The Adoring Audience
FAN CULTURE
AND POPULAR MEDIA

edited by
LISA A. LEWIS

1992

 Routledge
London and New York
Beatlemania: Girls Just Want to Have Fun

BARBARA EHRENREICH, ELIZABETH HESS, GLORIA JACOBS

... witness the birth of eve - she is rising she was sleeping she is fading in a naked field sweating the precious blood of nodding blooms ... in the eye of the arena she bends in half in service - the anarchy that exudes from the pores of her guitar are the cries of the people wailing in the rushes ... a riot of ray/dios ...  

Patti Smith, 'Notice,' in Babel

The news footage shows police lines straining against crowds of hundreds of young women. The police look grim; the girls' faces are twisted with desperation or, in some cases, shining with what seems to be an inner light. The air is dusty from a thousand running and scuffling feet. There are shouted orders to disperse, answered by a rising volume of chants and wild shrieks. The young women surge forth; the police line breaks.

Looking at the photos or watching the news clips today, anyone would guess that this was the sixties - a demonstration - or maybe the early seventies - the beginning of the women's liberation movement. Until you look closer and see that the girls are not wearing sixties-issue jeans and T-shirts but bermuda shorts, high-necked, preppie blouses, and disheveled but unmistakably bouffant hairdos. This is not 1968 but 1964, and the girls are chanting, as they surge against the police line, 'I love Ringo.'
out unguarded into the streets runs the very real peril of being
dismembered or crushed to death by his fans. 2

When the Beatles arrived in the United States, which was still
ostensibly sobered by the assassination of President Kennedy
two months before, the fans knew what to do. Television had
spread the word from England: The approach of the Beatles
is a license to riot. At least 4,000 girls (some estimates run as
high as 10,000) greeted them at Kennedy Airport, and hundreds
more laid siege to the Plaza Hotel, keeping the stars virtual
prisoners. A record 73 million Americans watched the Beatles
on 'The Ed Sullivan Show' on 9 February, 1964, the night 'when
there wasn't a hubcap stolen anywhere in America.' American
Beatlemania soon reached the proportions of religious idolatry.
During the Beatles' twenty-three-city tour that August, local
promoters were required to provide a minimum of 100 security
guards to hold back the crowds. Some cities tried to ban
Beatle-bearing craft from their runways; otherwise it took
heavy deployments of local police to protect the Beatles from
their fans and the fans from the crush. In one city, someone
got hold of the hotel pillowcases that had purportedly been
used by the Beatles, cut them into 160,000 tiny squares,
mounted them on certificates, and sold them for $1 a piece.
The group packed Carnegie Hall, Washington's Coliseum and,
a year later, New York's 55,600-seat Shea Stadium, and in no
setting, at any time, were their music audible above the frenzied
screams of the audience. In 1966, just under three years after
the start of Beatlemania, the Beatles gave their last concert --
the first musical celebrities to be driven from the stage by their
own fans.

In its intensity, as well as its scale, Beatlemania surpassed
all previous outbreaks of star-centered hysteria. Young women
had swooned over Frank Sinatra in the forties and screamed for
Elvis Presley in the immediate pre-Beatle years, but the Fab Four
inspired an extremity of feeling usually reserved for football
games or natural disasters. These baby boomers far outnumbered
the generation that, thanks to the censors, had only been
able to see Presley's upper torso on 'The Ed Sullivan Show.' Seeing
(whole) Beatles on Sullivan was exciting, but not enough.
Watching the band on television was a thrill -- particularly the
close-ups -- but the real goal was to leave home and meet the

BEATLEMANIA: GIRLS JUST WANT TO HAVE FUN

Beatles. The appropriate reaction to contact with them -- such
as occupying the same auditorium or city block -- was to sob
uncontrollably while screaming, 'I'm gonna die, I'm gonna
die,' or, more optimistically, the name of a favorite Beatle, until
the onset of either unconsciousness or laryngitis. Girls peed
in their pants, fainted, or simply collapsed from the emotional
strain. When not in the vicinity of the Beatles -- and only a
small proportion of fans ever got within shrieking distance of
their idols -- girls exchanged Beatle magazines or cards, and
gathered to speculate obsessively on the details and nuances
of Beatle life. One woman, who now administers a Washington,
DC-based public interest group, recalls long discussions with
other thirteen-year-olds in Orlando, Maine:

I especially liked talking about the Beatles with other
girls. Someone would say, 'What do you think Paul had
for breakfast?' 'Do you think he sleeps with a different girl
every night?' Or, 'Is John really the leader?' 'Is George really
more sensitive?' And like that for hours.

This fan reached the zenith of junior high school popularity
after becoming the only girl in town to travel to a Beatles'
concert in Boston: 'My mother had made a new dress for me
to wear [to the concert] and when I got back, the other girls
wanted to cut it up and auction off the pieces.'

To adults, Beatlemania was an afflication, an 'epidemic,' and
the Beatles themselves were only the carriers, or even 'foreign
germs.' At risk were all ten- to fourteen-year-old girls, or at least
all white girls; blacks were disdainful of the Beatles' initially
derivative and unpolished sound. There appeared to be no cure
except for age, and the media pundits were fond of reassuring
adults that the girls who had screamed for Frank Sinatra had
grown up to be responsible, settled housewives. If there was a
shortcut to recovery, it certainly wasn't easy. A group of Los
Angeles girls organized a detox effort called 'Beatlesaniacs,
Ltd.,' offering 'group therapy for those living near active
chapters, and withdrawal literature for those going it alone
at far-flung outposts.' Among the rules for recovery were: 'Do
not mention the word Beatles (or beetles),' 'Do not mention the
word England,' 'Do not speak with an English accent,' and 'Do not speak English.' In other words, Beatlemania was as inevitable as acne and gum-chewing, and adults would just have to weather it out.

But why was it happening? And why in particular to an America that prided itself on its post-McCarthy maturity, its prosperity, and its clear position as the number one world power? True, there were social problems that not even Reader's Digest could afford to be smug about—racial segregation, for example, and the newly discovered poverty of 'the other America.' But these were things that an energetic President could easily handle—or so most people believed at the time—and if 'the Negro problem,' as it was called, generated overt unrest, it was seen as having a corrective function and limited duration. Notwithstanding an attempted revival by presidential candidate Barry Goldwater, 'extremism' was out of style in any area of expression. In colleges, 'coolness' implied a detached and rational appreciation of the status quo, and it was de rigueur among all but the avant-garde who joined the Freedom Riders or signed up for the Peace Corps. No one, not even Marxist philosopher Herbert Marcuse, could imagine a reason for widespread discontent among the middle class or for stirrings that could not be satisfied with a department store charge account—much less for 'mania.'

In the media, adult experts fairly stumbled over each other to offer the most reassuring explanations. The New York Times Magazine offered a 'psychological, anthropological,' half tongue-in-cheek account, titled 'Why the Girls Scream, Weep, Flip.' Drawing on the work of the German sociologist Theodor Adorno, Times writer David Dempsey argued that the girls weren't really out of line at all; they were merely 'conforming.' Adorno had diagnosed the 1940s jitterbug fans as 'rhythmic obedient,' who were 'expressing their desire to obey.' They needed to subsume themselves into the mass, 'to become transformed into an insect.' Hence, 'jitterbug,' and as Dempsey triumphantly added: 'Beatles, too, are a type of bug . . . and to 'beatle,' as to jitter, is to lose one's identity in an automatized, insectlike activity, in other words, to obey.' If Beatlemania was more frenzied than the outbursts of obedience inspired by Sinatra or Fabian, it was simply because the music was 'more frantic,' and in some animal way, more compelling. It is generally admitted 'that jungle rhythms influence the "beat" of much contemporary dance activity,' he wrote, blithely endorsing the stock racist response to rock 'n' roll. Atavistic, 'aboriginal' instincts impelled the girls to scream, weep, and flip, whether they liked it or not: 'It is probably no coincidence that the Beatles, who provoke the most violent response among teenagers, resemble in manner the witch doctors who put their spells on hundreds of shuffling and stamping natives.'

Not everyone saw the resemblance between Beatlemaniac girls and 'natives' in a reassuring light however. Variety speculated that Beatlemania might be a 'phenomenon closely linked to the current wave of racial rioting.' It was hard to miss the element of defiance in Beatlemania. If Beatlemania was conformity, it was conformity to an imperative that overruled adult mores and even adult laws. In the mass experience of Beatlemania, as for example at a concert or an airport, a girl who might never have contemplated shoplifting could assault a policeman with her fists, squirm under police barricades, and otherwise invite a disorderly conduct charge. Shy, subdued girls could go berserk. 'Perky,' ponytailed girls of the type favored by early sixties sitcoms could dissolve in histrionics. In quieter contemplation of their idols, girls could see defiance in the Beatles or project it onto them. Newsweek quoted Pat Hagan, 'a pretty, 14-year-old Girl Scout, nurse's aide, and daughter of a Chicago lawyer . . . who previously dug "West Side Story," Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning: "They're tough," she said of the Beatles. "Tough is like when you don't conform . . . You're tumultuous when you're young, and each generation has to have its idols."'

America's favorite sociologist, David Riesman, concurred, describing Beatlemania as 'a form of protest against the adult world.'

There was another element of Beatlemania that was hard to miss but not always easy for adults to acknowledge. As any casual student of Freud would have noted, at least part of the fans' energy was sexual. Freud's initial breakthrough had been the insight that the epidemic female 'hysteria' of the late nineteenth century—which took the form of fits, convulsions,
tics, and what we would now call neuroses – was the product of sexual repression. In 1964, though, confronted with massed thousands of ‘hysterics,’ psychologists approached this diagnosis warily. After all, despite everything Freud had to say about childhood sexuality, most Americans did not like to believe that twelve-year-old girls had any sexual feelings to repress. And no normal girl – or full-grown woman, for that matter – was supposed to have the libidinal voltage required for three hours of screaming, sobbing, incontinent, acute-phase Beatlemania. In an article in Science News Letter titled ‘Beatles Reaction Puzzles Even Psychologists,’ one unidentified psychologist offered a carefully phrased, hygienic explanation: Adolescents are ‘going through a strenuous period of emotional and physical growth,’ which leads to a ‘need for expressiveness, especially in girls.’ Boys have sports as an outlet; girls have only the screaming and swooning afforded by Beatlemania, which could be seen as ‘a release of sexual energy.’

For the girls who participated in Beatlemania, sex was an obvious part of the excitement. One of the most common responses to reporters’ queries on the sources of Beatlemania was, ‘Because they’re sexy.’ And this explanation was in itself a small act of defiance. It was rebellious (especially for the very young fans) to lay claim to sexual feelings. It was even more rebellious to lay claim to the active, desiring side of a sexual attraction: the Beatles were the objects; the girls were their pursuers. The Beatles were sexy; the girls were the ones who perceived them as sexy and acknowledged the force of an ungovernable, if somewhat disembodied, lust. To assert an active, powerful sexuality by the tens of thousands and to do so in a way calculated to attract maximum attention was more than rebellious. It was, in its own unformulated, dizzy way, revolutionary.

Sex and the Teenage Girl

In the years and months immediately preceding US Beatlemania, the girls who were to initiate a sexual revolution looked, from a critical adult vantage point, like sleepwalkers on a perpetual shopping trip. Betty Friedan noted in her 1963 classic, The Feminine Mystique, ‘a new vacant sleepwalking, playing-a-part quality of youngsters who do what they are supposed to do, what the other kids do, but do not seem to feel alive or real in doing it.’ But for girls, conformity meant more than surrendering, comatose, to the banal drift of junior high or high school life. To be popular with boys and girls – to be universally attractive and still have an unblemished ‘reputation’ – a girl had to be crafty, cool, and careful. The payoff for all this effort was to end up exactly like Mom – as a housewife.

In October 1963, the month Beatlemania first broke out in England and three months before it arrived in America, Life presented a troubling picture of teenage girl culture. The focus was Jill Dinwiddie, seventeen, popular, ‘healthy, athletic, getting A grades,’ to all appearances wealthy, and at the same time, strangely vacant. The pictures of this teenage paragon and her friends would have done justice to John Lennon’s first take on American youth:

When we got here you were all walkin’ around in fuckin’ Bermuda shorts with Boston crewcuts and stuff on your teeth . . . The chicks looked like 1940’s horses. There was no conception of dress or any of that jazz. We just thought what an ugly race, what an ugly race.

Jill herself, the ‘queen bee of the high school,’ is strikingly sexless: short hair in a tightly controlled style (the kind achieved with flat metal clips), button-down shirts done up to the neck, shapeless skirts with matching cardigans, and a stance that evokes the intense posture-consciousness of prefeminist girls’ phys. ed. Her philosophy is no less engaging: ‘We have to be like everybody else to be accepted. Aren’t most adults that way? We learn in high school to stay in the middle.’

‘The middle,’ for girls coming of age in the early sixties, was a narrow and carefully defined terrain. The omnipresent David Riesman, whom Life called in to comment on Jill and her crowd, observed, ‘Given a standard definition of what is feminine and successful, they must conform to it. The range is narrow, the models they may follow few.’ The goal,
which Riesman didn’t need to spell out, was marriage and motherhood, and the route to it led along a straight and narrow path between the twin dangers of being ‘cheap’ or being too puritanical, and hence unpopular. A girl had to learn to offer enough, sexually, to get dates, and at the same time to withhold enough to maintain a boy’s interest through the long preliminaries from dating and going steady to engagement and finally marriage. None of this was easy, and for girls like Jill the pedagogical burden of high school was a four-year lesson in how to use sex instrumentally: doling out just enough to be popular with boys and never enough to lose the esteem of the ‘right kind of kids.’ Commenting on Life’s story on Jill, a University of California sociologist observed:

It seems that half the time of our adolescent girls is spent trying to meet their new responsibilities to be sexy, glamorous and attractive, while the other half is spent meeting their old responsibility to be virtuous by holding off the advances which testify to their success.

Advice books to teenagers fussed anxiously over the question of ‘where to draw the line,’ as did most teenage girls themselves. Officially everyone – girls and advice-givers – agreed that the line fell short of intercourse, though by the sixties even this venerable prohibition required some sort of justification, and the advice-givers strained to impress upon their young readers the calamitous results of premarital sex. First there was the obvious danger of pregnancy, an apparently inescapable danger since no book addressed to teens dared offer birth control information. Even worse, some writers suggested, were the psychological effects of intercourse: It would destroy a budding relationship and possibly poison any future marriage. According to a contemporary textbook titled, Adolescent Development and Adjustment, intercourse often caused a man to lose interest (‘He may come to believe she is totally promiscuous’), while it was likely to reduce a woman to slavish dependence (‘Sometimes a woman focuses her life around the man with whom she first has intercourse’).12 The girl who survived premarital intercourse and went on to marry someone else would find marriage clouded with awkwardness and distrust.

Dr Arthur Cain warned in Young People and Sex that the husband of a sexually experienced woman might be consumed with worry about whether his performance matched that of her previous partners. ‘To make matters worse,’ he wrote, ‘it may be that one’s sex partner is not as exciting and satisfying as one’s previous illicit lover.’13 In short, the price of premarital experience was likely to be postnuptial disappointment. And, since marriage was a girl’s peak achievement, an anticlimactic wedding night would be a lasting source of grief.

Intercourse was obviously out of the question, so young girls faced the still familiar problem of where to draw the line on a scale of lesser sexual acts, including (in descending order of niceness): kissing, necking, and petting, this last being divided into ‘light’ (through clothes and/or above the waist) and ‘heavy’ (with clothes undone and/or below the waist). Here the experts were no longer unanimous. Pat Boone, already a spokesman for the Christian right, drew the line at kissing in his popular 1958 book, Twist Twelve and Twenty. No prude, he announced that ‘kissing is here to stay and I’m glad of it!’ But, he warned, ‘Kissing is not a game. Believe me! . . . Kissing for fun is like playing with a beautiful candle in a roomful of dynamite!’14 (The explosive consequences might have been guessed from the centerpiece photos showing Pat dining out with his teen bride, Shirley; then, as if moments later, in a maternity ward with her; and, in the next picture, surrounded by ‘the four little Boones.’) Another pop-singer-turned-adviser, Connie Francis, saw nothing wrong with kissing (unless it begins to ‘dominate your life’), nor with its extended form, necking, but drew the line at petting:

Necking and petting – let’s get this straight – are two different things. Petting, according to most definitions, is specifically intended to arouse sexual desires and as far as I’m concerned, petting is out for teenagers.15

In practice, most teenagers expected to escalate through the scale of sexual possibilities as a relationship progressed, with the big question being: How much, how soon? In their 1963 critique of American teen culture, Teen-Age Tyranny, Grace and Fred Hechinger bewailed the cold instrumentality that shaped
the conventional answers. A girl’s ‘favors,’ they wrote, had become ‘currency to bargain for desirable dates which, in turn, are legal tender in the exchange of popularity.’ For example, in answer to the frequently asked question, ‘Should I let him kiss me good night on the first date?’ they reported that:

A standard caution in teen-age advice literature is that, if the boy ‘gets’ his kiss on the first date, he may assume that many other boys have been just as easily compensated. In other words, the rule book advises mainly that the [girl’s] popularity assets should be protected against deflation.16

It went without saying that it was the girl’s responsibility to apply the brakes as a relationship approached the slippery slope leading from kissing toward intercourse. This was not because girls were expected to be immune from temptation. Connie Francis acknowledged that ‘It’s not easy to be moral, especially where your feelings for a boy are involved. It never is, because you have to fight to keep your normal physical impulses in line.’ But it was the girl who had the most to lose, not least of all the respect of the boy she might too generously have indulged. ‘When she gives in completely to a boy’s advances,’ Francis warned, ‘the element of respect goes right out the window.’ Good girls never ‘gave in,’ never abandoned themselves to impulse or emotion, and never, of course, initiated a new escalation on the scale of physical intimacy. In the financial metaphor that dominated teen sex etiquette, good girls ‘saved themselves’ for marriage; bad girls were ‘cheap.’

According to a 1962 Gallup Poll commissioned by Ladies’ Home Journal, most young women (at least in the Journal’s relatively affluent sample) enthusiastically accepted the traditional feminine role and the sexual double standard that went with it:

Almost all our young women between 16 and 21 expect to be married by 22. Most want 4 children, many want . . . to work until children come; afterward, a resounding no! They feel a special responsibility for sex because they are women. An 18-year-old student in California said, ‘The standard for men — sowing wild oats — results in sown oats. And where does this leave the woman?’ . . . Another student: ‘A man will go as far as a woman will let him. The girl has to set the standard.’17

Implicit in this was a matrimonial strategy based on months of sexual teasing (setting the standard), until the frustrated young man broke down and proposed. Girls had to ‘hold out’ because, as one Journal respondent put it, ‘Virginity is one of the greatest things a woman can give to her husband.’ As for what he would give to her, in addition to four or five children, the young women were vividly descriptive:

. . . I want a split-level brick with four bedrooms with French Provincial cherrywood furniture.
. . . I’d like a built-in oven and range, counters only 34 inches high with Formica on them.
. . . I would like a lot of finished wood for warmth and beauty.
. . . My living room would be long with a high ceiling of exposed beams. I would have a large fireplace on one wall, with a lot of copper and brass around. . . . My kitchen would be very like old Virginian ones — fireplace and oven.

So single-mindedly did young women appear to be bent on domesticity that when Beatlemania did arrive, some experts thought the screaming girls must be auditioning for the maternity ward: ‘The girls are subconsciously preparing for motherhood. Their frenzied screams are a rehearsal for that moment. Even the jelly babies [the candies favored by the early Beatles and hurled at them by fans] are symbolic.’18 Women were asexual, or at least capable of mentally bypassing sex and heading straight from courtship to reveries of Formica counters and cherrywood furniture, from the soda shop to the hardware store.

But the vision of a suburban split-level, which had guided a generation of girls chastely through high school, was beginning to lose its luster. Betty Friedan had surveyed the ‘successful’ women of her age — educated, upper-middle-class housewives — and found them reduced to infantile neuroticism by
the isolation and futility of their lives. If feminism was still a few years off, at least the ‘feminine mystique’ had entered the vocabulary, and even Jill Dinwiddie must have read the quotation from journalist Shana Alexander that appeared in the same issue of Life that featured Jill. ‘It’s a marvellous life, this life in a man’s world,’ Alexander said. ‘I’d climb the walls if I had to live the feminine mystique.’ The media that had once romanticized togetherness turned their attention to ‘the crack in the picture window’—wife swapping, alcoholism, divorce, and teenage anomie. A certain cynicism was creeping into the American view of marriage. In the novels of John Updike and Philip Roth, the hero didn’t get the girl, he got away. When a Long Island prostitution ring, in which housewives hustled with their husbands’ consent, was exposed in the winter of 1963, a Fifth Avenue saleswoman commented: ‘I see all this beautiful stuff I’ll never have, and I wonder if it’s worth it to be good. What’s the difference, one man every night or a different man?”¹⁹

So when sociologist Bennet Berger commented in Life that ‘there is nobody better equipped than Jill to live in a society of all-electric kitchens, wall-to-wall carpeting, dishwashers, garbage disposals [and] color TV,’ this could no longer be taken as unalloyed praise. Jill herself seemed to sense that all the tension and teasing anticipation of the teenage years was not worth the payoff. After she was elected, by an overwhelming majority, to the cheerleading team, ‘an uneasy, faraway look clouded her face.’ ‘I guess there’s nothing left to do in high school,’ she said. ‘I’ve made song leader both years, and that was all I really wanted.’ For girls, high school was all there was to public life, the only place you could ever hope to run for office or experience the quasi fame of popularity. After that came marriage—most likely to one of the crew-cut boys you’d made out with—then isolation and invisibility.

Part of the appeal of the male star—whether it was James Dean or Elvis Presley or Paul McCartney—was that you would never marry him; the romance would never end in the temudium of marriage. Many girls expressed their adulation in conventional, monogamous terms, for example, picking their favorite Beatle and writing him a serious letter of proposal, or carrying placards saying, ‘John, Divorce Cynthia.’ But it was inconceivable

that any fan would actually marry a Beatle or sleep with him (sexually active ‘groupies’ were still a few years off) or even hold his hand. Adulation of the male star was a way to express sexual yearnings that would normally be pressed into the service of popularity or simply repressed. The star could be loved noninstrumentally, for his own sake, and with complete abandon. Publicly to advertise this hopeless love was to protest the calculated, pragmatic sexual repression of teenage life.

The Economics of Mass Hysteria

Sexual repression had been a feature of middle-class teen life for centuries. If there was a significant factor that made mass protest possible in the late fifties (Elvis) and the early sixties (the Beatles), it was the growth and maturation of a teen market: for distinctly teen clothes, magazines, entertainment, and accessories. Consciousness of the teen years as a life-cycle phase set off between late childhood on the one hand and young adulthood on the other only goes back to the early twentieth century, when the influential psychologist G. Stanley Hall published his mammoth work Adolescence. (The word ‘teenager’ did not enter mass usage until the 1940s.) Postwar affluence sharpened the demarcations around the teen years: fewer teens than ever worked or left school to help support their families, making teenhood more distinct from adulthood as a time of unemployment and leisure. And more teens than ever had money to spend, so that from a marketing viewpoint, teens were potentially much more interesting than children, who could only influence family spending but did little spending themselves. Grace and Fred Hechinger reported that in 1959 the average teen spent $555 on ‘goods and services not including the necessities normally supplied by their parents,’ and noted, for perspective, that in the same year school-teachers in Mississippi were earning just over $3,000. ‘No matter what other segments of American society—parents, teachers, sociologists, psychologists, or policemen—may deplore the power of teenagers,’ they observed, ‘the American business community has no cause for complaint.”²⁰
If advertisers and marketing men manipulated teens as consumers, they also, inadvertently, solidified teen culture against the adult world. Marketing strategies that recognized the importance of teens as precocious consumers also recognized the importance of heightening their self-awareness of themselves as teens. Girls especially became aware of themselves as occupying a world of fashion of their own—not just bigger children's clothes or slimmer women's clothes. You were not a big girl or a junior woman, but a 'teen,' and in that notion lay the germs of an oppositional identity. Defined by its own products and advertising slogans, teenhood became more than a prelude to adulthood; it was a status to be proud of—emotionally and sexually complete unto itself.

Rock 'n' roll was the most potent commodity to enter the teen consumer subculture. Rock was originally a black musical form with no particular age identification, and it took white performers like Buddy Holly and Elvis Presley to make rock 'n' roll accessible to young white kids with generous allowances to spend. On the white side of the deeply segregated music market, rock became a distinctly teenage product. Its 'jungle beat' was disconcerting or hateful to white adults; its lyrics celebrated the special teen world of fashion ('Blue Suede Shoes'), feeling ('Teenager in Love'), and passive opposition ('Don't know nothin' 'bout his-to-ry'). By the late fifties, rock 'n' roll was the organizing principle and premier theme of teen consumer culture: you watched the Dick Clark show not only to hear the hits but to see what the kids were wearing; you collected not only the top singles but the novelty items that advertised the stars; you cultivated the looks and personality that would make you a 'teen angel.' And if you were still too young for all this, in the late fifties you yearned to grow up to be—not a woman and a housewife, but a teenager.

Rock 'n' roll made mass hysteria almost inevitable: It announced and ratified teen sexuality and then amplified teen sexual frustration almost beyond endurance. Conversely, mass hysteria helped make rock 'n' roll. In his biography of Elvis Presley, Albert Goldman describes how Elvis's manager, Colonel Tom Parker, whipped mid-fifties girl audiences into a frenzy before the appearance of the star: As many as a dozen acts would precede Elvis—acrobats, comics, gospel singers, a little girl playing a xylophone—until the audience, 'driven half mad by sheer frustration, began chanting rhythmically, "We want Elvis, we want Elvis!" When the star was at last announced:

Five thousand shrill female voices come in on cue. The screeching reaches the intensity of a jet engine. When Elvis comes striding out on stage with his butchy walk, the screams suddenly escalate. They switch to hyperspace. Now, you may as well be stone deaf for all the music you'll hear.

The newspapers would duly report that 'the fans went wild.'

Hysteria was critical to the marketing of the Beatles. First there were the reports of near riots in England. Then came a calculated publicity tease that made Colonel Parker's manipulations look oafish by contrast: five million posters and stickers announcing 'The Beatles Are Coming' were distributed nationwide. Disc jockeys were blitzed with promo material and Beatle interview tapes (with blank spaces for the DJ to fill in the questions, as if it were a real interview) and enlisted in a mass 'countdown' to the day of the Beatles' arrival in the United States. As Beatle chronicler Nicholas Schaffner reports:

Come break of 'Beatle Day,' the quartet had taken over even the disc-jockey patter that punctuated their hit songs. From WMCA and WINS through W-A-Beatle-C, it was 'thirty Beatle degrees,' 'eight-thirty Beatle time'...[and] 'four hours and fifty minutes to go.'

By the time the Beatles materialized, on 'The Ed Sullivan Show' in February 1964, the anticipation was unbearable. A woman who was a fourteen-year-old in Duluth at the time told us, 'Looking back, it seems so commercial to me, and so degrading that millions of us would just scream on cue for these four guys the media dangled out in front of us. But at the time it was something intensely personal for me and, I guess, a million other girls. The Beatles seemed to be speaking directly to us and, in a funny way, for us.'

By the time the Beatles hit America, teens and preteens had already learned to look to their unique consumer subculture
for meaning and validation. If this was manipulation—and no culture so strenuously and shamelessly exploits its children as consumers—it was also subversion. **Bad** kids became juvenile delinquents, smoked reefer, or got pregnant. Good kids embraced the paraphernalia, the lore, and the disciplined fandom of rock ‘n’ roll. (Of course, bad kids did their thing to a rock beat too: the first movie to use a rock ‘n’ roll soundtrack was ‘Blackboard Jungle,’ in 1955, cementing the suspected link between ‘jungle rhythms’ and teen rebellion.) For girls, fandom offered a way not only to sublimate romantic and sexual yearnings but to carve out subversive versions of heterosexuality. Not just anyone could be hyped as a suitable object for hysteria: It **mattered** that Elvis was a grown-up greaser, and that the Beatles let their hair grow over their ears.

**The Erotics of the Star-Fan Relationship**

In real life, i.e. in junior high or high school, the ideal boyfriend was someone like Tab Hunter or Ricky Nelson. He was ‘all boy,’ meaning you wouldn’t get home from a date without a friendly scuffle, but he was also clean-cut, meaning middle class, patriotic, and respectful of the fact that good girls waited until marriage. He wasn’t moody and sensitive (like James Dean in *Giant* or *Rebel Without a Cause*), he was realistic (meaning that he understood that his destiny was to earn a living for someone like yourself). The stars who inspired the greatest mass adulation were none of these things, and their very remoteness from the pragmatic ideal was what made them accessible to fantasy.

Elvis was visibly lower class and symbolically black (as the bearer of black music to white youth). He represented an unassimilated white underclass that had been forgotten by mainstream suburban America—more accurately, he represented a middle-class caricature of poor whites. He was **sleazy**. And, as his biographer Goldman argues, therein lay his charm:

What did the girls see that drove them out of their minds? It sure as hell wasn’t the All-American Boy... Elvis was the flip side of [the] conventional male image. His

**Beatlemania: Girls Just Want to Have Fun**

fish-belly white complexion, so different from the ‘healthy tan’ of the beach boys; his brooding Latin eyes, heavily shaded with mascara... the thick, twisted lips; the long, greasy hair... God! what a freak the boy must have looked to those little girls... and what a turn-on! Typical comments were: 'I like him because he looks so mean...' 'He’s been in and out of jail.'

Elvis stood for a dangerous principle of masculinity that had been expunged from the white-collar, split-level world of fandom: a hood who had no place in the calculus of dating, going steady, and getting married. At the same time, the fact that he was lower class evened out the gender difference in power. He acted arrogant, but he was really vulnerable, and would be back behind the stick shift of a Mack truck if you, the fans, hadn’t redeemed him with your love. His very sleaziness, then, was a tribute to the collective power of the teen and preteen girls who worshipped him. He was obnoxious to adults—a Cincinnati used-car dealer once offered to smash fifty Presley records in the presence of every purchaser—not only because of who he was but because he was a reminder of the emerging power and sexuality of young girls.

Compared to Elvis, the Beatles were almost respectable. They wore suits; they did not thrust their bodies about suggestively; and to most Americans, who couldn’t tell a blue-collar, Liverpudlian accent from Oxbridge English, they might have been upper class. What was both shocking and deeply appealing about the Beatles was that they were, while not exactly effeminate, at least not easily classifiable in the rigid gender distinctions of middle-class American life. Twenty years later we are so accustomed to shoulder-length male tresses and rock stars of ambiguous sexuality that the Beatles of 1964 look clean-cut. But when the Beatles arrived at crew-cut, precounterculture America, their long hair attracted more commentary than their music. Boy fans rushed to buy Beatles wigs and cartoons showing well-known male figures decked with Beatle hair were a source of great merriment. *Playboy*, in an interview, grilled the Beatles on the subject of homosexuality, which it was only natural for gender-locked adults to suspect. As Paul McCartney later observed:

100

101
There they were in America, all getting house-trained for adulthood with their indisputable principle of life: short hair equals men; long hair equals women. Well, we got rid of that small convention for them. And a few others, too.24

What did it mean that American girls would go for these sexually suspect young men, and in numbers far greater than an unambiguous stud like Elvis could command? Dr Joyce Brothers thought the Beatles’ appeal rested on the girls’ innocence:

The Beatles display a few mannerisms which almost seem a shade on the feminine side, such as the tossing of their long manes of hair. . . . These are exactly the mannerisms which very young female fans (in the 10-to-14 age group) appear to go wildest over.25

The reason? ‘Very young “women” are still a little frightened of the idea of sex. Therefore they feel safer worshipping idols who don’t seem too masculine, or too much the “he man.”’

What Brothers and most adult commentators couldn’t imagine was that the Beatles’ androgyny was itself sexy. ‘The idea of sex’ as intercourse, with the possibility of pregnancy or a ruined reputation, was indeed frightening. But the Beatles construed sex more generously and playfully, lifting it out of the rigid scenario of mid-century American gender roles, and it was this that made them wildly sexy. Or to put it the other way around, the appeal lay in the vision of sexuality that the Beatles held out to a generation of American girls: They seemed to offer sexuality that was guileless, ebullient, and fun – like the Beatles themselves and everything they did (or were shown doing in their films Help and A Hard Day’s Night). Theirs was a vision of sexuality freed from the shadow of gender inequality because the group mocked the gender distinctions that bifurcated the American landscape into ‘his’ and ‘hers.’ To Americans who believed fervently that sexuality hinged on la différence, the Beatlemaniacs said, No, blur the lines and expand the possibilities.

At the same time, the attraction of the Beatles bypassed sex and went straight to the issue of power. Our informant from Orlando, Maine, said of her Beatlemanic phase:

It didn’t feel sexual, as I would now define that. It felt more about wanting freedom. I didn’t want to grow up and be a wife and it seemed to me that the Beatles had the kind of freedom I wanted: No rules, they could spend two days lying in bed; they ran around on motorbikes, ate from room service. . . . I didn’t want to sleep with Paul McCartney, I was too young. But I wanted to be like them, something larger than life.

Another woman, who was thirteen when the Beatles arrived in her home city of Los Angeles and was working for the telephone company in Denver when we interviewed her, said:

Now that I’ve thought about it, I think I identified with them, rather than as an object of them. I mean I liked their independence and sexuality and wanted those things for myself. . . . Girls didn’t get to be that way when I was a teenager – we got to be the limp, passive object of some guy’s fleeting sexual interest. We were so stifled, and they made us meek, giggly creatures think, oh, if only I could act that way, and be strong, sexy, and doing what you want.

If girls could not be, or ever hope to be, superstars and madcap adventurers themselves, they could at least idolize the men who were.

There was the more immediate satisfaction of knowing, subconsciously, that the Beatles were who they were because girls like oneself had made them that. As with Elvis, fans knew of the Beatles’ lowly origins and knew they had risen from working-class obscurity to world fame on the acoustical power of thousands of shrieking fans. Adulation created stars, and stardom, in turn, justified adulation. Questioned about their hysteria, some girls answered simply, ‘Because they’re the Beatles.’ That is, because they’re who I happen to like. And the louder you screamed, the less likely anyone would forget the power of the fans. When the screams drowned out
the music, as they invariably did, then it was the fans, and not the band, who were the show.

In the decade that followed Beatlemania, the girls who had inhabited the magical, obsessive world of fandom would edge closer and closer to center stage. Sublimation would give way to more literal, and sometimes sordid, forms of fixation: By the late sixties, the most zealous fans, no longer content to shriek and sob in virginal frustration, would become groupies and ‘go all the way’ with any accessible rock musician. One briefly notorious group of girl fans, the Chicago Plaster Casters, distinguished itself by making plaster molds of rock stars’ penises, thus memorializing, among others, Jimi Hendrix. At the end of the decade Janis Joplin, who had been a lonely, unpopular teenager in the fifties, shot to stardom before dying of a drug and alcohol overdose. Joplin, before her decline and her split from Big Brother, was in a class by herself. There were no other female singers during the sixties who reached her pinnacle of success. Her extraordinary power in the male world of rock ‘n’ roll lay not only in her talent but in her femaleness. While she did not meet conventional standards of beauty, she was nevertheless sexy and powerful; both genders could worship her on the stage for their own reasons. Janis offered women the possibility of identifying with, rather than objectifying, the star. ‘It was seeing Janis Joplin,’ wrote Ellen Willis, ‘that made me resolve, once and for all, not to get my hair straightened.’ Her ‘metamorphosis from the ugly duckling of Port Arthur to the peacock of Haight Ashbury’26 gave teenage girls a new optimistic fantasy.

While Janis was all woman, she was also one of the boys. Among male rock stars, the faintly androgynous affect of the Beatles was quickly eclipsed by the frank bisexuality of performers like Alice Cooper and David Bowie, and then the more outrageous antimasculinity of eighties stars Boy George and Michael Jackson. The latter provoked screams again and mobs, this time of interracial crowds of girls, going down in age to eight and nine, but never on the convulsive scale of Beatlemania. By the eighties, female singers like Grace Jones and Annie Lenox were denying gender too, and the loyalty and masochism once requisite for female lyrics gave way to new songs of cynicism, aggression, exultation. But between

the vicarious pleasure of Beatlemania and Cyndi Lauper’s forthright assertion in 1984 that ‘girls just want to have fun,’ there would be an enormous change in the sexual possibilities open to women and girls – a change large enough to qualify as a ‘revolution.’

Notes
1 Lewis (1963, p. 124).
2 Green (1964, p. 30).
3 ‘How to Kick . . . ’ (1964, p. 66).
4 Dempsey (1964, p. 15).
5 Quoted in Schaffner (1977, p. 16).
6 ‘George, Paul . . . ’ (1964, p. 54).
7 ‘What the Beatles Prove . . . ’ (1964, p. 88).
10 Quoted in Schaffner (1977, p. 15).
11 ‘Queen Bee . . . ’ (1963, p. 68).
14 Boone (1967, p. 60).
15 Francis (1962, p. 138).
16 Hechinger (1963, p. 54).
17 ‘Shaping the ‘60s . . . ’ (1962, p. 30).
19 Grafton (1964, p. 36).
22 Schaffner (1977, p. 9).
24 Quoted in Schaffner (1977, p. 17).
25 Quoted in Schaffner, ibid., p. 16.

References
We have lost the relative strength of old moral codes guaranteed, for them or determining their limits, by gynecological surgery rooms and desire, if not revolution, evolution - hence for the benefit of the under the rubble of those ideas are nevertheless ambitious, of altruistic - that they were extended to quench a thirst for space in which I 'assume the Paranoid? I am, in love, at the

Although Elvis Presley has been in the news for years, fans who believe that he is the father of a letter a day.

Newspaper report (San Francisco)