

FANTASTIC!



Clockwise from top left: Elizabeth Peyton, 'Pete Doherty (Isle of Wight June 2007)', 2007, watercolour on paper, 36x26cm, copyright the artist, courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London; painting of the Manic Street Preachers by Sara Jayne from 'The Uses of Literacy' by Jeremy Deller, published by Bookworks; Karen Kilimnik, 'Prince Charming', 1998, water soluble oil colour on canvas, 51x61cm, courtesy 303 Gallery, New York; Kim Pace, 'Frenzy' (installation detail), 2000, charcoal wall drawings, courtesy of The Bonington Gallery, Nottingham; Stella Vine, 'Polly (Pink Chair)', 2002, oil on board, 24x28cm; small portraits in text, Cathy Lomax.

CATHY LOMAX SWOONS ALONG WITH THE REST OF THE FANS AS SHE EXAMINES A CONTEMPORARY CULTURAL PHENOMENON.

'Fandom is one of the purest forms of unrequited love; it is both euphoric and destroying. You love them and they don't want to be anywhere near you.' Jessica Voorsanger

'May 13th 1955, Jacksonville Florida, Elvis's performance at the Gator Bowl caused a riot, the first of its kind in rock 'n' roll history... Hank Snow, Slim Whitman and others watched in amazement and fear when audience members jumped onto the stage and began tearing Elvis's clothes off him. Critics claimed watching Elvis perform was like watching a striptease while sipping milk. He looked to be decent and lewd, proper and sexual and steamy but cool... Elvis naively teased "girls I'll see you backstage"' Taking his cue, fourteen thousand fans grappled to leap on stage and rip off Elvis's pink shirt, white jacket and shoes.' Sleeve Notes, 'Elvis Louisiana '55'

There are two media stereotypes of the fan, an unruly member of a hysterically unhinged crowd or a mentally unstable loner, devoted to an idol they will never know. Although there are examples of both, neither tells the complete story and of course fans are not only aligned to rock stars. There are fans of gardening, cats and even scrabble. However these more genteel pursuits don't tend to attract the same fervent zeal as rock and pop and their fans are consequently less likely to suffer society's derision and disapproval.

The growing prominence of the fan in the 20th century is popularly seen as being tied up with a decline in community and the subsequent rising importance of the mass media. The media's persuasion tactics whip up emotions and replace family and community ties with bonds to constructed figures, most commonly rock or film stars. The psychological compensation of either identifying with, or idolising a star can be seen as 'an attempt to make up for all that modern life lacks.'¹

Male and female fans fall into separate cliché-ridden groups. Females exert an emotional, eroticised energy epitomised by prolonged periods of screaming. The Beatles concerts at the Hollywood Bowl in 1964 and Shea Stadium in 1965 saw four small figures climb on stage amid deafening noise. As they started to play the screaming stepped up a notch, and their music became all but inaudible. Kim Pace used this as a starting point for *Frenzy*, a theatrical installation of wall drawings, stage lighting and a soundtrack. The work explores ideas of pop idolisation, teenage obsession and fan delirium and was inspired by memories

of listening to her parents' copy of *The Beatles, Live at the Hollywood Bowl* LP combined with the very real experience of going to boy band concerts herself.

Hysteria, especially hysterically, screaming girls, get a bad press. They are seen as immature and the embodiment of all that is bad and silly about females. When Take That split in the 1990s mass hysteria broke out amongst their legion of female fans and special counselling hotlines were set up to cater for suicidal tendencies. These fully committed fans can be terrifyingly to their idols, as numerous stars have found out when they are stalked, propositioned and in moments of high passion their clothes ripped from them. Tennessee Williams' play *Orpheus Descending* (the film renamed *The Fugitive Kind* starred Marlon Brando although Tennessee originally wanted Elvis to wear Val Xavier's snakeskin jacket) examined this phenomenon teaming it with the myth of Orpheus who had the ability to entrance listeners with his music and was eventually torn to pieces by a mob.

The cliché male fan foregoes emotions for a rampaging destructiveness and a tendency to indulge in what could be termed mob behaviour, such as the excesses and dubious political alliances of some punk and skinhead audiences. Back in the 50s 'early British performances of the Bill Haley band and the first showings of Elvis Presley films were celebrated by rows of razored seats in the theatres concerned. These did not indicate dissatisfaction with the performance or anger with the management. They were signatures. They said if anything, "Thank you Bill, Elvis, for making your violence for us. Now we'll make ours for you..." Tribal gestures of tribal significance. Society, far from being an enemy, was not even a consideration.'²



These stereotypes feature the fan as an easily influenced infantile figure and paint the objects of their attentions as hardly more intelligent or important. A reading that ignores the fact that the 'stars' possess very unique qualities, most importantly the ability to communicate a raw emotion to their audience. Frank Sinatra's passionate bobbysoxer fans were



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a matter of international concern. A Guardian article from 1945 reported that: 'Psychologists have written soberly about the hypnotic quality of his voice and the remarkable effect upon susceptible young women... One young woman is known to have sat through 56 consecutive performances, which means about eight consecutive days. Some of the youngsters faint with hunger and fatigue after sitting six or eight hours without food, but still refuse to leave until they are bodily removed by the attendants'. Fifties star Johnnie Ray was 'nicknamed the Nabob of Sob and the Million Dollar Teardrop, he flaunted his neuroses and would ritually end every stage show collapsed and sobbing. He would tremble, twist, choke in agony, squirm and buckle and most of all weep, aggressively and exhibitionistically.'³ These stars have a rare talent or X factor if you will; their lifestyles may sometimes look strange but to rise to the status of an idol they have to be special. 'Look at Michael Jackson,' points out artist Jessica Voorsanger, 'he is considered freakish after all of his plastic surgery, life crises and court cases. But try to sing Thriller and you'll see how talented he is. Michael Jackson is a phenomenal singer.'

These messiah-like figures have a far greater power than politicians to influence their followers. They have the ability to tap into a hidden place in their fans heads giving them something that feels personal to each of them. This phenomena is hard to define but CS Lewis came close to it with his definition of something he called *Sehnsucht* in the essay *The Weight of Glory*: 'I am almost committing an indecency. I am trying to rip open the inconsolable secret in each one of you - the secret which hurts so much that you take your revenge on it by calling it names like Nostalgia and Romanticism and Adolescence... the secret we can not hide and cannot tell though we desire to do both. We cannot tell it because it is a desire for something which has never actually appeared in our experience'.

Jessica Voorsanger has made a number of works inspired by David Cassidy. 'I became a fan of the



Partridge Family when I was six years old and watched the TV show. It was at that point that I fell in love with David. When I started making the work it came from



seeing the pandemonium about Take That and wanting to explore what makes an idol fascinating to their fan. David Cassidy was interesting to me because he was a safe pop star for a young girl to like. He was pretty, sang with his TV family in his

TV pop band and never seemed to take advantage of girls (we learned later of course that he lived his rock star years as hard as the next guy)'. Voorsanger's David Cassidy work has ranged from collecting memorabilia (including a lunch that she shared with David while interviewing him for *What's on in London* magazine) to creating the The Partridge Wear Collection; 'assorted altered/created clothes, labelled with synopses of the episode that they appeared in'. Kim Pace's *Frenzy* installation also featured memorabilia; photographed and shown on large-scale light-box. At the centre of this image is a drawing of Davy from the Monkees (the first 'manufactured' boy band) suggesting a fan has just traced the image of their idol. She asserts that 'whilst tracing the image of the latest pop sensation, young fans can project fantasies from a safe distance, and find an outlet for awakening passion.'

Voorsanger through her David Cassidy work 'was trying to understand how the 'celebrity machine' worked, how was it that David Cassidy received over 2,000 letters a day and never saw any of them but that all the kids that wrote to him were sent invitations to join his fan club?' The special ability that a pop star has to communicate with his audience has obvious commercial potential and can subsequently be exploited. What is harder to quantify and manipulate is exactly what it is that makes a star. The numerous attempts to manufacture pop idols often end in failure maybe because more often than not the manufactured stars are formulaic copies of existing stars.

Jeremy Deller has based a number of projects on the The Manic Street Preachers and their fans, including the exhibition *Unconvention*⁵, which featured



Facing page: drawing of Ritchie Edwards by Krisha (top); drawing of Richie Edwards by Anna Vass, both from 'The Uses of Literacy' by Jeremy Deller, published by Bookworks. Above top to bottom: 'Lunch with David Cassidy', Installation, assorted objects from lunch & memorabilia from his concert, 2002; David Cassidy, 2003, collage, 56cmx38cm; 'Partridge Wear Collection', at W139, Amsterdam, 1995, all by Jessica Voorsanger



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artworks that had inspired the Manics alongside a number of Welsh themed cultural and political events. This followed on from another Manics project, *The Uses of Literacy*, which assembled artworks and writings by fans of the band (obtained by advertising in the music press). A review of the *The Uses of Literacy* show describes it as: 'A poetic visual record of screams, sighs and whispers seen through extraordinary images and the cultural commentary of the Manic Street Preachers'⁶. With these works Deller reveals a complex unsterotypical relationship between icon and fan encompassing diverse life enriching cultural influences far beyond the hysteria of desire laden screaming.

Vicarious living, something generally frowned upon, can surface in the life of a fan as a healthy way of conducting a fantasy life but if contestants on X Factor etc. are anything to go by it can slip into a unfulfillable delusion where life is not worth living if the dream is unfulfilled. 'The X Factor is so heartbreaking,' says Jessica Voorsanger, 'but some of the people who have come out of it have had successful careers, Will Young, Girls Aloud, etc. so it can be a very public forum for success.' Sheryl Garrett was a teenage Bay City Rollers fan and escaped the tedium of school with the



daydream (shared by many other teenage girls), 'that one of the Rollers would walk in to fetch me from class, with all my fellow students gawping and realising too late just how special I'd been.'⁷ Artist Karen Kilimnik has examined these ideas in her work, mixing her references and

often becoming a character in her re-imaginings of historical events alongside celebrity figures. In her 1993 work *The Psychedelic Conspiracy*, a handwritten text underneath an image of Kate Moss in a Calvin Klein ad says 'Sire Records' Seymour Stein signed her in 1982 "I was impressed by how determined she was"...' A 1998 painting called *Prince Charming* is clearly an image of Leonardo Di Caprio. The scenarios and the titles are quite patently the work of fantasy. Other artists such as Elizabeth Peyton and Stella Vine are themselves fans of a sort, painting obsessional and often-idealised portraits of rock stars such as Pete Doherty and PJ Harvey. These works are very much related to the kind of paintings made by the Manics fans in *The Uses of Literacy*.

In *Stage Struck*, a recent work by Jessica Voorsanger at the New Art Gallery, Walsall, participants were invited to dress as one celebrity and sing as another, karaoke style, exploring the inter-changeability of celebs today. They were then recorded and presented on plasma screens over the duration of the exhibition. 'When the participants (including myself) put on the costumes it was strangely empowering.' Says Voorsanger. 'To get up on a stage and sing karaoke can be scary as all of the focus is on YOU. Put on a costume and it's not you anymore you become them. I don't think this kind of vicarious experience is sad and loserish. The *Stage Struck* participants never lost sight of themselves. It just becomes sad when that is all you have.'



on the work of Karen Kilimnik, writer Maureen P Sherlock said: 'Authenticity is always a mask of vice not virtue, to live is in part to rehearse, to prepare for the vagaries of existence, it is to refuse the social order's prescription of who you are in the world. French workers have a wonderful word for this activity, *la per-ruque*, the wig.'

The fact is that mostly being a fan is fun, and on certain occasions can even be life enhancing. Sheryl Garratt describes seeing the Bay City Rollers play in the 70s while standing on a chair and screaming. 'I don't remember what they played or even whether I could hear them over the din. They weren't important by then, because what this was about was us. I'd never been that loud, that uninhibited before. Afterwards, I felt euphoric. It was pure joy.'⁸ ■

[1] Joli Jenson, *Fandom as Pathology*, Pg 16. From *The Adoring Audience* edited by Lisa A. Lewis, 1992

[2] Jeff Nuttall, *Bomb Culture*, 1968, London

[3] Douglas T. Miller, Marion Nowak, *The Fifties: The Way We Really Were*, 1977

[4] C S Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*, Preached originally as a sermon in 1942.

[5] *Uncovention*, Centre for the Visual Arts in Cardiff, 20 Nov 1999 -16 Jan 2000

[6] Marc Casnewydd, *The Uses of Literacy*, Bookworks, first published 1999

[7] Sheryl Garrett, *All of Me Loves All of You*. From *Love is the Drug* edited by John Aizelwood, 1994 / [8] *ibid*



Facing page: Kim Pace, 'Frenzy' (installation detail), 2000, charcoal on wall, approx 3000x600cm; Kim Pace, 'Davy', ('Frenzy' installation detail), photographic lightbox, 152x122cm, both courtesy of The Bonington Gallery, Nottingham. This page, Jessica Voorsanger, stills from 'Stage Struck' 2008