

## Glitter, glam and gender play: pop and teenybop in the early 1970s

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‘Why doesn’t anybody write anything about glam rock?’ Such was the title of an article by Jon Stratton, published in an academic journal in 1986, more than a decade after the demise of glam rock. Stratton’s complaint was directed towards his fellow academics, and particularly the youth culture researchers coming out of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University. As he noted, these researchers were very keen to wax lyrical about other youth cultural styles – most obviously punk – but they were much less interested in phenomena like glam rock, which they frequently dismissed as merely ‘consumerist’.

Of course, it’s no longer the case that nobody writes about glam rock. The recent early death of the leading glam star David Bowie in 2016 saw an outpouring of critical commentary, almost all of it gushing with adoration. Inevitably, much of this came from music critics and from fans (or former fans, remembering their own infatuation with Bowie in his early-1970s heyday), but some of it came from academics too. Indeed, in the previous year, Kingston University Professor Will Brooker had reportedly spent a year *living* as David Bowie in a curiously immersive participant observation study: he dressed in Bowie’s various personas and copied his hairstyles, although it appears he was unwilling or unable to match the star’s prodigious use of cocaine. The bibliography of academic ‘Bowie-ology’, explicating his lyrics, image and performance style, would probably run to many pages.

However, for various reasons, Bowie is somewhat of an exception here. He stands at the more self-conscious, even intellectual end of glam rock: both at the time and subsequently, he presented himself as an ‘artist’, not just a pop star, who demanded to be taken seriously. By contrast, critical writing about the more seemingly disposable or disreputable end of glam rock, particularly that aimed at a younger audience – performers such as Marc Bolan and Gary Glitter, or bands such as Slade and The Sweet – is still comparatively hard to find. Only in the last few years have there been any detailed, book-length studies written by music critics, historians or academics.

As Stratton argues, glam rock posed a problem for the academic study of youth culture, which was developing rapidly at the time. Glam didn’t sit easily with the idea of the Birmingham researchers that youth culture was all about working-class resistance to the ‘dominant ideology’. It seemed to appeal to both middle-class and working-class youth, and it appeared to be much more obviously manufactured by the commercial music industry. Unlike the counter-cultural rock music of the period, it wasn’t interested in authenticity, but in image, performance and display. Any challenges it posed were much more to do with gender and sexuality than with class; and the fans were largely young girls (dismissively identified as ‘teenyboppers’) rather

than tough, working-class boys on the streets – who tended to attract the fascination of these mostly male academic researchers.

For example, a contemporary study by criminologists Ian Taylor and David Wall, published in 1976, dismissed what it called the 'glam cult' as merely a matter of capitalist ideological exploitation. Taylor and Wall argued that glam rock neutralised the 'liberatory' potential of earlier styles of progressive rock music – the music of the hippy counter-culture. Bowie's apparent bisexuality was, they argued, just another ploy by a capitalist fashion industry looking for new, commercially marketable clothing styles. Bowie was 'the perfect representative for consumer capitalism to tranquilize the underground' (that is, the counter-culture). Glam rock, they argued, was one means by which a 'dying bourgeois society attempts to celebrate its defaults amongst the young... turning again and again the screws of a spiral of nihilism and meaninglessness onto a youth culture that could have been offered as an alternative'. Against this all-conquering form of capitalist manipulation, the fans of glam rock could only be cast as passive consumers, mere victims of false consciousness.

Dick Hebdige's classic book *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, published in 1979, was a little more alert to the dimension of gender and sexuality in glam, suggesting that it offered a space 'where an alternative identity could be discovered and expressed'. However, Hebdige was also ultimately dismissive: glam, he argued, was 'frivolous, narcissistic and politically evasive'. While 'teenyboppers' clearly could not be taken seriously, the more 'esoteric' artists such as Bowie and Roxy Music were also condemned for their 'extreme foppishness, incipient elitism and morbid pretensions to art and intellect' – qualities that, he falsely claimed, 'effectively precluded the growth of a larger mass audience'. While Taylor and Wall contrast the consumerism of glam rock with the authentic working-class rebellion of the skinheads, Hebdige describes glam as a 'diversion' from his grand narrative of post-war British youth culture – a narrative which includes teddy boys, mods, Rastas and punks, but excludes much else. Both accounts tend to ignore the sexism, racism and homophobia of their preferred styles, while coming down very hard on glam rock; and they also fail to address the considerable similarities and continuities between glam and other styles like mod and punk.

At the time, it was left to feminist critics to make the case for serious discussion of glam rock and other aspects of teenybopper culture. In 1975, Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber reported on their research with teenage girls in Birmingham, challenging the masculine focus of academic work on youth culture. They argued that girls' youth cultural practices were focused more on the bedroom than the street, and had tended to pass under the radar of male researchers. I'll be considering their account of the teenyboppers later in this essay, but it should be noted now that they did not dissent from their male colleagues' analysis of glam rock as essentially 'safe' and consumerist – nor indeed from their rather dismissive view of its fans.

### **Writing about glam rock**

In this essay, I *do* want to write about glam rock – and especially about its female fans. David Bowie is an unavoidable presence here, but (in line with my general

approach in these essays) I also want to focus on the more neglected, and even disreputable, aspects of this phenomenon. In the following sections, I will attempt to describe and define glam; consider issues of authenticity and performance; discuss the issue of gender and sexuality, and the question of 'camp'; and finally move on to look at the fans of glam, the so-called teenyboppers of the time.

In the interests of full disclosure, I should make it clear that I am writing about a period in my own teenage years: I was around sixteen when glam rock started to hit the charts. I was perhaps a little too old to be a dedicated fan, but I can recall a period when I had a vaguely bouffant 'feather cut', like most of the glam stars on the BBC's weekly chart music show *Top of the Pops*; and for a brief period, I even used plum-coloured nail varnish. I wore tight orange T-shirts and tight white flared trousers that deliberately left little to the imagination; I never had platform shoes, although (as a short person) perhaps I should have done. I can recall going to a David Bowie concert in London (probably in 1973) where most of the audience seemed to have come dressed as Ziggy Stardust. By this time, however, I had largely erased any hints of glam in favour of a Lou Reed look – leather bomber jacket, dark T-shirts and non-flared jeans.

My sister, three years younger, was much more of a teenybopper – a term that I applied to her with a tone of utter contempt. She followed bands like the Amen Corner and Love Affair, and she was a particular fan of Marc Bolan in his T. Rex phase. We grew up in a lower-middle-class suburb, on the other side of South London from Bowie, and I'm not entirely sure what my parents would have made of any of this. But given the homophobic remarks that my father used to shout at the TV while my sister and I watched *Top of the Pops* – 'is that a boy or a girl?' 'is he a pouff?' – it's not hard to imagine.

And yet, alongside these interests, I was also a fan of the Rolling Stones, and eventually the Velvet Underground. I had grown up with Tamla Motown. I was also listening to jazz, especially from the American *avant garde* (Ornette Coleman, Archie Shepp), and beginning to figure out how to play the saxophone. And as a student of literature, I had a pseudo-intellectual fascination with Romantic poetry (Rimbaud, Mallarmé), as well as Sartre, Kafka and the rest. I was insufferably pretentious.

This is almost certainly Too Much Information. However, my point here is that these youthful identifications are frequently temporary and hybrid. Different youth cultural styles exist alongside each other; and they are often taken up in uneasy, awkward combinations. Their influence is usually brief and partial. It would be wrong to assume that they are simply and directly diffused from the elite (or indeed from the capitalist culture industries) to the population at large. In practice, cultural change is typically indirect and uneven: its echoes are heard and felt, but they are often muffled and indistinct.

## **Defining glam**

In researching this essay, I took detailed notes on one of the historical compilation programmes that are increasingly used to fill the schedules on BBC4. *Glam Rock at the BBC* features clips from *Top of the Pops* and BBC concert footage from the period

1972 to 1977, alongside some from *Cilla* and the children's programme *Crackerjack*. As well as the more predictable glam acts (T. Rex, Bowie, Roxy Music, Slade, The Sweet), it features others whose glam status I found rather dubious: Alice Cooper, Suzi Quatro, Chicory Tip, Alvin Stardust, David Essex, Elton John, Queen, Sparks, and others. Conspicuous by his absence was Gary Glitter, who in recent years has been repeatedly arrested and imprisoned for child abuse; and the leading DJ and *Top of the Pops* presenter of the time Jimmy Savile, whose posthumous exposure as a prodigious child abuser precipitated a major crisis at the BBC. Both, it appears, have been erased from history.

Many of the acts on the BBC compilation might more reasonably be described as mainstream pop or novelty bands (Chicory Tip, Mud); some fit better under the category of 'revivals' (such as Alvin Stardust, a latterday Gene Vincent impersonator, or Roy Wood's Wizzard); yet others arrived relatively late in the day, assuming elements of the glam style, but quickly moved off in other directions (Queen, Elton John). Although they are generally included in histories of glam rock, I would even question whether Suzi Quatro, Alice Cooper and Sparks really belong in this category either. Quatro is often identified as the only female glam performer, although much of the point of her act was precisely that she was *not* glamorous or feminine, but actually very macho (at least in a sweaty leather-jumpsuit way). Alice Cooper placed a central emphasis on performance and visual display, but the band had little of the glitter or (despite their name) the gender ambiguity of glam. Aside from singer Russell Mael's luxuriant hairstyle, Sparks were barely glam at all, either in their appearance (especially the weird-pervert look of fellow front-man Ron Mael) or in their music.

Interestingly, all three of these acts originally hail from the US, although Alice Cooper is the only one who remained there. It may be that I am chauvinistically insisting on some uniquely *British* quality of glam here – perhaps a kind of British theatricality. While there are some US stars who might comfortably be categorized as glam – especially Jobriath (who was almost unknown in the UK) – others don't fit very easily. The New York Dolls, for example, or Wayne/Jayne County, seem to me to belong more to the art-world *avant garde*, especially that associated with Andy Warhol, albeit filtered through the tradition of amateur garage bands. There are definitely some visual trappings of glam here – especially the transvestitism – but this is infused with a self-consciously decadent sleaziness that is a very long way from the glittery, teen-oriented pop of the British acts, including Bowie. The most overt transatlantic connection here is Bowie's role as producer of Lou Reed's *Transformer* album (1972); but while Reed briefly adopted some glam characteristics – including make-up – he quickly abandoned them. It's equally striking that very few British glam artists – again, with the exception of Bowie – managed to achieve any success in the US.

My instinctive responses to all this are certainly contentious, and I'll leave the finer points to enthusiasts. However, they do imply that defining glam isn't straightforward. Whatever else it may have been, glam was not primarily a musical genre. In terms of their music, all the acts featured in the BBC4 compilation could reasonably be described as 'pop' (rather than 'rock', I would argue). Most of the tunes follow the familiar chorus/verse structure of three-minute pop songs; there is an emphatic, thumping 4/4 backbeat; melodic hooks appear early, and are repeated

many times; there are very few instrumental solos, and little elaborate ornamentation; and the lead vocal performances often feature affected Cockney accents, accompanied by high-pitched backing singers. Even so, there isn't much in common between (for example) the quirky experimentalism of Roxy Music or Sparks on the one hand and the more mainstream, stomping pop of Slade or The Sweet on the other – especially if we look beyond the singles featured on *Top of the Pops* and sample their albums. Likewise, it's hard to find much musical common ground between the 50s and 60s revivalism of Mud and Alvin Stardust and the increasingly symphonic stadium rock of Queen; or the grand melodrama of Bowie's Ziggy Stardust period and the basic rock-n-roll of Suzi Quatro.

Some critics (such as Dick Hebdige) have argued that we should distinguish between what we might call 'high glam' (the more 'arty' or 'intellectual' acts such as Roxy Music and Bowie) and 'low glam' (the lumpen pop of Slade or Gary Glitter). However, others (such as Philip Auslander) have questioned this. Whatever may have happened since, in the early 1970s Bowie and Roxy Music were chart acts popular with (and partly targeted towards) a young teenybopper audience, even if they were popular with a slightly older age group as well. Furthermore, there are musical elements that *do* cut across this division, especially the tendency to revivalism: there is a decided influence of 1950s rock-n-roll and 1960s pop (as well as music of earlier decades) in the work of Bowie and Roxy Music, just as there is in glam pop bands like The Sweet and Wizzard. Nevertheless, this does seem to me to be a useful distinction, not least when one looks at the amount of critical commentary that artists like Bowie have generated, as compared with most critics' continuing contempt for what is seen as disposable pop.

If it's difficult to define glam rock as a distinctive musical style, the obvious point is that glam was identified principally by its visual and performance styles. For its almost exclusively male performers, glam was about *dressing up*, often in ways that are conventionally considered to be feminine, or in other forms of 'fancy dress'. This entailed, among other things, particular shiny fabrics (satin, velvet, gold and silver lamé), fur and leather jackets, and shiny or luminous platform shoes, and sometimes extended to feather boas and headdresses. Men wore copious amounts of lurid make-up, as well as glitter and sequins on their faces or in their hair. Favoured hairstyles included luxuriant ringlets and layered 'feather cuts', along with coxcombs, often with brightly coloured hair dye. While some performers appeared in dress-like tunics, this rarely extended to full-on transvestitism, although in some celebrated instances (such as the cover of Bowie's 1971 album *The Man Who Sold the World*) it did. The androgyny (or indeed effeminacy) of glam performers was also apparent in their body language – in styles of movement and dance, in facial expressions (especially for the benefit of television cameras), and in apparently seductive looks and gestures. The label 'camp' is routinely applied here – although, as we'll see, this is a complex and ambivalent term.

Of course, these tendencies were by no means new in popular music. Elvis Presley and Little Richard wore make-up and hair dye in their time, as well as outrageous gold lamé and satin outfits – as indeed did British stars like Billy Fury. Mick Jagger famously wore a dress (or at least a frilly tunic) over his trousers when he performed in London's Hyde Park shortly after the death of fellow Rolling Stone Brian Jones. However, one would have to look well beyond the pop mainstream for

anything approaching the outrageous theatricality, and especially the androgyny, of glam.

It is perhaps an exaggeration to say that glam wasn't about the music; but the music itself clearly didn't matter as much as it did for other styles. Of course, it is possible that 'glam rock' was little more than a convenient marketing label for performers who happened to emerge at around the same time. Glam briefly provided a collective description for acts that might seem in retrospect to have had quite different intentions – from the mainstream or novelty pop of Mud and Slade, through to the proto-Marilyn Manson horror shows of Alice Cooper, or the seemingly 'decadent' art rock of Lou Reed's *Transformer*. The visual elements of glam may have been little more than a necessary gesture of the times: appearing on *Top of the Pops* in particular might have required a pair of orange satin trousers and a layer of heavy make-up, or even a feather headdress, even for those who might otherwise have scorned such things. Indeed, it's notable that even among the bands I would confidently categorise as glam, not all their members appeared in this way: both Slade and The Sweet, for example, had one member in particular who assumed the outrageous 'glam queen' role (Dave Hill and Steve Priest, respectively), while the other members dressed in more idiosyncratic or simply anonymous ways. Some glam performers – Bowie's lead guitarist Mick Ronson, for example – might have worn gold lamé jumpsuits and copious make-up, but their body language remained that of the strutting, macho guitar heroes of heavy rock.

If glam was principally a spectacular, visual phenomenon, it was bound to depend very heavily on visual media. *Top of the Pops* was effectively compulsory viewing for young people during this period: by the late 1960s, it had seen off the competition, and was enjoying a regular audience of around 17 million (almost one third of the population). Dismissed by many counter-cultural commentators as hopelessly sanitized and staid, it was the absolute opposite of credibility for progressive 'underground' acts, many of whom refused to appear – effectively leaving the way clear for glam. *TOTP* had the power to break new acts to a mass market, and it was by no means ignored even by the more 'high glam' acts such as Bowie and Roxy Music. Well before the advent of music video and digital media, its presentational styles were necessarily very limited; although since the performers were required to mime to recordings, they were accordingly more free to focus on aspects of visual appearance. While more middle-of-the-road, conservative performers were regularly featured alongside youth-oriented acts, there was always the abiding hope (or, for some adults, the fear) that it would break with decorum. David Bowie's famous performance of *Starman* in 1972, when he oh-so-causally draped his arm around Mick Ronson's shoulder, was one such moment of outrage that struck fear into the hearts of an older generation – or at least, so the mythology suggests (I doubt that my dad would have liked it, anyway).

While there were also glam movies – Bolan's rather embarrassing *Born to Boogie*, David Essex's *Stardust* and even Slade's more realistic picture of the music business, *Flame* – most dedicated fans were likely to rely heavily on print media. Although some established music papers – most notably *Melody Maker* – were keen to capitalize on the growing popularity of glam, the most striking development here was the growth of magazines for teenage and pre-teenage girls. While established romance magazines were actually in decline, those featuring musical content – and

especially pin-up posters – grew phenomenally in the early 1970s: *Jackie*, the market leader, had a circulation in 1974 of over 700,000, and estimates suggest that around 40% of the 10-25 age group would have read such magazines on a regular basis. Much of their appeal was clearly to do with the colour images of male pop stars; and while some were ‘boy-next-door’ types (David Cassidy, the Osmonds, the Jackson Five), many were heavily made-up older men dressed in excessively ‘feminine’ ways. At least on the face of it, this seems a curious, paradoxical phenomenon; and it is one I intend to explore more fully later in this essay.

## **Beyond authenticity**

Although its influence has lived on, glam rock was short-lived. Its earliest stirrings can probably be traced to Marc Bolan’s first hits with the band T. Rex – and perhaps even more specifically to his appearance on *Top of the Pops* in early 1971 singing ‘Get It On’ with glitter and sequins stuck to his cheeks. T. Rex enjoyed a series of top ten hits through 1972, rapidly followed by most of the artists I have mentioned; and key albums of that year included Bowie’s *Ziggy Stardust* and the first Roxy Music. Yet by late 1973, both Bolan and Bowie already seemed prepared to move on: Bolan’s string of hits was effectively exhausted, and Bowie unexpectedly terminated his Ziggy Stardust persona at a concert in July of that year. While some of the glam pop bands were still going strong, and a second generation had begun to appear (Cockney Rebel, Arrows), glam was effectively defunct by early 1975. Disco was starting to emerge from the studios and nightclubs of Philadelphia and New York, and punk was just around the corner – although both genres owed more to glam than is often acknowledged. Bowie, of course, quickly moved on to quite different projects, but others such as Bolan were arguably the casualties of their own mythology: believing themselves to be superstars, they followed the inevitable path towards a kind of bloated self-importance that made it difficult for them to ride the perilous waves of pop...

Several of the leading glam performers already had considerable experience as second- or third-rank artists in the music business before their moment of fame arrived. During the 1960s, David Bowie had released several albums and novelty singles awkwardly positioned between pop and stage musicals: one of his earliest and most abiding influences was the mainstream theatrical singer Anthony Newley. Gary Glitter had performed first as Paul Raven, singing rock-and-roll standards and pop ballads, before his career had stalled. Slade had been a working-class skinhead band, while Roy Wood had been a driving force in various Birmingham groups including the Falcons, and most successfully in the mod band The Move. Perhaps the most striking reinvention, however, was in the case of Marc Bolan. During the 1960s, he performed and recorded as a Dylan-esque folk singer called Toby Tyler, before joining the anarchic mod band John’s Children. He subsequently formed an acoustic psychedelic folk duo called Tyrannosaurus Rex, which released several albums imbued with cosmic mythology out of *Lord of the Rings*, and was famously championed by the influential progressive rock DJ John Peel. During 1970 and 1971, Bolan again transformed his appearance and his music, with the addition of electric guitars, to form what became T. Rex. Significantly, Bowie, Glitter and Bolan had all changed their names on at least one occasion through these periods of reinvention:

anticipating the theatricality of glam rock, it was as though their identities were not fixed or given, but could be constructed and performed in many different ways.

On one level, it might be possible to explain the success of glam as simply a manifestation of escapism. The early 1970s in the UK were years of industrial strife and economic turmoil. There was a protracted miners' strike in 1972, followed by a global oil crisis in 1973, precipitated by the Yom Kippur War in Israel and the embargo on Israel's supporters imposed by OPEC (the oil producing countries). By 1974, amid regular power cuts, the UK government had been forced to impose a three-day working week: the Conservative government collapsed, but it took two elections before a stable Labour administration could be established. By 1975, unemployment had reached one million and inflation hit a post-war peak of almost 27%. Over the course of a few years, it seemed that the optimistic expansion of the 1960s had gone into reverse, and that the country was on the verge of collapse.

The contrast between these economic realities and the flamboyance of glam was striking and incongruous. Yet while Bowie's *Ziggy Stardust* album does depict a kind of environmental apocalypse ('we've got Five Years, that's all we've got'), very few glam performers made any significant reference at all to contemporary social or political issues. On the contrary, a great many glam songs celebrated the mythology of rock music, and stardom itself: they were self-referential, but also nostalgic and implicitly reactionary. Several glam performers – especially Bowie and Roxy Music – looked even further back, not only to early Hollywood and the traditions of circus performance, but also to the decadence of the Weimar era, just before the advent of Nazism. (Bowie in particular had a long-standing fascination with fascism, which went well beyond occasional 'outrageous' comments to music journalists.) While glam might have challenged traditional notions of sexuality (an argument I will consider below), one can also justifiably accuse it of being politically escapist, or at least distinctly conservative.

Indeed, it's possible to see glam as a reaction against the counter-cultural politics that dominated much of the music business in the late 1960s – a scene in which several of glam's key protagonists had been quite active themselves. This was a reaction that was happening in any case, as the idealism of the 'summer of love' began to turn sour. Among the political establishment, there was a kind of moral backlash against the counter-culture, which gathered force during the early 1970s. The hippie underground in Britain started to fragment, not least with the (justified) challenge of feminism. The underground press (which I have written about in another essay in this series) fell into decline, and potentially radical political movements were either suppressed or collapsed of their own accord. Broadly speaking, the emphasis shifted from more overt and confrontational forms of political activism, often based on social class, to a more personal politics, based on gender and sexuality. In these respects, as Philip Auslander suggests, glam rock is part of the story of how 'the Sixties' became 'the Seventies'.

In terms of music, the counter-culture had placed a central emphasis on *authenticity*. It was about speaking the truth, about honesty and the absence of artifice – and to some extent, about a suspicion of visual performance. In its heyday, psychedelic rock had its own visual appeal – the swirling light shows, the multi-coloured patchwork fashions, the cosmic imagery of posters and magazines – but by the early 1970s,

leading musicians had come to focus more on instrumental virtuosity. 'Progressive' rock was all about extended guitar solos, large-scale concept albums and ornate compositions influenced more by classical music and jazz than by traditional rock-and-roll. Many performers eschewed visual spectacle or special costumes; they did not dance, but stood still, concentrating on their instruments; and despite their displays of virtuosity, they did not seek to set themselves above or apart from their audiences. Show business and commercial entertainment – not least as represented by *Top of the Pops* – were seen as incompatible with true artistic integrity, and hence as politically suspect.

Glam reacted against all this. Indeed, in many ways, it seemed to invert the basic values of rock – or what has since been called 'rockism'. It embraced, and drew attention to, artificiality and fabrication. It was about posing and pretending, not about self-expression. Image – outward appearance, the visual aesthetic – was everything. Performance was not about expressing some inner personal truth, but rather about assuming another persona, even that of a fictional character. Glam stars were not asserting any democratic solidarity with their fans, but showing them how different they were – despite the ways in which fans increasingly came to dress up and mimic the appearance of their idols. Glam did not reject or resist commercialism: it positively celebrated it.

Theatricality was absolutely central to glam; and in this respect, it drew not only from Elvis and Little Richard, but also from a much older English history of vaudeville and music hall, and well as international traditions of circus and cabaret. Glam stage shows regularly went well beyond the psychedelic freak-outs of hippie rock. Gary Glitter, for example, would appear in Busby Berkeley-style extravaganzas with teams of silver-clad dancers, motorbikes and fireworks. Alice Cooper came on as a kind of anarchic circus performer, with elaborately choreographed mock-beheadings, slapstick violence and scenes straight out of horror movies. Rather than a matter of spontaneous or honest self-expression, this was all about the professional construction of illusions: it depended upon elaborate lighting, props and costumes, and ornate *mise-en-scene*.

These qualities were also apparent in individual styles of performance. Bowie, for example, had famously studied with the mime artist Lindsay Kemp. He seemed to be *acting the role* of a rock star – for much of the time, of course, under the name of a fictional character (the alien Ziggy Stardust or his successor Aladdin Sane, both of whom were as different from their audience as they could possibly be). As Philip Auslander argues, Bowie wanted to perform rock music *as theatre*, in the manner of a music-hall actor, not as an authentic artist expressing his inner soul. But the same might also be said of Gary Glitter, or even David Essex (whose stage persona was blurred with the character he played in the films *That'll Be The Day* and the follow-up *Stardust* in 1973-4). While not as radically theatrical as Bowie, Roxy Music's Brian Ferry operated almost like a fashion mannequin, shifting styles (both of appearance and music) with each new season, sometimes with satirical or parodic effect. Even Marc Bolan, while by no means as arch or knowing as Bowie or Ferry, seemed to be self-consciously performing the role of the rock star, pouting and strutting and preening himself, not only for the benefit of his girl fans but also as a kind of expression of his own narcissism.

However, this is not to say that glam was merely disposable pop. While bands like The Sweet and Slade might well be described as 'bubblegum' – the former were produced by Chinn and Chapman, the leading commercial pop producers of the time - 'high glam' performers like David Bowie and Roxy Music were keen to be seen as serious artists. Roxy Music had emerged from university art schools rather than the rock-and-roll touring circuit, and their work was peppered with arcane references to literary, musical, performance and visual art styles dating back decades. Even Marc Bolan had published a book of poetry, and claimed (albeit with little evidence) to have completed several serious fantasy novels. For Bowie, this sense of his own artistic superiority led him to disassociate himself from the movement quite quickly: as he explained twenty years later, 'we were very miffed that people who'd obviously never seen *Metropolis* and had never heard of Christopher Isherwood were actually becoming glam rockers'.

Two potential labels might be used to sum this up. I'll be considering the term 'camp' in due course – although it should be emphasized now that camp is not solely, or even primarily, to do with sexuality. The other obvious term, however, is 'postmodern'. It's tempting to argue that glam was postmodern decades before the term itself entered into common usage. Much of the critical commentary on postmodernism focuses on high culture, or at least on its fringes (the term originates in architectural criticism). It seems comfortable with popular culture that is somehow already knowing and self-consciously ironic (Madonna being the obvious example). It's hard to imagine pompous academic critics of postmodernism like Jean Baudrillard or Fredric Jameson enjoying the *oeuvre* of The Sweet or Gary Glitter (although it's a nice thought). And yet glam consistently displayed qualities that have become synonymous with postmodernism: pastiche, parody, artifice, kitsch, playfulness, and so on. Glam raided and recycled existing imagery, abstracting it from its original context; it was flippant rather than sincere, deceitful rather than honest; it mixed elements from high art and vulgar popular culture, across time and space; it blurred image and reality, drawing attention to its own fakeness and theatricality; it wasn't interested in hidden depths and profound meanings, but in superficial appearances and illusions. It would seem to be a textbook case.

Nevertheless, the key question here is to do with the knowingness or self-consciousness of this move. One could argue that being postmodern implies a level of irony. In creating something – a performance, an artefact – postmodern artists also distance themselves from it, or encourage their audiences to do so. They play a role, but they signal that they realize it is just a role. The debate, however, is about the degree of intentionality on the part of the producer – or to put this another way, to do with *who* is doing the 'knowing'. Audiences can obviously be ironic, self-conscious consumers of things that they deem to be trash, without their 'trashiness' being something that is acknowledged by their creators. Much of the imagery and performance style of glam appeared to be deliberately excessive, mannered, stylized, and even grotesque: it was 'over the top', absurd and trashy; it appeared to be a ludicrous parody of pop, or of stardom, or of the act of performance. Yet whether or not this was intentional or deliberate is another matter. In some cases, one suspects, glam was more sincere, or even more innocent and pure, than in others; while in some instances, it seemed to be taking itself seriously and sending itself up at the very same time. These are questions that I'll return to later, in considering the notion of camp.

## Performing sexuality

The 1960s is popularly described as a decade of sexual liberation – although quite how far that liberation went, and who benefited from it, remain matters of considerable debate. The sexual politics of the counter-culture seemed to permit a form of ‘free love’, but it was one that largely privileged men at the expense of women; and in reality, the hippies were more conservative in terms of gender roles, and indeed more narrowly heterosexual, than they sometimes tended to profess. Yet if women’s liberation – or second-wave feminism – only began to gather momentum in the early 1970s, gay liberation (if not the name itself) arguably predated it. As Dominic Sandbrook describes, there were major shifts in public attitudes towards homosexuality during the early 1960s, even though changes in the law were quite slow to arrive. It took ten years from the publication of the Wolfenden Report to the passing of the Sexual Offences Act in 1967, which finally legalized homosexuality – albeit only among ‘consenting adults’ over the age of 21, and not (at first) in Scotland or Northern Ireland. The first Gay Pride march took place in London in 1972, just as glam was breaking into the pop charts, although homosexuality was still a long way from mainstream acceptability.

On one level, glam rock would seem to present a fundamental challenge – indeed, an outrageous affront – to traditional notions of masculinity, and indeed to heterosexuality itself. It might be seen as a popular celebration of a newly emerging ‘gay’ identity, or at least a manifestation of a form of bisexuality or sexual fluidity that went well beyond the predominant heterosexuality of the hippies. However, we need to beware of making easy claims here.

One striking manifestation of such claims can be found in *Velvet Goldmine*, Todd Haynes’s 1998 movie set in the glam era. Through an awkward mix of quasi-documentary and melodrama, the film tells the story of a fictional pop star, Brian Slade, who is clearly based on David Bowie in his Ziggy Stardust phase. Ten years after Slade’s disappearance, following a faked assassination, a British journalist, Arthur Stuart, is sent by his American employer to investigate what happened to him. In parallel with Slade’s rise to fame, we see Stuart’s own narrative of his ‘coming out’ as a gay teenager: in one notable scene, he points at the TV, which is screening one of Slade’s performances, and shouts at his conservative, homophobic parents, ‘that’s me! that’s me!’ *Velvet Goldmine* is thinly-veiled fiction, but it takes some striking liberties with history – perhaps most implausibly in the central romance between Slade/Bowie and an American star, Curt Wild, who is based on Iggy Pop. Haynes clearly identifies the elements of artifice and dishonesty in glam, but this sits awkwardly with the more sincere elements of gay romance. The portentous lines delivered by Slade and his acolytes are often clumsy and laughable; and the film has been aptly described by *Empire* magazine as ‘the most derided British music movie of all time’.

My point here is that it would be a mistake to celebrate glam rock – as Haynes implicitly does – as some kind of popular cultural equivalent of gay liberation. No glam performers were openly gay, and only David Bowie claimed to be bisexual. Androgyny in appearance is not necessarily an indicator of sexual ambiguity, or

indeed of any inherent truth about sexuality. And in any case, we might well want to question the kind of 'liberation' that is offered by men dressing up in a kind of ridiculous, excessive parody of traditional femininity.

Androgyny in male fashion is by no means a new phenomenon; and of course there is a parallel history of female androgyny. Upper-class European male dress of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was distinctly 'effeminate', for example: think of the enormous powdered wigs. The period immediately before the rise of glam saw a resurgence of male androgyny, which was also manifested in the styles of music performers, most notably Mick Jagger. As the fashion historian Georgina Gregory has described, there were significant shifts in male clothing styles in the late 1950s and early 1960s, not only among subcultural groups like the mods but also in mainstream menswear. An interest in fashion was, at least for some, no longer regarded as effeminate: male fashions became feminized, and new 'unisex' clothing styles (for both men and women) began to emerge. The long hair of male hippies was just one manifestation of this, but the mods, who preceded them, were much more intensely interested in fashion (both Marc Bolan and David Bowie had been mods in the early 1960s). Yet while such shifts might to some extent question *gender* distinctions, they do not necessarily imply any questioning of masculine *sexuality*.

As I've noted, glam performers were almost exclusively male, perhaps to an even greater extent than in other musical genres. The only notable female performer, Suzi Quatro, was aggressively masculine, and deployed her bass guitar in the style of old-fashioned 'cock rock'. To say the least, this does not suggest that a significant revolution in gender roles in the music industry was under way. Indeed, some glam performers, such as Roxy Music's Bryan Ferry, were overtly misogynistic and anti-feminist: several of the band's album covers were blatantly sexist, albeit with a superficial gloss of retro irony.

Aside from David Bowie, who publicly proclaimed his bisexuality in a press interview in 1972, no other glam performers claimed to be anything other than heterosexual. Of course, this doesn't mean that they were: indeed, it's notable that the sexuality of both Freddie Mercury (of Queen) and Elton John – two performers who were associated with the later stages of glam – was kept hidden until much later (and in Mercury's case, until after his death). In Bowie's case, there is no reason to doubt his claim, but it seems to have been delivered with a kind of archness – he had 'a secret smile at the corners of his mouth', the interviewer, Mick Watts, recalled – as though playfully and knowingly inciting publicity. While Bowie may indeed have empowered young people who were growing up gay – as *Velvet Goldmine* suggests – it is striking that no other glam performers followed his lead. Indeed, some gay men at the time regarded Bowie as a kind of 'sexual tourist', and criticized his unwillingness to publicly support gay liberation – although in a sense, it was the deliberate ambiguity, the refusal to be defined, or what Simon Reynolds calls 'the miasma of sexual undecidability', that was largely the point.

### **Gay or camp or queer or what?**

Even if the sexuality of the performers was not specifically 'gay', it could be argued that glam performance was nevertheless 'camp', and possibly 'queer'. The term

'camp' derives from the French 'camper' – meaning to pose, or strike an attitude. However, it does at least imply a connotation of sexuality: its original definition (from the 1909 Oxford English Dictionary) clearly identifies a link to homosexuality and 'effeminacy'. In popular usage, 'camp' often translates to 'gay', although the relationship between them is not unproblematic.

The term 'camp' had been around for several decades, but it was an essay by the US critic Susan Sontag published in 1964 that famously pulled it into the mainstream of critical debate. According to Sontag, camp is not necessarily to do with homosexuality, although there may be an affinity or an overlap between them: some gay people may exhibit camp tastes, but not all; and an enjoyment of camp is not necessarily an indication of homosexuality. Rather, Sontag argues, camp is a more general sensibility, a way of relating to particular art forms, and of seeing the world as 'an aesthetic phenomenon'. Camp reflects a love of the outlandish, the outrageous and the extravagant; it converts the serious into the frivolous; it revels in artifice and stylization, and in vulgarity and kitsch; it is about a love of 'the exaggerated, the "off", of things-being-what-they-are-not'. According to Sontag, camp 'sees everything in quotation marks': it is about playing a role, about living life as theatre, or about 'the theatricalization of experience'. It blurs the distinctions between high culture and popular culture, and between good taste and bad: it allows trash to become a suitable object for refined cultural contemplation. Once again, it's hard to imagine the fearsomely intellectual Susan Sontag bopping around to the likes of Slade and Gary Glitter, but glam would seem to tick most of her boxes.

Indeed, on this account, the overlap between camp and postmodernism is also quite obvious. Significantly, however, Sontag distinguishes between 'pure camp', which is 'dead serious', and a kind of knowing or self-conscious camp, which is much less innocent: 'camp which knows itself to be camp,' she argues, 'is much less satisfying'. True camp, it seems, has to be sincere and unintentional, even if the audience chooses to read it ironically. It is not cynical or detached, but identifies with what it is enjoying. As with postmodernism, the crucial issue here is to do with *intention*: is camp a stance adopted by the producer of a cultural text, or is it something the audience can read into it? Is irony or knowingness a quality that resides in the product, or in the mind of the beholder, or both?

More recent work on camp has worried away at the questions Sontag raises. Her distinction between knowing and innocent, her implicit value judgments, and her argument that camp is essentially apolitical and frivolous, have all generated considerable debate. However, the key issue for my argument here is to do with the sexual politics of camp. As I've suggested, Sontag seems to deny that sexuality has anything much to do with camp. By contrast, more recent critics have argued that camp can be a powerful means of mocking and subverting established gender and sexual categories, and thereby challenging 'compulsory heterosexuality' or 'heteronormativity'.

The other term that is most often applied here is 'queer'. This term was certainly in use at the time of glam, but only as a term of abuse for homosexuals. However, it has since been reclaimed, not so much to describe a particular group of people, but more as a way of defining a critical strategy in sexual politics. 'Queering' is about exposing the fact that gender is a performance, and thereby dramatizing the inherent

instabilities and inconsistencies of gender identities. Again, the application to glam is fairly obvious. The critic Philip Auslander, for example, argues that the performance styles of glam reflected a more general troubling or disruption of apparently settled sexual identities, rather than a manifestation or celebration of homosexuality more specifically. By presenting gender as a performance, or an artificial construction, he argues, glam not only challenged the hetero-normativity of rock but also the idea of a fixed, foundational sexual identity. In glam performance, gender is destabilized and fluid: gender identities are multiplied and subject to change, and are no longer an unvarying expression of some essential inner self. According to Auslander, this queerness is apparent not only in the elements of transvestitism, but also in the high-pitched singing styles and affected diction of male stars like Bolan and Brian Ferry.

As I've argued, it's easy to read some elements of 'high glam' – some of the work of Bowie or Roxy Music, for example – as ironic, and to assume that this was how they were intended to be understood. However, this is rather more difficult with the 'low glam' of Gary Glitter or Slade, for example, or especially with Marc Bolan. In Susan Sontag's terms, the latter might actually count as 'pure' camp – and even as 'innocent' – while Bowie et al. might be considered too smart and self-aware for their own good. There is also a danger when we encounter this kind of material retrospectively: when I watch an archive video of The Sweet performing on *Top of the Pops*, it seems to me entirely ludicrous and over the top – although I'm not sure if I would have seen it in that way at the time.

The political dimensions of all this remain a matter of considerable debate. 'Camp' occupies an ambivalent place within gay identity politics: it can be seen as a means of assimilation, and as a merely consumerist stance, as much as a means of subversion. One could well argue that the elements of transvestitism in glam performance merely parodied sexual norms, rather than fundamentally critiquing or challenging them, let alone offering alternatives. Indeed, such exaggerated parody might well be seen to reinforce existing gender binaries, particularly when performed by almost exclusively male artists.

## **Understanding music fandom**

Intense musical fandom is by no means a new phenomenon. Well before teenyboppers, Beatlemania and Frank Sinatra, crowds would clamour to see the musical idols of their day. As Daniel Cavicci describes, the term 'star' first emerged in the 1820s in relation to musical theatre. In the United States, the growth of concert halls and pleasure gardens led to extensive nationwide tours of musical stars. In the early 1850s, for example, the Swedish singer Jenny Lind became a focus for what was called 'Lindmania', and large amounts of Lind merchandise (including furniture and clothing) were sold. Meanwhile, across Europe, there was 'Lisztomania', among largely female followers of the composer and pianist Franz Liszt (as portrayed in Ken Russell's 1975 movie): women reportedly swooned and threw their clothes at the stage when he performed. In the early twentieth century, the advent of recordings led to changes in music consumption, and the formation of the earliest fan clubs.

Psychologists rapidly came up with the clinical diagnosis of ‘musicomania’ – ‘a form of monomania involving an unnatural obsession with music’, as it is still defined in dictionaries today. This obsession was seen to bypass the rational faculties: sufferers were emotionally invested in music to an excessive degree, and for the wrong reasons – unlike their cultivated upper-middle-class counterparts, who were seen as connoisseurs rather than mere slavish fanatics.

While early criticisms of music fans were largely to do with social class, the focus soon shifted towards gender: it was women – and especially teenage girls – whose behaviour was deemed most problematic. The arrival of Frank Sinatra and other stars in the 1940s coincided with the growth of the teen market: the ‘bobbysoxers’ who mobbed Sinatra and Johnny Ray were among the first post-war youth cultures, albeit one of the more wholesome ones. By the 1950s, this market of teenage girl fans had become increasingly lucrative. Girls became a focus for consumer research, and were targeted with a growing range of products, including magazines, movies and what became known as ‘bubblegum’ pop. Indeed, it could be argued that the mainstream music industry is still highly dependent on this phenomenon: even today, its business model depends upon massive sales of a very small number of leading artists, whose success props up less profitable acts.

Yet even though girl fans are simply enjoying (and buying) the things that have been created for them, they attract widespread criticism. Girl fans are typically denigrated and stigmatized, unlike their male counterparts: for example, young men’s adoration of sports stars is rarely seen as problematic. While male music fans are often seen as active and discriminating, girls are condemned for being passive and easily manipulated: they are regarded as cultural dupes, consuming products that are largely condemned as worthless. The term ‘teenybopper’ itself is often used dismissively, to connote triviality and superficiality, and is clearly feminized: there are no male teenyboppers.

As Norma Coates argues, this reflects the general sexist denigration of women and female fans within the music industry, and in the ‘rockist’ commentary of many music critics. Here again, much of the criticism rests on the issue of authenticity. Thus, while men and boys enjoy *rock*, girls like *pop* – something that is deemed to be wholly commercial, fabricated and inauthentic. Where rock somehow stands outside mass culture, and aspires to the status of serious art, pop is merely lowest-common-denominator, ephemeral trash. As Coates argues, this is part of a longer history of the denigration of mass culture, which is often defined in gendered terms.

Much of this criticism today focuses on the phenomenon of ‘boy bands’ – although the lineage of boy bands stretches back from One Direction, through Take That and Duran Duran, at least as far as the Monkees and the Beatles. The music of boy bands is seen to be part of a wider commercial media culture that is responsible for manipulating girls in particular. As Gayle Wald points out, such bands are often accused of displaying a kind of ‘girlish’ masculinity designed to appeal to the nascent sexual fantasies of their fans. With the aid of neuroscientists, critics attempt to explain what goes on in the brains of Justin Bieber followers, as though they were suffering from some kind of mysterious pathological disorder. Aside from anything else, this would seem to ignore the appeal of ‘teenybopper’ music to boys, and indeed to many adults.

The unavoidable issue here, of course, is sex. While male fans are typically believed to be appreciating the music itself, girls are often accused of following performers primarily on the basis of their looks. Teen girls, it appears, are overly sexualised, and the apparent 'hysteria' of their fan behaviour is traced to an excess of raging hormones. The spectacle of large numbers of teenage girls apparently being whipped up into an erotic frenzy – especially at the time of 'Beatlemania' – appears to have horrified adults, but also to have fascinated them.

To be fair, this underlying fear about the dangers of such sexual fantasies is not wholly unjustified. History has told us that celebrity offers ample opportunities for exploitation and abuse on the part of older male performers: Gary Glitter and Jimmy Savile are by no means isolated instances in this respect. As Norma Coates argues, the boundary between an under-age teenybopper and an adult groupie is perhaps not as clear as many might wish.

However, there is also a kind of double standard, or at least a contradiction, here. On the one hand, critics dismissively argue that pop fandom offers teenage girls a form of 'safe' or even 'sanitised' sexuality that is not really threatening – as opposed (presumably) to the authentic, animalistic sexuality of rock performers such as the Rolling Stones or Led Zeppelin. The bland pop idols and boy bands they prefer are seen as merely vicarious objects of a distant fantasy, 'practice boyfriends' rather than real, sexual beings. Yet quite why young girls might be – or even *should* be – interested in what might seem to them to be gross, adult men isn't entirely clear. Once again, it seems that girls can't win.

### **Glam, girls and fandom**

In some respects, glam fandom was simply another moment in this longer history. In the UK in the early 1970s, the attentions of teenybopper fans were partly focused on American stars such as David Cassidy, the Jackson Five, and the Osmonds (especially Donny). However, there were also several British bands that attracted a teenybopper following, including Amen Corner, Love Affair and (a little later) the Bay City Rollers. Glam rock overlapped with these more mainstream, 'boy-next-door' performers, and would have attracted the same kind of followers.

Marc Bolan, in particular, was at once a glam star and a teenybopper idol. While he liked to strike a sexy pose and strut the stage in the manner of Mick Jagger, Bolan retained a boyish, even child-like quality from his hippy days. It's possible, as one of Simon Reynolds' interviewees suggests, that Bolan was the kind of person girls would want to mother, rather than have sex with – although he must have retained a kind of seductive sexual appeal for younger teenagers. Bolan had a certain androgynous softness; yet despite his glittery cheekbones, his satin trousers and even his feather boa, he didn't aspire to the level of camp or gender ambiguity of Bowie, for example. 'T. Rextacy', as it was known, was often compared to Beatlemania, and seemed to share a similar kind of sexual innocence.

Obviously, artists across the spectrum of glam would have attracted male fans as well – and certainly some, like Arthur Stuart in *Velvet Goldmine*, would have been gay.

One striking and fairly unprecedented characteristic of glam fandom was that so many people in the audience (girls as well as boys) wanted to copy the performers' appearance. While stars like Bowie were keen to set themselves apart from their audience, and to emphasise their otherness, it was as though their audience was nevertheless aspiring to become like them, to the extent of mimicking their clothing, make-up and hairstyles.

Even so, the large majority of glam fans would have been female and heterosexual. I suggested earlier that there seemed to be a paradox here, at least on the face of it. Why should teenage girls have been interested in a group of cross-dressing, heavily made-up, largely older male stars – as opposed to the more straightforward appeal of David Cassidy or Donny Osmond? This is a complex question. On the one hand, it's possible that, for some heterosexuals, androgyny may be distinctly sexy, if perhaps in a different way from that of the 'practice boyfriends' of more conventional boy bands. On the other hand, it is also possible that androgyny – and perhaps especially the outrageous camp of some glam performers – is not quite as 'safe' as some have implied, but has a kind of risky appeal. Or it may simply be that (at least for younger teen fans) it is simply playful and fun, and does not necessarily carry sexual connotations in the first place.

### **(Mis-)understanding teenyboppers**

As I have noted, academic commentary on glam rock and on the teenybopper phenomenon at the time – insofar as it existed at all – was largely negative. While Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber attempted to shine the spotlight on girls' subcultures, they nevertheless continued to cast girls as passive consumers. Finding little evidence of girls' active involvement in the subcultures studied by their male colleagues, McRobbie and Garber point to the more domestic focus of girls' social and cultural lives. However, they interpret this 'bedroom culture' of dressing up, make-up, magazines and pop music, as a 'quasi-sexual ritual', and a 'defensive retreat' from (or a 'defensive solidarity' against) their subordination within the wider society. This culture is, they argue, highly packaged and commercialized: it is all about 'the subordinate, adoring female in awe of the male on a pedestal', and it can only lead to 'future subordination' in marriage. To say the least, there is very little 'girl power' to be found here.

Media and popular culture – including pop music – were the principal means through which this subordination would be achieved. McRobbie's celebrated analysis of *Jackie*, the most popular girls' magazine of the time, focuses primarily on the romance stories rather than the musical content; but across the various elements of the magazine, she detects a singular, coherent ideology, which is all about the imperative of getting and retaining a man. Girls, she argues, are being induced into conformity and obedience, rather than being encouraged to experiment or exercise choice. When it comes to music, girls are passively fantasizing about 'safe' male stars, rather than learning an instrument or getting into the 'new wave or experimental' music that McRobbie herself evidently prefers. While she disclaims the idea that she is treating girls as dupes, or suggesting that they swallow this stuff whole, McRobbie does implicitly see *Jackie* readers as victims of a kind of patriarchal ideological manipulation.

McRobbie's account of the teenyboppers was self-evidently of its time; and subsequent feminist critics have repeatedly challenged it. Sue Turnbull, for example, accuses McRobbie of failing to understand the aesthetic pleasures of popular culture, and casting girls as victims of false consciousness; while Mary Kearney argues that she ignores the 'homosociality' (the group identity) of such girls, and the creative, productive nature of girls' bedroom cultures. Kearney also notes how, in revising and republishing her earlier articles, McRobbie appears to give girls more credit for being resistant and powerful, rather than merely consumerist.

Some other feminist research appears to back up this more positive account of teenybopper fandom. Writing in 1992, Barbara Ehrenreich and her colleagues look back to their own early experiences as 'Beatlemaniacs'. Far from seeing evidence of hysteria or manipulation, they argue that Beatlemania was an assertion of 'an active, powerful sexuality'. Seen retrospectively in this way, they argue that Beatlemania was the first 'uprising of the women's sexual revolution' – a form of protest and defiance, and a rebellious assertion of active sexual feelings, in which girls were the pursuers rather than the pursued. Rather than just unrealistic fantasy, it was based on the recognition that you could *never* marry the Beatle of your choice, and that you wouldn't necessarily want a fate of domestic conformity as a 'housewife' in any case. Writing much more recently, Nicolette Rohr likewise sees the fans' screams as a form of rebellion against social norms that expected girls to be 'ladylike': screaming was an expression of freedom, a release of inhibition, a letting loose. According to these accounts, teenage girls' fandom is by no means a matter of colluding in one's own subordination, but on the contrary of challenging gender and sexual conventions, and collectively claiming public space.

This redemptive analysis of teen girls' fandom has been echoed in numerous research studies in recent years. It has become almost compulsory to challenge the pathological view of the teenybopper: along with studies of media fans more broadly, the fan is seen here, not as duped or manipulated, but on the contrary as empowered and discriminating. Tonya Anderson, for example, argues that fan-related bedroom culture offers a space for girls to play collectively with sexual fantasies, free from judgement by men; while Sarah Baker argues that contemporary 'tweens' are much more active and critical in their engagements with pop music than has been previously assumed. All these studies suggest that music fandom offers opportunities for girls to actively construct their own identities, rather than being passively shaped by forces beyond their control.

On one level, this is all very well, but it seems to take us to an opposite extreme. Fandom is no longer about consumerism and ideological manipulation, but about creativity and agency. Girls' music fandom comes to be seen both as a celebration of the pleasures of girlhood, but also as a form of resistance to the constraints and pressures of femininity. It is a free space in which girls can construct and play with gender and sexual identities, and engage in 'unfeminine' behaviour. In this context, any criticisms of fandom come to be seen as snobbish and elitist, and indeed misogynistic.

In effect, we have moved from a view of female fandom as negative and pathological to a situation where it is effectively beyond criticism. Yet even if it appears to have

been redeemed, fandom continues to be read from contrasting feminist perspectives as a primarily *political* phenomenon: other aspects of fandom – such as aesthetic pleasure – seem to be rendered in solely political terms. In the process, fandom also becomes a kind of universal paradigm for media consumption in general. There's little place here for more casual, less committed forms of engagement, or the hybrid, temporary identifications I described above; and little recognition of the forms of elitism and competitiveness *within* fan cultures. And it remains to be seen what one might say about *male* fandom, where some of the arguments might play out rather differently (could we make the same arguments about boys and football, for example?).

Glam rock doesn't fit very easily on either side of these debates. It doesn't offer the kind of 'safe' romantic fantasy that McRobbie and Garber are so keen to condemn; but neither, in my view, does it provide the proto-feminist empowerment that Ehrenreich and others proclaim. Part of the problem here is that it seems so hard to *take it seriously*: it seems so self-consciously ludicrous and excessive, such an obvious parody of ideas both about gender and sexuality, and about pop itself, that it resists any straightforward political reading.

### **Conclusion: the legacy of glam**

Glam may have been just a brief moment in the history of pop, but it has had a more lasting influence. The New Romantics of the early 1980s were its most obvious inheritors, but one can also detect strong elements of glam in later performers such as Prince and Madonna, and in bands like Suede. Lady Gaga would have been unthinkable without glam. While glam mutated into other musical genres – such as the 'hair metal' of the 1980s (especially in the form of Kiss) – it was also an important influence on disco (Earth, Wind and Fire, Parliament/Funkadelic) and on punk (Siouxi and the Banshees, X-Ray Specs). Although punk was keen to present itself as a rejection of the commercial music industry, the music and performance style owed a good deal to the theatricality of glam – and indeed, shared its reaction against the counter-cultural progressive rock of the time.

While glam may have contributed to a growing flexibility in terms of gender and sexuality, its legacy here is more ambivalent. For some male fans, it might have allowed different ways of being masculine – or at least contributed to a broader repertoire of possibilities in that respect. For young people growing up gay, it might have offered role models that reflected their emerging sexual identities. However, I'm not sure I would see these possibilities and role models as unambiguously positive. With the dubious exception of Bowie, glam performers were not openly or unambiguously gay; and it's doubtful whether the cause of gay liberation was really furthered by the outrageous public exhibition of an array of flamboyant drag queens.

Perhaps the most difficult question here is what any of this might have meant for the teenyboppers – the girl fans who were almost certainly the most numerous followers of glam. As I have implied, much of the discussion of girls' fandom has been over-politicised, and (at least in recent years) has become unduly celebratory. Quite how girls' interests might have been served by following a group of men acting out an absurd and exaggerated caricature of conventional femininity is far from clear.

While it might not have been preparing them for a lifetime of subordination, it is also hard to see it as a matter of empowerment. It would be tempting to conclude that glam wasn't political at all, but simply a matter of fun – although, as we all know, fun is rarely completely innocent...

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Todd Haynes (director) *Velvet Goldmine* (Zenith/Killer Films, 1998)

Jeremy Marre (director) *Marc Bolan: Cosmic Dancer* (BBC4, 16<sup>th</sup> September 2017)

Ken Russell (director) *Lisztomania* (Warner Brothers, 1975)

Stuff Mom Never Told You (podcast episode) 'Teenyboppers: From Musicomaniacs to Beliebers', posted 7<sup>th</sup> Jan 2015, <https://www.stuffmomnevertoldyou.com/podcasts/teenyboppers-from-musicomaniacs-to-beliebers.htm>