in a group situation or left the question blank on surveys, probably fearing the implication of their answers being pathologised in some way. But as Cornel Sandvoss (2005) advocates, as researchers "...we must avoid pasteurised representations of fandom and its underlying mechanisms – not least because the sexual desires and fantasies that underlie fandom and audienceship are of course utilized by the media industry" (Sandvoss 2005, p. 76). While it was difficult to get Duran fans to openly discuss the details of their fantasies with me, a number of participants responded affirmatively that they have indeed fantasised:

Almost every day. That stopped when I went to college.

I used to when I was younger...

Well, frankly they got famous as many of us were hitting puberty. So yeah!  
... coming of age in the height of their popularity, certain band members were at the forefront of my imaginative fantasy world!!!

Most fans claimed similarly, that they 'used to' fantasise but do so no longer. And most who admitted to fantasising as adults, claim that their fantasies are no longer sexually motivated. It is important to recognise that not all fan fantasies are sexual. At its simplest level, a fantasy might be defined as an "imaginary scene in which the subject is a protagonist, representing the fulfilment of a wish..." (Laplanche and Pontalis 1978, p. 31 qtd. in Sandvoss 2005, p. 71). Consider these non-sexual fan fantasies of adult Duran fans:

... these days as an adult, I'd love to know him [John Taylor] as a person and would love to have many conversations with him.

Now my dream is to work for them and hang out with them and travel the world with them, watching them perform and partying with them afterwards.

Of the few fans who agreed to share their sexual fantasies, those who contributed the details of adolescent fantasies provided accounts that were relatively tame. Rather than kissing a poster, for example, this fan admits to kissing pillows:

My cousin and I used to pretend pillows were band members! We would serve them champagne (Sprite) in my aunt's crystal champagne flutes and get into so much trouble for it! We practiced French kissing the pillows... oh Lord! Let's just say... pillow 'Simon' got A LOT of action! LOL!

Whether or not young Duran fans fantasised specifically about acting out their sexual desires, those who did so justified those fantasies in the context of having a romantic relationship with a favourite band member:

When I was a teenager I dreamed that I would marry John.

When I was younger as a teenager I fantasized that he'd [Simon] be my boyfriend...

Oh God all the time! As a child I wanted to marry John, even wanted to lose my virginity to him. Now, I would settle for a snog with any of them!

I've been daydreaming and fantasizing about Duran Duran ever since I first saw them in 16 magazine. When I was a girl I wanted to marry John Taylor and be their back-up singer - with my best friend beside me of course :) - and have ten beautiful babies with him! :)

Only a handful of Duran fans (who, incidentally, also write 'adult' fan fiction) admitted to having sexual fantasies about the band as adults:

I always have and always will dream and fantasize about the lead singer. Some are naughty, some are innocent. They're too numerous to even touch on!

Over the years, I have had many dreams of a romantic or sexual nature about several members of the band, often times at once... I also like to read and



write fan fic and slash fic based on the band members. It's all part of the fantasy.

I have written stories involving John Taylor for years. He is one of the sources of my inspiration for writing Erotica. When I was younger, I fantasized about marrying him and having his kids or just meeting him and having a one night stand with him.

This level of openness regarding the topic of sex and fantasy was atypical in my ethnographic fieldwork, at least in the United States and the United Kingdom, an issue which may be culturally specific. Consider the following dialogue from the European focus group I conducted in 2009, which offers an example of group sexual banter, an activity which I have observed often as a member of the fan community for many years, but usually only when fans think they are in the company of 'friends'. While most of the European participants had not met me prior to the session, and I therefore was not part of their social circle, they nevertheless engaged in sexual banter with each other and with me. I had asked the participants if they ever 'drool', which is common fan slang for 'shared expressions of emotion and desire' (Jenkins 2002). One fan, whom I will call Anna to protect her anonymity, responded, "*No! We don't do that. We don't exchange pictures of Simon in his Speedos.*" Everyone then began excitedly discussing paparazzi photos of Simon Le Bon in a swimsuit which appeared in a tabloid circa 2008 (all names have been changed to preserve anonymity):

Laura: Those were horrible!

Sophie: Which one, the one where he's checking for his 'boys'? Or...

Laura: That's wrong on so many levels. Oh...

Anna: And we don't drool!

Emma: But you watch it. You watch it.

Laura: It was hard to go around it. It was everywhere.

Anna: No we don't drool. No.

Diana: No drooling. [Laughter]

Sophie: And what about that picture of Roger naked? Oh my god.

Everyone: Ohhhhh!

Emma: He must've sniffed something because you KNOW who's outside.

Sarah: Oh you know they knew because Simon had to wear his bathrobe and his flip flops...

Anna: He wanted us to take a picture of that. [Laughter]

(2009 European Focus Group)

A similar dialogue occurred at the American focus group I conducted in 2008, and despite my efforts to steer the group back on track to topics that I felt, in my morally dualistic

academic way, to be superior, their preoccupations were sexual jokes and 'meet the band' tales. Previously I suggested that the hesitancy to discuss sexuality might be culturally specific, noting how the European fans were considerably less reserved than most other fans I had interviewed. In this particular instance, however, the Americans engaged in the same level of intimate banter because they were comfortable with me – they were my 'home' fan group, local to my geographic area, and they knew me well. I used to attend monthly parties that they would arrange to watch Duran videos, gossip, and drink alcohol. On those occasions, sexual repartee was always on the menu. In fact I have never attended any Duran fan-related gathering anywhere, of two fans or more, even if it is just a luncheon, where light-heartedly referring to the band members in a sexual way has not been at the forefront of activities. After observing this activity countless times and closely examining the dialogues from these two focus groups, I believe that the sharing of such fantasies is, in essence, a trust-building activity and a form of bonding. It is a practice that might be akin to male 'locker room' behaviour, providing women a safe space for 'play' that is free from external judgement and criticism, particularly from men. Therefore, just as the bedroom culture practice of fantasising is instrumental in teen girls' identity construction and sexual expression, fantasy also appears to play an equally important function in adulthood.

### **Duranmania**

Making a departure from bedroom culture, in this next section I will move from the private sphere to the public arena in consideration of another activity in which female pop fans are known to engage, a more manifest expression of sexual desire made famous by the likes of the infamous Bobbysoxers and Beatlemania. In much the same way that Duran fans enjoy communal bedroom culture where they can 'drool' among friends, most confess to getting a similar thrill when expressing that same libidic energy on a massive scale at concerts. And concert attendance appears to be just as popular among adult Duran fans as their teenhood poster possession had been, with a substantial 97% of fans reporting they have attended at least one Duran concert in their lifetime, 44% claiming they attend at least one Duran concert per year in the present day, and 29% say they have been to more than 20 Duran concerts in total. For a 'music' fan culture like that of Duran Duran, this should not be surprising, because the live concert is the zenith around which the entire fan experience is based. And for teen girls, the pop concert holds particular value, according to McRobbie & Simon Frith (1991). 'A live pop concert is... a landmark among their leisure activities,' it is a chance to 'express a collective identity, to go out en masse, to take part in activities unacceptable in other spheres' (McRobbie & Frith 1991, p. 148). And what better way to express that feeling than a squeal of delight that 'signifies romantic fantasy while it tests out some newly active hormonal responses' (Wald 2002)? 83% of the Duran fans I surveyed report that they have screamed while attending a Duran show:

I saw [Duran Duran] in person at my first concert... I absolutely had a blast and could not speak for days after... I had just turned 16.

Like this fan, I was also 16 when I attended my first Duran concert. And although I had been to concerts by other pop artists before, some who were phenomenally popular at the time like Michael Jackson, never before had I encountered an audience quite like that one. Girls were screaming, jumping, and throwing every item of clothing imaginable onto the stage. Some even climbed light poles and other equipment to get a better view. Fan after fan would 'rush' the stage only to be escorted out by security. It was utter chaos, it was 'Duranmania' – a complete spectacle, at which I was both terrified and fascinated. Although I was frightened for my safety on a couple of occasions, the crowd's enthusiasm was contagious and it furthered the thrill of seeing my favourite band on stage for the first time. My initial amazement and curiosity about the other fans' behaviour that day is what planted the seed for me to later pursue this research. However, it may be evident from my language in this account that I was hesitant about partaking in the same behaviour. Social conditioning had taught me that it was inappropriate on some level. Garratt characterises the associated shame:

Most of us scream ourselves silly at least once, although many refuse to admit it later, because like a lot of female experience, our teen infatuations have been trivialized, dismissed, and so silenced. Wetting your knickers over a pop group just isn't a hip thing to have done (Garratt 1990, p. 400).

In her review of teen pop history, Kristin Kidder refers to Frank Sinatra and his 'Bobbysoxers' as being the first documented case of young women swooning and screaming over a teen idol at a concert (Kidder 2006, p. 83). Although some experts argue that this practice goes back further – classical music historians claim that pianist Franz Liszt incited similar reactions among young women in the 19th century, when they threw their clothing at him and 'fought over locks of his hair' (Beck 2012).

In her introduction to *The Adoring Audience* (1992), Lewis posited, 'Fans get a bad press. The familiar images of fandom are loaded with negative stereotypes and labels of deviancy ... why is it so maligned and stigmatized?' (1992, p. iii) The direction of fan studies has changed since that time, turning away from the position that fandom is pathological. But even now, popular criticism still locates many fans as 'isolated' and 'inept' (Moore 2005, p. 82). Although this perception is changing in some respects, particularly in academia where 'the battle to place fandom on the cultural studies agenda has long since been won' (Hills 2002, p. 183), where society at large is concerned, 'condescension and condemnation is but one narrative of many surrounding the phenomenon of fandom' (Andrews & Whorlow 2000, p. 258). This attitude is particularly apparent with regard to fans of 'women's media':

On the whole, the word 'fans', when applied to women, is derogatory. It is always assumed that they are attracted to a person for the 'wrong' reasons, that they are uncritical and stupid. As an audience, they are usually treated with contempt by both bands and record companies. The 'real' audience is assumed to be male (Garratt 1990, p. 409).

A number of studies in the 1980s and 1990s by feminist scholars such as Dorothy Hobson (1982), Janice Radway (1987), Ann Gray (1992), Ian Ang (1988), and Charlotte Brunson (1997) contend that women's pleasures are regarded as trivial, and worse, they are perceived to be a 'problem', like an addiction. Consider this assessment by Sue Wise of the media response to Elvis fans:

What better way to explain the frightening spectacle of hordes of uncontrollable females than by 'discovering' that they were only responding to being sexually stimulated and manipulated by a man—literally man-ipated... How suitable! How unthreatening! And how ego stroking for the men who looked on approvingly. By turning Elvis from what in effect he was— an *object* of his fans— into a *subject*, the girls' behaviour was de-threatened and controlled... Yet it seems paradoxical to me that feminists, myself included, have taken over these male ideas about rock music without ever bothering to ask how women experience this phenomenon (1990, p. 396-397).

Wise makes a compelling argument, and her final statement is a challenge for us to probe this area further. We should scrutinise the commonly accepted belief that the male pop idol onstage is seen to act on the female fan on the ground. In other words, are female fans really passive, being acted upon by the active male star? Frith & Goodwin claim that 'the domination of rock writing by men has led to a version of pop history that is both ideologically and empirically suspect' (1990, p. 370). As an example, consider this account of Beatles fan behaviour in 1963:

Screaming like an animal and wearing almost as much leather as one, the young girl writhed and shook in some private ecstasy... there were hundreds like her and so much oblivious of their partners' presence that they stood at right angles to the boy they were 'with', shaking, screaming, supremely happy (The Daily Mail 1963 qtd. in Andrews & Whorlow 2000, p. 256).

Andrews & Whorlow emphasize the patronizing tone of this review – the reporter's concern is that the 'boyfriend's' masculinity is subverted by the mere presence of the Beatles and of his girlfriend's enjoyment of their performance (ibid.). The review is a textbook example of the media's depiction of Beatles fans at the time. Ehrenreich, Hess, & Jacobs (1992) have explored such fan behaviour in retrospect, suggesting that Beatles fans actually reversed the

power dynamic that dominant culture (and the media) had assumed was taking place with fans of Elvis Presley and Frank Sinatra. The fans were not being acted upon by the males on the stage, the female fans were not the objects, it was indeed the other way around (Ehrenreich et. al. 1992, p. 90). The fans were not out of control either, they were celebrating their newfound discovery of a pastime that would be shared with subsequent generations of female fans, the objectification of the male pop star. (Here again is the ‘inversion’ of traditional gender stereotypes, analogous to Kidder’s observations about teen poster consumption.) Unfortunately, most of the fans I interviewed claim they were not allowed to partake in this activity – few were allowed to attend concerts when they were adolescent:

I went to my first concert only in 2005 because I was not allowed to go when I was a teenager.

My first concert was in 1984. I have an old brother so, he [went] with me. So my parents allowed it.

My mom wouldn't let me go to see them when I was 16... I didn't get the opportunity until '87-Stange Behaviour.

Sept, 1984: My 2nd day of high school... The girl behind me comes in and sits down in her seat. She's wearing a tour shirt for the Seven And The Ragged Tiger tour... I hadn't been allowed to go, a sore point, even to this day.

No way I would've been allowed to a concert...

...we did all sorts of crazy things but we weren't allowed to go to the concerts either because we lived too far away.

My parents were pretty protective. I wanted to go see [Duran Duran] so bad and they wouldn't let me. I was so mad at them for months.

None us of got to see Duran until 1987...

While there are rational explanations for this tendency (such as the one fan mentioning that she lived ‘too far away’ and the fact that most adolescent fans did not have the financial means or the transportation to attend many concerts), the main limitation barring young Duran fans from attending concerts was parental overprotection. My teen experience with concerts was no different. My mother forbade me from going to see Duran Duran when they came through town in 1984 at the height of their popularity. She still forbade me 3 years later, even when I turned 16, but in defiance I went anyway and concealed that fact

from her for many years. To this day, she says she cannot remember why she would not permit me to go, when she had allowed me to see other artists. We have discussed the topic at length, and the only justification that she can surmise is the news reports about the behaviour of other fans at Duran concerts at that time. Not unlike Beatlemania, stadiums were full of frenetic and screaming adolescents, a potentially dangerous cocktail as the sheer volume of excited young girls in one place meant that many were getting crushed. An interesting parallel, but also possibly related, is that my mother herself played a part in Beatlemania 20 years earlier when she attended a concert of this same magnitude in 1964.

Frith contends that this nature of parental overprotection has to do with the way in which 'the rock 'n' roll discourse constructs its listeners in sexually differentiated terms—boys as public performers, girls as private consumers' (1996, p. 228). And further, he confirms McRobbie's theories about 'bedroom culture', proposing that teen girl culture in general, begins and ends 'in the bedroom' (ibid.). McRobbie & Frith (1991) explain that girls 'are usually confined to the locality of their homes; they have less money than boys, less free time, less independence of parental control' (p. 148). Whereas boys 'are on the streets', girls are more often at home or at a friend's house where they can visit, listen to music, and engage in 'girl talk' or gossip (ibid., p. 226). This double standard inhibits many young girls from concert attendance, when boys of the same age do not face similar limitations. To what, exactly, are young women at risk of being exposed at these events? Are there forces at concerts from which parents feel they needed to protect their daughters, particularly when the pop concert is considered by many to be 'one of adolescence's most exciting rites of passage' (Kidder 2006, p. 83)?

Drawing upon the analysis of McRobbie & Frith, it appears that fears regarding female pop fan behaviour stem from more than just a protective parental concern that daughters might get 'crushed' by the mob; it is rather a historically deep-seated patriarchal bias that condemns such female fan behaviour because of what motivates it. Ehrenreich et. al. (1992) allege that Beatles fan behaviour at concerts was revolutionary for the women's movement (p. 90), contending that the real reason behind the screaming was a subject that no adult dared to touch: female sexuality, a taboo subject for 1960s Western culture and a subject in which contemporary society is still not entirely comfortable, as the testimonies of the Duran fans above can attest. But the panic was not only about female sexuality, the real problem was that it also concerned adolescent sexuality (ibid.).

The 'medical' nature of pathologising female behaviour has historical roots- with the word 'hysteria' long associated with women, 'a metaphor for anything considered unmanageable in the female sex' (Andrews & Whorlow 2000, p. 256). Even fans themselves refer to themselves pathologically. These fan statements reveal the reception they have received from individuals outside the fan community:

They think I'm obsessed.

People tease or look at you weird, right? Maybe people have a little resentment because we're getting a little bit older and still having loads of fun with this band. So, what's the problem?

I think most of my family and friends consider joining a fan board "fanatical"/unacceptable and would be concerned. Seriously.

Nuts!

[My] parents think I'm nuts. My sister says that too spend money on a band (that she once worshipped herself. [This] is stupid, I think she is just jealous.

This makes me frustrated. If I try to explain, I just get poked fun at even more.

They think I'm a groupie and I'm obsessed, but I don't think any of them understand.

Notice the language here, particularly the frequency of words like 'crazy', 'nuts', and 'obsessive'. For some fans, the 'fandom as pathology' message has been internalized; they admit guilt for gleaning enjoyment from such media and feel compelled to justify and defend themselves. They are aware of how their fandom is perceived by the rest of society, so many of them make jokes about having an addiction, as reflected in these statements:

I crave that "fix".

I find myself continuing to go to shows and follow them because I'm always chasing after that proverbial carrot – in this case the carrot being that after-show sighting "high"...

It's my drug and escape.

Media have historically struggled to come up with an explanation for female pop fan behaviour, as was evident in the previous discussion about Beatlemania and Elvis fandom. And this is still the case today. The opening paragraph from a recent article on Justin Bieber fans in the Wall Street Journal proves that such behaviours are still largely misunderstood:

The symptoms include uncontrollable screaming, swooning and spending hours on Twitter and Facebook. It primarily affects preteen and teen girls, yet it is highly contagious and can infect mothers, too. In severe cases, sufferers camp

out on sidewalks for days... By disease standards, "Bieber Fever" is approaching a global pandemic (Beck 2012).

While this article later attempts to present a more accepting perspective, it does so by explaining this fan behaviour scientifically, resorting again to pathologisation, claiming the behaviours are 'chemical' responses and unique to teenagers, simply a phase of adolescence that girls will outgrow. In her article "I David Lee Roth: Threat or Menace?", Cheryl Cline (1992) describes the challenge of maintaining her adult fandom of Van Halen's former lead singer:

A lot of junk has been written about the teenage crush, and almost as much junk on the middle-aged matron-crush, but between these two periods of hormonal lunacy (adolescence and menopause), women are supposed to give up their crushes on famous people – especially rock stars. It's a sign of maturity to pack up the posters, photos, magazines, scrapbooks, and unauthorized biographies you so lovingly collected and shove them in the back of the closet... until you reach the age when everybody thinks you're crazy anyway (Cline 1992, p. 70-71).

Cline reminds us that the predominating belief is that pop fandom belongs to the adolescent domain. This misconception is chiefly responsible for many adult Duran fans resorting to closet fandom. I know that for me, upon entering adulthood my outward interest in Duran Duran dulled due to societal pressures that my fannish tendencies were best left in teenhood. Becoming a closet fan was easier than facing the ridicule, particularly from one's male partner: 'Not wanting to be on the wrong end of the pointing finger of scorn, we keep our lips buttoned and lust in silence' (Cline 1992, p. 71). Adult fans of Duran Duran employ a similar muted approach:

People will turn it [in]to a negative so I don't tell them all the stuff.

You don't tell anybody.

Very few people know.

It's like telling someone that you like cross-stitch embroidery or something.

You don't talk about Duran Duran... no, you don't.

I can understand the motivation behind fan defensiveness because, admittedly, I have been guilty of passing judgment on other fans myself. The intensity of fan devotion to Duran Duran is something that has intrigued me from the beginning of my own fandom, not only



the behaviour I witnessed at my first concert but also from observing other fans at school. Their lockers, adorned with Duran posters, were extensions of their bedrooms. And their school demeanour echoed their concert behaviour, voices filling the hallways with shrieking and squealing over new photos of their favourite band members. I noticed how other kids (non-fans) reacted with condescending eye rolls and whispering. Just as I was uneasy with the fan response to the video at the slumber party, here again I was also embarrassed, only this time, my uneasiness arose from a fear of being judged by my peers. Being a typically self-conscious teenager, I avoided public association with other Duran fans after that. This hiding of my fandom from non-fans was the beginning of a 'closet' fandom that continued for most of my life. I am not the norm, however, based on the fans I have interviewed. The shame of being a fan of Duran Duran began earlier for me than most, but many fans have told me that they have felt ashamed at some point in their lives due to the realisation that their favourite pastime and its associated behaviours are considered immature and inappropriate to those outside the fan culture.

Lynn Zubernis and Katherine Larsen (2012) found similar instances of shame during their investigation of *Supernatural* fandom, claiming that 'Fandom, for many female fans, is compelling for its invitation to self-expression, including sexual expression. At the same time, the negative connotations of "fangirl" persist' (p. 11). They suggest that this nature of shame is often associated with 'the pursuit of pleasure ...whether it's the evolutionary pleasure of sex or the pleasure sought in "frivolous amusement", the definition of which shifts with cultural exigency (attendance at theatrical productions and reading novels were both formerly discouraged after all)' (ibid.). Many fans I interviewed claim that the judgements they receive are most often from men, again suggestive that such fandoms threaten or destabilise traditional masculinity:

My brother gave me a hard time. My brother still gives me a hard time.

I was friends with a lot of guys in Junior High and High School and I [was given] hard time from the guys that I liked Duran Duran.

But by far, the strongest condescension reported by Duran fans came from those who are in relationships with male partners, evidence that such fandoms may, indeed, be seen as threatening to traditionally patriarchal structures:

He doesn't understand my connection to other fans, or the "obsession" with the band. [I'm] pretty sure he is jealous of my crush on the same man for 26 years.

At one point, it was a huge issue...but since then I think things have mellowed out because the band isn't touring right now... it used to really bother me, partly because I think I knew he was right.

I wish he would allow me to travel more when there is a tour, but he seems to think it is silly and may be jealous that he is not going.

My husband says nothing makes my eyes sparkle more than "that Duran band", ha ha ha!

My husband doesn't get it at all - none of it. He thinks it's a total waste of time & money. No matter how I explain it all (Duran Duran or New Kids On The Block) he just doesn't get it. He doesn't get mad or anything - he just rolls his eyes.

Sometimes I think he gets a little jealous.

Notice the number of comments that use the term 'jealous' to describe a partner's reaction, or that characterise a partner as having an attitude of condescension. The few Duran fans whose partners supported their fandom assert that they prioritise their fan activities within the context of their lives as wives and mothers:

My hubby thinks it is all silly, but nonetheless, he is supportive. Ours is a great relationship and we each have our own likes and interests, so while he will roll his eyes and call me silly, he knows that it's something that I truly love and is always okay with me taking off for Duranie weekends or concerts, provided it's in the budget. I am responsible enough to see that we've got kid coverage, so it's not like I leave him high and dry on his own. He also understands my need to get away from responsibilities, work, motherhood and just cut loose and enjoy myself. Otherwise, if Momma ain't happy, ain't nobody happy.

While this fan suggests that a strong sense of duty or responsibility in the home comes first, she also indicates that she engages in fan practice as a way of defining a space for herself free from the same domestic constraints. Here is another fan testimony that further illustrates the same dynamic:

My hubby was extremely worried when I found Duran again. I'm not sure if he was jealous of the band or jealous of the friends that I made because of them or maybe just the fact that I had something that I loved that didn't really include him. He has since learned that I am a happier person to be around when I get a little 'me' time now and then and has become pretty supportive of my Duran addiction. He likes their music [and] has even gone to

a show, but he realizes that this is my thing and it's best to let me do it with the girls.

These fans express how their fan activities must be conducted in a way that does not disrupt their relationships with their male partners. But would their partners do the same for them? How different would these testimonies be if they were given by men? Would men be as concerned about their leisure activities in the context of their relationships with their wives? Would they be concerned about securing child care, for example? Such ideas recall conclusions drawn by Radway (1987), as she observed women's reading of romance novels as a 'declaration of independence' or a temporary 'escape' from their roles as wives and mothers (Radway 1994, p. 301). Radway compares her research to that of both McRobbie and Hobson, citing similarities in how all three 'studies use traditionally female forms to resist their situation as women by enabling them to cope with the features of the situation[s] that oppress them' (Radway 1987, p. 301). Although Radway's conclusions regarding 'patriarchal marriage' were made two decades ago and the feminist movement has made great strides since that time, these Duran fan comments suggest that marital relationships and expectations about women's familial role may not have changed that much. However, just as Radway's subjects continued to engage in romance novel consumption when faced with similar gender politics, such pressures have not discouraged Duran fans from continuing their fan practice, particularly when their fan attachments have spanned many years, usually exceeding (and sometimes outliving) the length of fans' romantic relationships, as this fan points out:

I always think that the boyfriends can come and go... but Duran Duran stayed. They are still there. They were there when I was 13. Maybe it sounds pathetic but... they are still there.

### **Youth Reclaimed**

As we have seen thus far, many aspects of Duran fandom for adult female fans are just as empowering as they were when they were teens, but maintaining that fandom long-term has not been without its share of complications. And as we have also seen, most Duran fans began their fandom as a factor of adolescent desire. But as I will now discuss, the findings from my case study indicate that Duran fandom today has less to do with sex and more to do with memory and a nostalgic identification with one's 'teen self':

The fact that they still give me the tingly feeling that I had when I was a teenager is probably what keeps me coming back.

Other Duran fans report a similar renewed pleasure in attending gigs as adults – a euphoria that makes them feel 'like a kid' again, a nostalgic tendency that correlates to my earlier assertion about the impact of pop cultural influences during adolescence. One Duran fan

told me: “*You suffer from I.T.S. ... "Inner Teen Syndrome" ... great, isn't it?*” Another fan proposed the term: *‘teens with credit’*. She rationalised that being an adult Duran fan today, with both the financial means and the freedom to travel to concerts, makes her feel like a teen with a credit card. Here are some other fan testimonials that illustrate this tendency:

Now when I see them I can let go for a couple of hours and feel like I am still a teenager.

Attending concerts with my friends and singing with the songs and basically acting like a teenager!

You can always be assured you’ll dance and sing and have fun with your friends when you go to a Duran show... I always have a great time, I always dance and sing to every song, it always puts me in a good mood, makes me feel like I’m a 16 year old girl again.

Definitely a time to be a “kid” again and forget real life.

This second teenhood represents a milestone in each fan’s lifelong narrative, instances in which they not only renew their dedication to their favourite band, but also reassess themselves and the progress they have made in their lives up to that point. The reclaimed youth these fans experience might serve as an antidote to *social ageing*, which Thornton (1995) describes as: ‘that ‘slow renunciation or disinvestment’ which leads people to ‘adjust their aspirations to their objective chances, to espouse their condition, become what they are and make do with what they have’ (Bourdieu 1984 qtd. in Thornton 1995, p. 102). Thornton’s logic may help to explain why fans like these cling to attachments formed in adolescence:

... youth culture is often attractive to people well beyond their youth. It acts as a buffer against social ageing – not against the dread of getting older, but of resigning oneself to one’s position in a highly stratified society (Thornton 1995, p. 102).

Garde-Hansen (2011) draws a similar connection in her analysis of lifelong Madonna fandom, suggesting that ‘pop music and nostalgia create a powerful marketable mix that evoke youthfulness’ (Garde-Hansen 2011, p. 134). And as she points out, further research should be conducted in this area because the connection between memory and pop music has been left relatively unexplored (ibid., p. 121).

An oft-cited volume of pop fan fantasies is Fred and Judy Vermorel’s *Starlust* (1985). Academic criticisms of *Starlust* have acknowledged its significance for fan studies, in that it ‘was the first publication of its kind—a study that offered a theory of the music industry

through the words of the fans themselves' (Frith & Goodwin 1990, p. 479). But at the same time, these 'secret fantasies of fans' were labelled 'obsessive, devotional voices' by the same critics (*ibid.*, p. 422). Even Thompson (1995) backslides into pathologising rhetoric (Moore 2005, p. 81) when he cites the following passage to prove fandom's risk of becoming obsessive:

When I make love to my husband I imagine it's Barry Manilow. All the time.... And after that, when my husband and I have made love and I realize it's not him, I cry to myself... It's usually dark when the tears flow and somehow I manage to conceal them... [Barry] helps me through my life... He's my lover in my fantasies. He's my friend when I'm depressed. He's there and he seems to serve as something I need to get through my life (Joanne *qtd.* in Frith & Goodwin 1990, p. 481-482).

Thompson deems this account to be 'disconcerting' and suggestive of a 'double life' (1995, p. 221). But Sandvoss (2005) offers a contrasting view, rationalising that all the fan fantasies in *Starlust* 'involve a projective quality in which inherent aspects of the self in the form of drives and fantasies are articulated through the object of fandom which functions as its extension' (Sandvoss 2005, p. 101). This idea is central to Sandvoss' theory of 'fan texts', which act as mirrors or forms of 'self-reflection' (*ibid.*, p. 10). Although this concept originates in the field of psychology, Sandvoss has managed to avoid the pathologisation pitfalls that have led so many academics to avoid addressing fandom psychologically. As Sandvoss suggests:

To fully understand fandom and the relationship between fan and object of fandom, we thus have to understand the psychological foundations of the self (*ibid.*, p. 68)... it is near impossible to think about such pleasures outside the basic concerns and language of psychoanalysis (*ibid.*, p. 69)

Hills, too, proposes that a psychoanalytical approach to fan studies may be appropriate (2002, p. 91), as long as it is 'respectful of fans' everyday creativities and 'little madneses'' (*ibid.* p. 22). Like Sandvoss, Hills argues that due to the intensely affective nature of fan attachments, it is 'impossible to take fandom seriously without taking fan psychology seriously' (*ibid.*).

The 'fan text' concept can be applied to Duran fan attachments if we consider them as transitional objects and spaces, in the way that 'found' transitional objects tend to hold great personal significance. According to D.W. Winnicott's (1951) interpretation of the post-psychoanalytical 'objects relations theory' (Sandvoss 2005, p. 79), as children we 'develop a strong emotional bond to our first possessions, such as blankets, toys and teddy bears' (*ibid.*, p. 85). These transitional objects become a 'source of emotional warmth' (*ibid.* p. 86) that help us cope with anxieties in the absence of our caregivers. Sociologist Anthony

Giddens (1991) appropriates this idea too, suggesting that transitional objects and spaces might act as a 'protective cocoon' for coping with anxieties and insecurities in adulthood (Sandvoss 2005, p. 88). As an example, consider how this fan's practice of consuming old Duran videos gives her comfort:

My life has been really crazy since August of last year... I have thought so many times that I was losing my mind... I have felt really far away from Simon and the guys so I started going back and looking at old videos and it has helped my perspective on things. That would probably sound crazy to some, but it's not about getting lost in a fantasy, it's more like I just get happy when I am able to see them. Sometimes YouTube just lifts my spirits so... it truly helps.

Through its emphasis on objects being found or discovered, transitional object theory may help to explain how attachments formed in adolescence can make such an impact. For example, most fans take pride in their personal 'discovery' stories about how they became fans, instances that hold great significance in the context of their life narratives. Rediscovery in later life can be just as meaningful, as expressed by the following fan comments:

[I] found them again in 2005. To see the original 5 back together again was a dream come true.

I jumped out of my seat and ran to the TV when I heard them announce that Duran Duran in full five line-up was going to perform shortly. I could not believe it. This was a dream come true. They spoke of getting back together and a U.S. tour and all I could do was scream with excitement and stare at the TV.

They announced the reunion tour, and I freaked out... I was like "oh I gotta have more, gotta have more!"

So a group of girls who hadn't seen much of each other since [high school] got together to see the band we had loved so much. It was on that night... I realized that I had become a wife and a mommy and left [myself] somewhere in the shadows. It was that night that I realized I had to find a way to be wife, mommy and ME!

The final statement here suggests that this fan rediscovered a part of herself which she had long forgotten. I felt this way too at the reunion concert I attended in 2005, an event which represented a pinnacle moment in the chronology of my fandom, a turning point where I not only finally embraced my fan identity but also reclaimed a more youthful and

empowered part of myself that I had abandoned long ago. The reclaimed youth that we discovered by taking part in these experiences was life affirming for us in many respects. The following fan comment illustrates a similar recognition, implying an awareness of not only the band's mortality, but by extension, the fan's own mortality:

I try to... live the tour to its fullest – because let's face it, you never know when it'll be the last one.

Most Duran fans are now hitting 'midlife' (many are either approaching or have already hit their 40th-year birthday), and by most standards this period is thought of as a transitional space, the bridge between youth and old age. Because these fans discovered the band in adolescence, the appeal of finding Duran Duran again later in life may represent a 'fountain of youth' of sorts, accounting for the nostalgic pleasure that makes them feel like kids again.

While such conclusions could be misconstrued as regressive or suggestive of midlife crises, this analysis is not meant to disparage or pathologise female pop fandom. As stressed previously, female pop fans have already experienced enough condemnation. Rather, serious consideration should be given to the motivations behind these tendencies. Connections can be drawn between the various discourses concerning ageing, gender politics in relation to teen pop, and women's continued engagement in pop fandom in adulthood. While some of the conservative attitudes associated with patriarchal culture's expectations of women's roles and behaviours still exist, continued participation in fandoms like that of Duran Duran in spite of external deterrents is a signifier of a gradual cultural progression toward a more empowered feminist ideology, supporting the claims of scholars who have charted the revolutionary nature of teen idol fandom over the last century.

## **Conclusion**

Much has been written that marginalizes both pop idols and their fans, so endeavouring to treat these subjects as worthy of serious academic study has been paramount in this research. Through an analysis of an ethnographic case study of Duran Duran fans, the motivations and complications inherent in women's lifelong pop music fandom were examined, finding that adult female fans experience a euphoric empowerment from performing the same fannish activities they did as teens. Because many of the fans in this study claim that Duran Duran stirred their first sexual desires, it is possible that this notion of a first crush may be one of the instigators in the formation and persistence of their lifelong fan attachment. However, as the case study also revealed, while many fans came into the fandom because of this initial sexual attraction, their attachments today have little to do with sex and more to do with memory and a nostalgic identification with their teen selves. When we take into account that most fans surveyed are over the age of 40, and we consider the personal significance of 'found' objects and spaces during periods of transition, we can see how a continued participation in a fandom discovered in one's teenhood might be highly appealing, approximating a reclaimed youth.

As mentioned at the start of this article, there is a shortage of such studies on lifelong fan attachments. This research is therefore distinctive in its investigation of women's media consumption as part of a lifelong fan practice. While some critical inquiry has been performed by other scholars on the individual elements discussed here, none has brought together these issues to specifically examine the adult female experience with teen idol fandom or the patriarchal politics that condemn it. This research has sought to drive forward discourses in feminism, fan studies, and popular music, but more research should be done in this area, particularly to investigate how memory, nostalgia, and fantasy function in other lifelong fandoms.

### **Biographical note:**

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