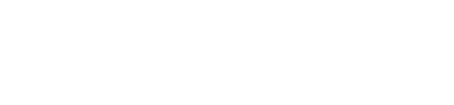


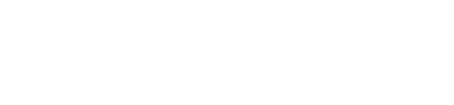
HEDI SLIMANE: FANS
JON SAVAGE



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On the 12th of October 1943, Frank Sinatra opened his third season at New York’s Paramount Theatre. It was Columbus Day, a school holiday, and the fans were out in force. Weegee was there, capturing the scene for the *New York Daily News*: “Oh! Oh! Frankie ... The line in front of the Paramount Theater on Broadway starts forming at midnight. By four in the morning there are over five hundred girls ... they wear bobby sox (of course), bow ties (the same as Frankie wears), and photos of Sinatra pinned to their dresses.”

By eight in the morning there was a huge milling mob: “A big blow-up picture of Sinatra in front of the theatre is marked red with lipstick impressions of kisses, endearing messages of love, and even telephone numbers. The theatre is soon filled. The show starts with the feature (*Our Hearts Were Young and Gay*). This is the most heckled movie of all times... not that it’s a bad movie ... just the opposite... but the girls simply didn’t come to see that... as far as they are concerned they could be showing lantern slides of the screen.”

“Then the great moment arrives. Sinatra appears on the stage... hysterical shouts of Frankie ... Frankie ... you’ve heard the squeals on the radio when he sings ... multiply that by about a thousand times and you get an idea of the deafening noise... as there is no radio control man to keep the noise within ear level. Sinatra does a few numbers and leaves the stage hurriedly.” But that wasn’t the end of it: “A big mob is waiting at the stage entrance... he dares not leave... so he’s marooned inside the theatre...”

“At two in the morning the theatre closes up ... the porters come in to clean up ... some of the girls, having been in all day and night and having seen the five shows, refuse to leave ... and try and hide in the ladies room... but the matrons chase them out.” For Weegee, this was yet another example of the human extremities that he documented with his unerring instinct for the climatic moments in the life of New York City; what he didn’t mention was the fact that, after each performance, the Paramount was drenched in urine.

Like Valentino’s funeral in 1926 or the 1939 *Wizard of Oz* premiere, the Columbus Day riot was a generation-defining media event acted out on Manhattan’s streets: 30,000 frenzied girls taking over Times Square. The writer Bruce Bliven called it “a phenomenon of mass hysteria that is only seen two or three times in a century. You need to go back not merely to Lindbergh and Valentino to understand it, but to the dance madness that overtook some German villages in the Middle Ages, or to the Children’s Crusade.”

Sinatra had already excited frantic reactions from his almost exclusively female fans, but these disturbances marked the moment when he became a national obsession: the small figure around whom America’s hopes and fears about their youth began to coalesce. This very public display of fan power alerted publishers and marketers to the value of the youth market. Within a year, this new vision of the adolescent as consumer would have its defining name: the “Teenager.”

The fan is central to the momentum of youth culture. She or he provides the raw energy that, fixed upon one point, gives the performer the power that is then radiated back at the fan. Both performers and fans then act as a kind of mirror for each other’s fantasies and projections, a living embodiment of who they could be or—in the case of the performer—who they once were. Like satellites around a planet, they oscillate around each other until some cosmic event throws this delicate balance out of kilter.

There is a fantastic photograph of Sinatra in the mid 1940s that illustrates this exchange. The setting is a long, luxurious hall with chandeliers and ornate doors. It is full of embryonic teenagers, almost all women, all of whom are craning to get a full view of the young, lone, almost frail figure that faces them. The photo is from Sinatra’s POV: we feel the intensity of the performance in the intense gaze that every single one of the audience—at least one hundred people in shot—are directing towards the face that we cannot see.

The etymology of the word “fan” is confused, but it first appeared in America in the late 1880s to denote a passionate follower of a baseball team. It seems to have been an abbreviation of the term “to fancy,” which had a stronger connotation than it does now, meaning to like something intensely. Baseball as a spectacle was an early product of the American experiment: an urbanized consumer society, based around mass production, that would be the seed bed of twentieth century popular culture.

A major development in this pop culture was the almost accidental invention of the movie star in the early 1910s. When the Biograph film company began to promote Florence Lawrence as a named personality, the reaction was extraordinary: by early 1912, she was described as “The Girl of a Thousand Faces.” Lawrence represented a celestial body materialized in a young, attractive female form, which was then reproduced electronically in hundreds or thousands of copies, blown up beyond its actual size on the screen, and finally consumed by the masses.

In this new pagan religion, the star was the God or Goddess. In quick time, their characters would emerge as the twentieth century version of the Ancient Greeks’ Mount Olympus: an intricate value system of abstracted human impulses that could be applied both to national life and individual needs. Adolescence was central to this system, exemplifying sexual attractiveness and idealized innocence. Frozen by celluloid, the star’s youth could appear as perennial as that granted to the fictional Dorian Gray or Peter Pan.

The pioneering psychologist and creator of adolescence, G. Stanley Hall, had in 1904 defined what he called “the adolescent psychology of conversion”—the propensity of youth for religious feeling. Prolonged beyond nature, the youth of the star was then mirrored by the youth of his or her follower, caught in an acute development stage between “the higher and the lower self.” Religion or religious conversion provided the perfect bridge between the selfish child and the responsible adult; translated into show business, it becomes “fan mania.”

This can take many forms, but at its heart is an exquisite contradiction: the fan exalts the star because she or he is at once both divine—if not superhuman—and extremely ordinary: the boy or girl next door. Bruce Bliven observed this about Sinatra: “He earns a million a year, and yet he talks their language; he is just a kid from Hoboken who got the breaks. In everything he says and does, he aligns himself with the youngsters and against the adult world. It is always ‘we’ and never ‘you.’”

Fan worship is first expressed by the buying of records, of concert tickets, of merchandising and memorabilia: the basic commerce of youth culture. It can then expand into public manifestations—the screaming mobs of young women that have marked shows by Sinatra, Presley, the Beatles, the Bay City Rollers, and all those who have followed. Or the taking up of musical instruments by those young men (and women) who decide that they, too, want some of that stardust. There is also the deeper identification of the wanna-bees who scan the star’s wardrobe and re-present the divine garment in an everyday context.

Then there are the collectors of holy relics, torn clothes, hair clippings etc. In December 1956, the experienced Hollywood screenwriter Hal Kanter went to an Elvis Presley show in Shreveport to gather material for the film that would eventually become *Loving You*. He went to scoff, but couldn’t believe his eyes: “I saw a young girl open her purse and take out a Kleenex, and she wiped her hand on the car, took some dust, put it in the Kleenex and folded it and put it back in the purse. I thought, ‘My God, I’ve never seen any kind of devotion like this anywhere, about anything.’”

Then there are the death cults formed by the lovers of perennial youth: James Dean, Sid Vicious, Kurt Cobain. This morbidity goes back to the Romantics, those late eighteenth century visionaries who observed the immortality gained by those who, dying young, will never grow old. One of the most shocking of all star events occurred in August 1926, when thousands of young “sheiks and shebas,” dressed in imitation of their idol, rioted in the streets around the funeral parlour where Rudolf Valentino was lying in state: *eros* and *thanatos* entwined.

Historically, the early twentieth century arrival of the star denotes the shifting of worship from the divine to the human, from the spiritual to the secular, from gratification deferred to gratification here and now. Fundamentalist hostility to pop culture is not based purely on prejudice but is an extremely realistic assessment of its status as a competitor. The history of pop has been marked by bannings and denunciations, as each new sensation—whether ragtime in the 1910s, swing in the 1930s, or rock ‘n’ roll in the 1950s—has been greeted by fire and brimstone.

Sometimes, this combat was recognized and relished. In an infamous interview given to famed American journalist Al Aronowitz in summer 1964, Derek Taylor stated about the Beatles—who were, by then, the hottest thing on the planet: “Here are these four boys from Liverpool. They’re rude, they’re

profane, they’re vulgar, and they’ve taken over the world. It’s as if they’d founded a new religion. They’re completely anti-Christ. I mean, I’m anti-Christ as well, but they’re so anti-Christ they shock me.”

As the Beatles’ PR, Taylor observed fan mania up close: “In Australia, each time we’d arrive at an airport, it was as if the Messiah had landed. The routes were lined solid, cripples threw away their sticks, sick people rushed up to the car as if a touch from one of the boys would make them well again ... it was as if some savior had arrived.” In August 1966, there was the backlash, when after John Lennon was reported as saying “Christianity is dead,” evangelists and the Ku Klux Klan threatened the Beatles and burnt their records.

On the other side of the equation, the impact of sudden, and unreckoned, divinity on the only-too-human star is almost always devastating. In September 1956, Elvis Presley gave thanks to “all my faithful teenage fans,” while speaking of the cost: “I can’t seem to relax ever, and I have a terrible time falling to sleep at night. At the most, I usually get two or three hours of broken sleep.” But, this being pop and the 1950s, Elvis ends on an affirmation: “Everything is going so fine for me that I can’t believe it’s not a dream. And, if it is, I hope I never wake up.”

The star is torn apart by the twinned furies of self-doubt (“Do I really deserve this?”) and self-aggrandizement (“I AM god”). The result is an almost unbearable tension that is worsened by the crucial fact about fandom as a state: it is fickle, subject to the same consumer processes as the wider society. Kenneth Anger’s notoriously inaccurate *Hollywood Babylon* books capture one essential truth: the star almost always goes mad, and the disparity between public image and private life often leads to disgrace, addiction, and suicide.

Elvis Presley was alone. The Beatles had each other but they were just as prey to the star’s fate. In 1963 John Lennon understood the group’s fans as a lifeline of ordinariness: when their limo was mobbed and scratched by young girls, he observed that they could smash up the car as they had paid for it. As the years went on and the mania did not ebb, things got more serious. In May 1968, John Lennon announced to his colleagues that he was Jesus before finding salvation in Yoko Ono and, briefly, heroin’s deadening embrace.

Stardom can carry a high price. The trio of major rock deaths at the turn of the decade—Brian Jones, Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin—brought an end to the 1960s idea of divinity, the idea that you could go up and up and up and never come down. During the 1970s, there was an increased awareness of the star/fan dark side: the 1974 British film *Stardust*, which told of a pop rec-luse; the death of a fan at a 1974 David Cassidy concert; the stampede in December 1979 at a Who show in Cincinnati that claimed eleven lives.

The shooting of John Lennon in December 1980 fully inaugurated the new condition of fandom: the absurd idea that the star should behave how the fan wishes, that the star owes the fan for his devotion, that the fan can exact revenge for wrong doings

imagined or otherwise, that the fan can become, in this case in his own twisted way, a star himself—emblazoned on newsstands worldwide. (This particular notoriety, of the thrill-killing criminal, had already been explored by Leopold and Loeb, Charles Starkweather, and Charles Whitman—the August 1966 Texas Sniper, among others.)

For, during the 1970s, the star became the celebrity. This is a quite different condition, which is not necessarily based on achievement, and is intimately connected with the rise of the media industry predicted by Debord in 1967’s *The Society of the Spectacle*, paragraph 193: “In the second half of this—twentieth—century culture will become the driving force of the American economy, so assuming the role of the automobile industry in the first half, or that of the railroads in the late nineteenth century.”

The new media economy was primed for worldwide colonization. “Celebrities,” wrote Debord in paragraph 60, “embody various styles of life and various views of society which anyone is supposedly free to embrace and pursue in a *global* manner. Themselves incarnations of the inaccessible results of social labor, they mimic by-products of that labor, and project these above labor so that they appear as its goal. The by-products in question are power and leisure—the power to decide and the leisure to consume which are the alpha and omega of a process that is never questioned.”

This exponential expansion and acceleration of information—a major concern of late 1970s punk aesthetics—quickened in the 1980s, just as various writers attempted a serious diagnosis of celebrity, whether in Thomas Thompson’s 1982 pulp fiction, *Celebrity*, Richard Schickel’s *Intimate Strangers: The Culture of Celebrity* (1985), Neil Postman’s *Amusing Ourselves To Death: Public Discourse In the Age of Show Business* (1985) and Leo Braudy’s *The Frenzy of Reknown: Fame and its History* (1986).

After December 1980, the fan’s relationship to the star would never be the same. Inherent in the new condition of celebrity was a new, aggressive sense of entitlement on the part of the fan. It has been often noted that “fan” is similar to the word “fanatic.” The more that celebrity was promoted as an ideal, the more the fan would feel that he or she owned a part of that celebrity, who was not regarded as a human but as an abstract. The fan letters and accounts contained in Fred Vermorel’s extraordinary *Fandemonium* (1989) show the acceleration of these demands.

The word “stalker” came into public use, a derivation of the word “steal”: the fan seeking to steal the celebrity’s soul, if not life. In March 1981, John Hinckley Jr. attempted to assassinate President Ronald Reagan in order to impress the object of his obsession: Jodie Foster, the teenage heroine of Martin Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver*. In December 2004, this process reached its ultimate conclusion when a disgruntled fan shot the former Pantera guitarist “Dimebag” Darrell Abbott live on stage in Columbus, Ohio.

Inherent in the twenty-first century nature of celebrity is a devouring envy, a sadist’s cruelty. Just as “ordinary people” are briefly raised to the condition of celebrity—on “reality TV” shows like *Big Brother* or *X-Factor*—so then are they quickly cast aside

like yesterday’s scraps. At the same time, once the performer becomes abstracted into celebrity, then his or her life becomes a public soap opera, with every aspect of appearance, drug consumption, etc. picked over in minute detail by magazines, *paparazzi*, bloggers, fans with their camera phones.

As global capitalism enters a new phase—further away from the time when mass culture was generous, of the people and by the people—then the position of the fan becomes more problematic, bearing out Debord’s curses. Today, girls scream at other girls—Kate Nash, Amy Winehouse, Girls Aloud—in celebration of a “girlpower” not reflected in institutions or in everyday life. A myriad of fan groupings exist in the virtual reality of networking sites and blogs, abstract societies chasing entities already abstracted, reification squared.

Today’s cautionary tale is that of Britney Spears, sexualized child star who, growing up in public, has her breakdown paraded in the media. (She then makes a great album about her plight, *Blackout*, which does nothing to relieve the pressure.) The delight shown at her downfall is more acute than any pleasure shown at her zenith of fame and popularity. At the same time, her image is shown around the world—for emulation or condemnation, who cares anymore?—an index of the Western “decadence” so excoriated by jihadists, who are, after all, fanatics of a different hue.

As an expression of the perpetual adolescence that is the hallmark of American culture, fandom is a transitional stage that should, in its most extreme forms, be passed through in order to achieve maturity. It is, by definition, an emotional state, lacking critical distance. Its virulent persistence into adulthood speaks of a twentieth century psychic crisis as yet ill-examined. And yet it remains a crucial *rite de passage* in Western adolescence, a way of orienting in the world that avoids the dangers of militarism and religious intolerance.

“Everything is going so fine for me that I can’t believe it’s not a dream. And, if it is, I hope I never wake up. I’m afraid to wake up each morning. A while ago, they thought I was dead. I can’t believe all this has happened to me. I just hope it all lasts.”