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**Speculation over the Love for Rock Music.  
Media Constructions of Groupies Between the 1960s and 1970s****Introduction**

The term “groupie” is often used in popular culture, and it dominates discourses surrounding rock and metal music. It plays a big role in the mythology commonly referred to as “sex, drugs and rock and roll”. The presence of groupies in the rock and metal scene is still significant in today’s world, but their popularity reached the peak between the sixties and seventies of the 20th century. It is still associated with the flourishing L.A music scene from these decades but also there are a few figures that created what the term ‘groupie’ was all about. Miss Pamela, Bebe Buel or Lori Maddox have become the silent heroes of the music world. They have brought an attention of media and have also become the prototypes for characters in movies about groupies. Their experiences and influence were often underestimated, and they themselves have become caricatured characters both in the opinion of the media (Davies, 2001) and fans (Hill, 2013). Although there are documented cases of male groupies as well as groupies in other cultures, histories or sports (GG, San Antonio 1998, for other culture and history, Thompson 2007), in this article I am referring to women who were rock music fans and identified as groupies in sixties and seventies of the 20th century. I believe that examining the cultural phenomenon of groupies in retrospect allows us to understand the problems behind the construction of identity and its consequences. I find it relevant to look at the following discursive processes: either the role of media in creating stereotypes of groupies in rock music while taking into consideration credibility and authenticity of publications provided by media or stigmatization and discreditation of the role of groupies in rock music and femininity in fandoms as an attempt of testing women as not only sexual objects but also passive consumers of mass culture. The perception of groupies is also irrelevant to the fact of male domination in rock and metal music. This was noticed in many aspects in early academic publications (Straw 1984; Shepherd 1989: 152–173). Simon Frith and Howard Horne saw the domination of men in British rock music in the artistic background based on the romantic ideology that was popular in British art schools. This ideology emphasized the exemplar in boheme, which was both masculine and somewhat misogynistic (Frith, Horne 1987: 90). It has proved to be attractive to many of the upcoming rock musicians

who not always were graduates of the arts. As Deena Weinstein notes, “not only rock, but youth culture is often oriented towards men” (Weinstein 2000: 103). Similarly fandom collector’s practices in rock and metal music are male (O’Reilly, Larsen and Kubacki, 2013). Rosemary L. Hill points out that there is no comprehension for female fans experiences followed by discrimination or limitation of them. She proposes to replace the subcultural theory and the concepts of scene with the work of feminist popular music theorists (Sarah Cohen and Angela McRobbie) as well as Anderson’s theory of the nation as an imaginary community. She indicates that this concept allows one to consider how fans imagine themselves as part of a community without eliminating the obstacles imposed by sexism (Hill, 2014).

There is no agreed definition of what “groupie” is. According to the PWN dictionary, the term “groupie” means “a rock band lover who follows the band during the tour”. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the group as “a fan of the rock band who accompanies the band on tours”. It is worth noticing that both definitions do not include the issue of seeking sexual emotions and/or possible relationships between fans and performers that are present in the academic literature (Cline 1992, Forrest 2010). Intimate relationships have become a permanent part of the groupie image created by the media as well as female fans who agree that groupies have access to musicians or the band off the stage, at private events and they know the band members personally, while regular fans cannot get close to the musicians – they only can see them on stage during concerts or in the hotel lobby (Des Barres, 1987a, 2007b).

### Sweethearts Together

At the beginning of the 1960s, attention is drawn to the cycle of essays by Tom Wolfe (the one called *The Girl of the Year* among them), which, as Lisa Rhodes notes, may be considered the first pieces on women classified as groupies (Rhodes 2005: 135–137). In 1968 in *The Los Angeles Times* Dial Torgeson published an article titled *The New Morality: Is It New or Just Open?*. It included a commentary on the changes in morality and behavior of young women in the 1960s. The author emphasized the fact that young unmarried women do not want to take care of their houses and they commit inappropriate behavior such as going out to pubs alone. Torgeson also criticized the existence of co-educational student dormitories and the illegality of many young adults’ activities, as well as the presence of sexual themes in art. He also noticed the increasing statistics of venereal diseases (Torgeson 1968). With his dialectic, he built the foundations for further discussions on groupies, taking into account acceptable social behavior of young adult women. This topic was covered in *The Los Angeles Times* a lot in the years 1969–1971 as the press was also interested in the musical events on the Sunset Strip. It is worth mentioning a few titles of the articles published in the outlet, among them: *Groupie. Therapy on Rock Scene* by Robert Hilburn and *New Music, New Morality and the Groupie Movement* by Kathy Orloff. Kevin Thomas, who wrote a piece called *Groupies. Details Rock Phenomenon*, referred to *Groupies* – the documentary that had premiere in 1970 and the controversy it sparked. The film (directed by Rob Dorfman and Peter Nebard, produced

by Robert Weiner) presented the world of the groupies as saturated with drugs, sex and violence. Young girls who testified in front of the camera, have built an unattractive world of gossips, competition, risk and aggression. They were also shown as teenage girls who follow musicians (strong, brutal and aggressive) obsessed by them. These girls had a clearly defined goal: intimate relationship. Each of the film's characters created their own story that was intertwined with the stories of others. In the documentary one can see Joe Cocker, Ten Years After and groupies including Miss Pamela, Miss Cynthia, Diana and Irys. "No girl seeing this picture would come away wanting to be a groupie unless she were already sick." commented Thomas (Thomas 1971). Following criticism of the film's iconoclasm, Weiner explained that the time he spent touring was indeed difficult. He stated that after two months he was "depressed and horrified. The musicians are lonely and depressed when they're on the road, that's why they are so susceptible. The girls [groupies] got them started on drugs and spread VD" (Forrest 2010: 138).

The groupie phenomenon was also observed by *Rolling Stone* magazine, which scandalously described groupies as "nonprofit call girls" and "star fuckers" (Burks, Hopkins, Nelson, 1969). The article *Groupies and Other Girls* is an extensive work which was published as a book shortly after its publication in the magazine. It contains excerpts from interviews with girls present on the music scene at that time, including the music group The GTOs that featured popular groupies (including Miss Pamela and Miss Christine), produced by Frank Zappa. Although female fans had the opportunity to talk about their own experiences personally, the publication edited by Burks, Nelson and Hopkins presented them as girls who "tend to think of themselves as unselfish vehicles of love, but those who've studied the groupie ethos see them otherwise" (Burks, Hopkins, Nelson 1969). Thus, the image of girls who would do anything to get behind the scenes of a concert where they have sexual relations between them and rock stars, has been created. Following the *Rolling Stone* article (as mentioned earlier, written entirely by three men from their perspective), visions of who a fan was were rejected in favor of a highly sexualized and misogynistic approach to groupie and rock culture (Rhodes 2005: 137). Ultimately the polemics over groupies identity ended. The interpretations of groupies presented in this article strengthened views of groupies as "easy, with low self-esteem, and too stupid about music to be proper fans" (Warwick 2007: 170). They were left behind with a mocking and wrongly connoted description of themselves that focused solely on sexual themes and was addressed to women only.

The album signed as *The Groupies* was released in 1969. It had no title. The idea beyond this production was to record the memories, activities and views of a team of groupies. There were a lot of secrets related to this album and no names were revealed, however Alan Lorber is believed to be behind it. The cover of the album there is a delicately outlined silhouette of a naked woman with the waist up in several overlapping positions on a purple background. The woman's eyes are covered with hair and the whole thing gives the impression of elusiveness, airiness and delicacy. There is also a glossary inside that contains a list of terms used by groupies. The people who took part in the recording have not been identified, but their accent is reminiscent of New Yorkers. The narrative is characterized by the openness with

which the protagonists of the recording talk about their dreams, desires and experiences, lost virginity and sexual adventures, including those unpleasant ones. "My mother doesn't know the fact that I am no longer a virgin, but I think she suspects it. She must know something" – says one of the girls talking on the album. "What do we have got to lose? At most we will get a few diseases, that's all" – she explains. "I'm having too much fun. In six years I think I'll be married. (...) What happens then? Everything is over!" (*The Groupies*, 1969). According to their words, besides having pure fun, the groupies believe to pay a toll for their choices. They agreed for it and they are very serious about what they do. "Groupie is a commodity" – clarifies a voice. – "It is paid. Not in cash but in identity" (*The Groupies*, 1969). One of the girls recalls being beaten up by a famous British guitarist who was identified by the listeners as Jimmy Page. Thus, the album presents a one-dimensional perception of groupies as sexual objects – women determined only to "count" as many musicians as possible. This recording contrasted with the stories presented by the famous groupies (including Miss Pamela and Cynthia Plaster Caster), who built around themselves an atmosphere of personal charm, sensitivity, empathy, freedom, and, above all, love for music. Miss Pamela, who collected her memories in several high-profile books: *I'm With The Band: Confessions of A Groupie* (Des Barres 1987), *Take Another Little Piece of My Heart: A Groupie Grows Up* (Des Barres 1992) and *Let's Spend the Night Together: Backstage Secrets of Rock Muses and Supergroups* (Des Barres 2007). Her memories are characterized by a romantic atmosphere full of intimacy and fascination with music and musicians. The words he uses suggest that the rock scene in the 1960s and 1970s should be viewed through the prism of a fascination with music and admiring artists in the times of a changing cultural order. "The G word quickly became a scurrilous accusation. Some women, claiming to be forward-thinking, began branding groupies as backward-thinking concubines, when all we were doing was exactly what we wanted to do! To this day, the word groupie is usually used as a pointy-fingered put-down, aimed like a poison dart at the girls who make it backstage—dancing in the wings, sitting atop amplifiers, climbing aboard private jets—the ones lavishly draped on the arms of much-desired, seemingly unattainable rock stars. (...) For me, it was always the music" (Des Barres 2007: xiii). The stories documented by Des Barres were, of course, intended to suggest a different view of the groupies phenomenon than that outlined by the media. They were also supposed to be a response to the undying fascination with the world of rock music, which attracts the next generation, as well as an expression of nostalgia for the past – at the turn of the seventh and eighth decades of the last century. Des Barres' voice was picked up by contemporary scholars of popular culture, especially in the field of women. In 2003 professor Virginia Scharff published a book called *Twenty Thousand Roads: Women, Movement and the West*, of which one chapter is focused on Pamela Des Barres. The author wrote about the groupie in a following way: "to find the story of a woman traversing and transforming the counterculture landscape in a more or less qualified and competent way, look no further in the comic book and disturbing odyssey of the self-styled groupie Pamela Miller Des Barres. (...) It was music that first called on Pamela Des Barres and literally millions of other girls

to challenge themselves: to find a bigger, wider and higher reality” (Scharff 2003: 161–162). In her narratives Des Barres emphasizes a passion for music, often using terms such as “rock and roll paradise”, etc. (Des Barres 1987).

### **That Girl Belongs to Yesterday**

His love to music also highlights Cameron Crowe in the film *Almost Famous* he directed. Arguably this is the most influential film devoted to groupies from the late 1960s and early 1970s. The main character of the film is a groupie named Penny Lane whose prototype was (mentioned above) Pamela Des Barres, also known as Miss Pamela. Penny, played by Kate Hudson, is a charming, sensitive, reflective fan who fits within the framework of fans constructed by the media. She moves freely around the idealized world of rock and roll. Penny is full of empathy and understanding for her beloved idol, Russell Hammond – a lost soul, an artist with whom she has an affair. The couple’s intimate relationship is a secret guarded by both: Penny’s friends and Russell’s band. Penny does not speak of herself in the category of groupie – she introduces her and her team as “band aids”. Ladies iron stage clothes for the musicians, take care of their comfort behind the stage. Above all, they love the music, band and its creativity. Neither Penny nor her friends fit into the groupie stereotype outlined by the media at that time. According to the press, they main reason for their appearance backstage was the fame of the band, not the love of music (Forrest 2010: 137). The fictional story of Penny Lane has also shown the border between the world of a rock star on tour and his private life at home. Penny has access only to the first of these worlds – the unusual, mythologized, inaccessible for “outsiders”. Her person does not enter the musician’s everyday life. This can be seen in the scene in which Russell’s wife visits him on tour. At this point, the idealized image of the world of rock full of freedom and madness is symbolically broken. In *Almost Famous* groupies (or band aids) exist only in the world of rock (during a concert tour and when their idols come to the town) but they do not enter the so-called real world in which the other characters perform their daily or professional duties.

Penny’s character may be a mirror of milder publications about groupies – the ones that portrayed them as role models, models, and rock music muse. The above-mentioned article *Groupies and Other Girls* followed by its book edition were illustrated with exclusive photos of the groupies. The photographer, Baron Wolman, has immortalized the girls as beautiful, innocent, sensitive women following rock and roll fashion. Some of the black and white photos made a room in the history of rock photography and are now exposed at the Morrison Hotel Gallery in New York. Although the visual material did not soften the image of groupies depicted in the magazine, it was consistent with the image of groupies presented by, for example, *Star Magazine*. The magazine had short life and was published just for a few months through year 1973. It was targeted and dedicated to the fans of music and the main subjects were about the fans only. It featured comics based on stories from the Sunset Strip in Los Angeles, as well as advice for fans who would like to be like their idols. The most famous groupies of the time: Lori Maddox, Shray Mecham and Sable Starr posed for both the cover and pages of the magazine. Groupies were respected

by other female fans and were assigned as role models for many young girls. They were also the human link between “ordinary” citizens and “divine” rock stars. They created an extensive network of contacts. They exchanged information and opinions about events and musicians. This helped them stay active on the rock scene and made all the news about gigs and artists flow. Des Barres explains in the Led Zeppelin biography *The Hammer of the Gods. Saga Led Zeppelin*: “We knew some of girls back East. We heard how wild Led Zeppelin were, that they fucked everybody, a different girl every night. They already had that reputation a month into their first tour!” (Davis 2008: 92). Referring further to the relationship she developed with Jimmy Page, she describes the artist as a gentleman, gentle and charming, in a different way that it was gossiped. However, it was a way of showing the artists’ affiliation to the unbridled world of rock and roll, which the media picked up. Rock musicians have often been portrayed as out of control, angry and mad about sex and physical strength. Rebecca Forrest, in her analysis of the image of rock bands, refers to the infamous mud shark incident. The dead animal was to be tied to the bed with an underage groupie during one of Jimmy Page’s orgies (Forrest 2010: 140). Rumors about the guitarist’s passion for hard sex were also perpetuated in the aftermath of the *Groupies* movie, in which one of the girls talks about Jimmy’s abilities in sex with whips. The narrative was visualised by photos of Miss Pamela, who was the musician’s partner at the time, who simultaneously began to date 14-year-old Lori Maddox. The artist got the nickname “Jimmy Page – scourge of the groupies” (Davis 2008: 94). How much truth is there in these stories and how many slanders is not really important here. In fact, their primary goal is to “enhance the imaginary debauchery of touring life” of rock and metal bands that is so different to not that wild artists such as The Beatles or Crosby, Still, Nash & Young (Forrest 2010: 140). The presence of groupies surrounded by bands playing rock music emphasized the nature of the dangerous and dark gods of rock. Deena Weinstein notices here the influence of the party lifestyle, the lack of control, but also the artists’ willingness to create a wild image of “culture heroes” (Weinstein 2000: 228).

It is worth mentioning that on the wave of the almost uncontrolled growth of rock popularity in the 1960s and 1970s, the next generations of musicians and their fans were brought up. Increased interest in the wild world created by The Doors, Led Zeppelin or The Rolling Stones resulted in another breaking of the boundaries of the broadly defined world of rock and roll and “rock and roll morality”. The excesses of rock and metal stars such as Ozzy Osbourne, Kiss, Guns N’ Roses and Mötley Crüe took attention, attracted or disgusted fans and the music journalists as well as the tabloid press and the public opinion. The presence and activity of groupies set in the context of rock and roll was emphasized. The narration of media created a distorted picture of the groupie phenomenon, adapted to the lifestyle outlined by rock and roll. At the same time, it had an impact on the identity being constructed by the musicians. Of course, all this must have had an impact on the status of women in rock music. The views expressed by the media became strengthened: groupies were constructed as sexual, submissive and naive objects. This is visible in the range of memoirs published by acclaimed artists of rock scenes, including Mötley Crüe’s *The Dirt*, Tommy Lee’s *Tommyland*, Ozzy Osbourne’s *I Am Ozzy* and others. Sheila

Whiteley points out the important fact that although “the cultural ideals of masculinity as expressed in popular music do not necessarily conform to the actual personalities of the majority of men, it would appear that role models are significant, not least in providing a cultural expression of hegemonic masculinity” (Whiteley 1997: xxi). She continues with the words of Simon Frith who believed that “rock has become synonymous with a male-defined sexuality” and then cited The Rolling Stones’ song *Under My Thumb*, whose heroine was a submissive, “stupid” girl (Frith, McRobbie 1990: 372, Whiteley 1997: xxi).

### **It’s Only Rock and Roll**

The place of groupies in the music space is still being negotiated. There is no doubt that their presence in the rock scene has played an integral role in constructing a wild image of rock and metal musicians and their lifestyles. When they serve as a background for groupies’ stories, media see groupies in an interesting, however one-sided way. All the conditions I mentioned above influenced groupies’ image in the history of music and popular culture. Today, even among artists, there is no consensus on how to define who the groupies are or have been. Bruce Kulick (KISS, Union) notes that the word “*groupie*” means a lot of things to different musicians. To some, they are just someone to have a crazy night of sex, and drunken debauchery with. Then there are groupies that are more likely willing to help the band, in any way they can. Some will get coffee, help with the merchandise table and give some moral support that musicians need” (Karbownik, Laviour 2013: 54–61). Patrick Stone (Adler’s Appetite) admits to his fascination with groupies: “Who doesn’t love someone who loves you and your music? (...) I love nothing more than meeting women on the road. It’s the best. Fans are always appreciated” (Karbownik, Laviour 2013: 54–61). Michael Starr, vocalist of Steel Panther, a band parodying the 1980s and 1990s glam rock scene, especially its wild party side, sees a huge role for women, including groupies, in constructing the music scene: “women are glue to rock and roll. They keep it from falling apart. I think every band should have its own groupies – ladies who come to their concerts to have fun, encourage others to have such fun. I don’t know if I’ve ever had any male among such fan-leaders. There were always girls who wanted to get involved in the group’s activities” (Karbownik 2017).

There is no doubt that the music journalism of the 1960s and 1970s distorted the narration of women in rock music with a lasting impact on rock heritage. Consequently, however, it has led to the situation in which these girls, devoted to their love for music, seeking for either an escape or forms of self-expression and the possibility of crossing their own borders, became role models for many women fighting for the right to take a place in the world of rock and roll. Today, the presence of women both on stage, beyond and in the music industry does not surprise anybody. The narratives of women, especially Pamela Des Barres, who proudly admit that she is a music fan and she loves it, have become a symbol and a role model for many generations of music female fans. These narrations allowed the legacy of rock to be enriched with something more than just a female body. The rock scene of the late 1960s and 1970s is a space followed by an unusual sentiment that inspires the

artists and heroes of popular culture of the next generations. As Chad Cherry from the band The Last Vegas admits, “groupies have made it imperative for musicians to write amazing music for the sake of having them around. In a way a groupie is a muse.” (Karbownik, Laviour 2013: 58–61).

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### **Abstract**

The music media have constructed the identity of groupies as sexual and passive objects, submissive, inauthentic consumers of music. The stereotype, although still present in popular culture, is criticized by both the interested parties and rock artists. This article is an attempt to discuss the role that groupies played in the creation of the myth and character of the rock god, while taking into account the preconceived assumptions held by the popular media. Narratives of groupies' participation in the emerging rock and metal scene have also been included as the ones which created a male rock musician identity: wild, aggressive and powerful. The basis for the discussion of groupies and their role in building identity in the context of rock music is the result of a deep, rhetorical analysis of groupies' biographies, press materials, films, scientific literature and own research.

## **Spór o miłość do rocka. Medialne konstrukcje groupies w latach 60. i 70. XX wieku**

### **Streszczenie**

Media muzyczne skonstruowały tożsamość groupies jako obiektów seksualnych i biernych, uległych, nieautentycznych konsumentek muzyki. Stereotyp, choć wciąż jest obecny w kulturze popularnej, spotyka się z krytyką zarówno ze strony samych zainteresowanych, jak i artystów rockowych. W tym artykule podjęto próbę omówienia roli, jaką odegrały groupies w tworzeniu mitu i postaci boga rocka, przy jednoczesnym uwzględnieniu utartych z góry założeń utrwalonych przez popularne media. Uwzględniono narracje z uczestnictwa groupies na budującej się scenie rockowej i metalowej, które stworzyły też osobowość męskiego muzyka rockowego: dzikiego, agresywnego i potężnego. Podstawą dyskusji o groupies i ich roli w budowaniu tożsamości w kontekście muzyki rockowej jest głęboka, retoryczna analiza biografii groupies, materiałów prasowych, filmów, literatury naukowej oraz badania własne.

**Keywords:** groupies, rock music, media, female fans

**Słowa kluczowe:** groupies, muzyka rockowa, media, fanki

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