

Fangirls: Scenes From Modern Music Culture

by Silvia Bombardini



Fangirls: Scenes From Modern Music Culture is the newly published book by London-based journalist Hannah Ewens, focusing for once, not on the musicians on stage but on the girls who beneath that stage swoon. From the Beatlemania of yore to the Beyhive of today, across continents too, fandom has long been underestimated if not derided. With her anthology Ewens seeks to give fangirls at last the credit they deserve for the pivotal role they play in music culture as much as in the fame of the artists they love. *A fangirl of sorts* herself, the author tells us more about her intentions with the book, and what fandom, that unifying force of obsessive devotion, truly is all about.

S.B.: Fandom, in general but in music especially, is a for the most part a womanly realm. It often hits us with puberty: *fangirls* therefore, is a distinctly gendered term. There's a lot to speculate about this – in your research for *Fangirls*, what conclusions were you able to draw, on the reasons why the most devoted fans tend to be female?

H.E.: I found that women and girl fans have a plethora of ways of being a fan and that these ways all work in tandem. They appreciate the music in a specific, 'logical' way, the music for the music's sake. But they also all – every girl or woman I spoke to! – love the artists themselves and have a special personal relationship with them. It's something about the ways these shades of appreciation interact that makes a fan. Someone completely devoted. Not to say men and boys don't also experience this, but it's definitely something that girls and LGBTQ people do. Girls also have so much emotion and care and love to give and it has to go somewhere.

S.B.: You've spoken for your book with many of these completely devoted music lovers around the world. Is fans' devotion a universal, unifying force or have you encountered cultural differences in how fangirls on different continents indulge their passion? Was there any account in particular that surprised you, or resonated with you the most?

H.E.: I was surprised by just how universal fangirling is – it doesn't matter whether the girls are in Japan, London, America or elsewhere, they are all doing the same things. That goes for time period too, there's not so much difference between a girl fan in the 1960s and a girl fan now, except that social media have made fanbases more global, we really can think now of an artist's fans as a single unit. That said, cultural differences do have a slight impact. Japanese Harry Styles' fans for example are so respectful and kind towards him. They were silent at the show when he told them to be silent so he could sing. They were concerned about being far away from Harry – spiritually, literally – but then again, I really related to that. I think even if you're a London fan of a London-based artist, you still have so much awareness of that distance! That's what fandom is all about.

S.B.: In his book *Netymology*, Tom Chatfield writes that "to call someone who disagrees with you a 'fanboy' or 'fangirl' during an online debate is to level one of the commonest accusations in the digital realm: that they're blinded by obsession and have no sense of proportion". Fanboys, but fangirls first and foremost, are often derided online or not. Yet fandom is also what makes or breaks a musician today. What is then at the root of the ridicule? And what's a common misconception about fangirls that you've personally had to disprove?

H.E.: We – society, historically – ridicule emotions and really prize care going where care should go, in the right amounts. We should care about monogamy, marriage, our careers, and the home. Fans have an 'excess' of emotion that's seen as too much, wasteful, even dangerous. Fandom has always been seen as a lower-class, debased activity right back to Lord Byron's era, when girls (and men!) would faint for being near him. There's a fear of women's sexuality in there too. I would say the concern over this is changing though – fandom is becoming much more acceptable. Rather than needing to debunk anything, I just listened to girls, spoke to as many of them as possible and presented the truth. My tone and arguments ended up being feminist, of course, as a fangirl of sorts myself, but I think when you present the truth of being a fangirl, it's clear that there's very

little that's dangerous or problematic. They're just girls learning about themselves, having fun and enjoying music.

S.B.: Still fangirls who'll be reading *Fangirls* are bound to find within it the recognition and appreciation they've seldom so far if at all received. But how did male critics respond to the book yet? And now that *Fangirls* is out, do you plan to research the subject further or are you moving on to something else?

H.E.: I haven't had yet any official feedback yet from men, in the form of printed reviews. The reviewers have all been women so far which is nice. I have to say I didn't write with men in mind at all – I only wrote what I would want to read as a female fan. My hope is only that girls and women will enjoy it, any others are a bonus. I plan to certainly carry on researching fandom and keeping that as a specialist subject, but I'll be starting on a novel next.