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# 8 Music, Fans and Fandom

## Introduction

**F**ans and fandom have been studied in a variety of different contexts, from soap operas to novels. Although there is a lot one can learn from studies about the characteristics of fandom and the behaviour of fans in general, research into music fans and fandom remains relatively scarce, with only a handful of works in the fields of popular music, marketing and consumer behaviour. Yet understanding music fans is crucial if one is to comprehend the production and consumption of music. For so many avid music consumers, the pleasures derived from music allows them to make sense of their everyday lives and experiences (Willis, 1990), 'letting other people know who we are, or would like to be, what group we belong to, or would like to belong to' (Shankar, 2000: 28). Music consumption is a very rich source of symbolic resources that can be drawn on by music fans to construct their individual and social identities. The purpose of this chapter is to explore fans and fandom in the context of music consumption and production. It builds on the earlier discussion in Chapter 7 on music consumption, where the frame of the music 'fan' was introduced. The chapter begins, therefore, with an attempt to provide a historical context for fans and fandom, and then outlines our understanding of fans and their behaviours and motivations. This is followed by an overview of fandom, its intensity and social organization. The chapter concludes with some observations on the material productivity of fans.

## Historical background

Most of us associate music fans with enthusiastic crowds following musical icons like Elvis Presley, the Beatles, or many boy- and girl-bands of the last 20 years. But in fact, behaviours typical of contemporary music fans have been traced back as far as the 19th century (Cavicchi, 1998, 2007). Music fans from as long ago as the times of Chopin and Paganini expressed their appreciation by throwing parts of their garments on stage, and the Hungarian piano virtuoso Liszt was regularly followed around Europe by an ecstatic group of female fans (Lebrecht, 1997; Parker, 1994). Across the Atlantic, in mid-19th-century America, a tour of Swedish opera singer Jenny Lind turned her into a celebrity (with a significant contribution, which needs to be acknowledged here, from the marketing machine designed by P.T. Barnum (Waksman, 2011)).

The 19th and 20th centuries brought some significant changes to the production and consumption of music. Although, as seen above, music fandom as a collective behaviour focusing on the appreciation of a musical act is not a new phenomenon, it has recently taken on a completely new dimension. With the increasing professionalization of musicians and the industrialization of musical cultures through, for example, the commercial publishing of sheet music and increasing numbers of concerts, music gradually became a passive activity requiring very little engagement from ordinary people in the production of sounds in order to be able to listen to them (Fishzon, 2012). In the 20th century music was becoming a commodity, and a new class of people emerged who can be described as music fans and who devoted themselves to following and enjoying the music made by professional musicians. One example of such changes in musical culture is 'Club Crosby', which was established in 1936 and remains the longest-running fan club in the world (Theberge, 2005). The burgeoning 20th-century music industry developed professional music-makers into celebrities, and music consumers into fans. Nowadays, in the contemporary, money-driven music industry, fans' market power and influence can make or break an artist, and with the emergence of more and more studies into fandom as a consumption phenomenon one can begin to see the

richness and diversity of fans' behaviours (Baym, 2000; Hills, 2002). There is a growing body of research into fans and fandom, with studies focusing on fans of artists including Elvis Presley (Harrison 1992; Duffett 2003; Doss 2004), Bruce Springsteen (Cavicchi, 1998), and David Bowie (Stevenson, 2009).

## Fans

Although there are no universal definitions of fans and fandom, as different musical genres require different forms of engagement from audience members for them to be perceived as fans, the word 'fan' implies a special type of relationship between a person and the object of their admiration. Early understanding of the fan-celebrity relationship focused on its stereotypically parasocial character, where one side (fans) have a substantial knowledge of the musician, and the other (musicians) know very little – or indeed nothing – about the individual lives of their fans (Horton and Wohl, 1956). Stever (2011), however, highlights the fact that although this kind of unidirectional relationship has often been presented in the literature in a negative light, it is important to recognize that it has a real influence on fans and their lives. More recent studies have moved away from seeing fandom as a parasocial form of interaction that is dangerous; pathological behaviours of fans are indeed rare and insignificant when considering the diversity and richness of the fan experience (Horton and Wohl, 1956). This chapter will discuss fans and fandom as a normal form of cultural behaviour, although it is acknowledged that, at its extreme, it can lead to deviant or even dangerous behaviours, like the murder of John Lennon by Mark Chapman, or of Selena by the president of her fan club, Yolanda Saldívar. Although these kinds of tragedies are far less common than one might think, unruly behaviour of fans, such as stalking, or verbally threatening and abusing artists during live performances, is often a cause of concern for musicians. Our focus is, nevertheless, on what one would describe as the normal, rather than criminal or deviant, consumption behaviours of fans.