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Fan Culture: Final Project

Popslash and Bandom:
Two Waves of Celebrity Fandom

Fans of popular musicians often extend their interest to the personal lives of those

musicians, following their activities through entertainment news like tabloid magazines and

MTV. Some fans transform this news about their favorite artists into narratives that are

dramatic, not journalistic, and congregate online to share their stories, which range from

write-ups of actual events to purely fantastical fiction. Many of these fans write and read

"slash" fiction, which pairs musicians in homosexual relationships, usually between men. In

this paper, I plan to examine two movements of such celebrity fandom from the last decade,

and conclude that academics studying fan relationships to popular media should mirror

some of the practices of celebrity fans themselves in acknowledging mass-culture influences

upon their own ideas. (To put my money where my mouth is, I'm attaching an appendix of

quotations and links to the sources of my own understanding of celebrity music fandom.)

Two separate waves are discernible in the history of online celebrity fanfiction.

Calling themselves "popslash" and "bandom", the two movements seem have a lot in

common: fiction written about the daily lives and interpersonal relationships of top-selling,

mostly male music groups, composed and distributed across the internet by dedicated fans.

However, popslash, which peaked around 2003, and bandom, whose rapid growth began

around 2007, differ in ways that are worth examination: bandom is not merely popslash

updated for today's fashions, but instead represents an important shift in cultural attitudes

and practices in the last decade.

Most striking is the difference between where popslash and bandom fans sit in the

larger group of music fans. Given their ages, interests, and avenues of communication, the

profile and activities of a popslash fan were often very different from those of her

musicians' non-slasher fans (termed "normal fans" by at least one slasher). However, the profile and activities of a bandom fan are often almost indistinguishable from her musicians' "normal" fans.

More than a few factors contribute to this state of affairs. The popslash community focused on so-called "boybands" like *NSync, whose image was tightly controlled by their producers, while the bandom community is concerned with "emo" or "hardcore" bands like Fall Out Boy, which proudly emphasizes its DIY MySpace roots. Furthermore, boybands targeted a pre-teen demographic with strictly heterosexual content, while emo bands reach teenagers and adults with content that is often deliberately homosexual. Finally, the boybands' traditional retail distribution and carefully managed public image stands in contrast to the "emo" bands' personal and professional integration with Web 2.0 tools like MySpace and LiveJournal: the same tools bandom fans use to communicate with one another.

Rather than offering a linear historical narrative to explain the cultural changes that turned popslash into bandom, I would like to portray the historical shifts that brought bandom into being as a matter of interrelated feedback-loops: for example, the teenager Fall Out Boy targets are connected via social networking websites like MySpace and LiveJournal, and have made Fall Out Boy's online distribution popular with their own grassroots promotion of the band. These same social networking sites bring slash-reading fans into communication with non-slash-reading fans, who thrill to the same "stage gay" performance of sexuality as the slashers. Fall Out Boy, having replaced *NSync-style producer authority with self-directed moderation, represents the idea of a producer in its music videos with violent ambivalence (figuring the producers as absent, or literally dehumanized).

The shift in common business practices, increasing availability of digital technology, and changing cultural attitudes about homosexuality between 1998 and 2008 have feedback-looped to mean that a bandom fan is much more like the "normal" fans of the band she

loves-- but also more like the ordinary citizen-- in 2008 than a popslash fan was like the "normal" fans or average citizens of 1998. A glib take on this concept: in 1998, *NSync slashers were an odd minority, but now everyone is a Fall Out Boy slasher. Going to Fall Out Boy shows, or listening to top radio, or maintaining a MySpace, or coming out as queer to one's high school friends, are all actions that put on a continuum of identity and performance with Fall Out Boy slashers.

Discussing these issues at all in a scholarly contexts requires acknowledging the mise-en-abyme of a contemporary pop-media consumer. It seems necessary-- but almost impossible-- to separate a musician's professionally produced image from the persona his fandom has communally constructed, or to additionally separate his authentic self, or the "factual" history of his band's work, from either. It's hard to distinguish the subject-position of a slash-writing fan, and the subject-position of a "normal" fan who obsessively follows Fall Out Boy on MySpace, and the subject-position of an ordinary citizen who feels no special dedication to Fall Out Boy but is aware of the band's activities nevertheless because digital culture and mass entertainment-journalism media bring her in though with news about the band, and-- finally-- the subject-position of a scholar who might write about any of these activities with some kind of authoritative critical voice.

As contemporary subjects interpellated and connected by the network of contemporary mass media, we are all produced as selves by feedback-looping cultural trends. The study of bandom requires academics to acknowledge our complicated, mass-mediated subject positions more than ever (because now everyone is a Fall Out Boy slasher), just as bandom makes the issue of feedback-looping cultural production more interesting than ever (because now everyone is a Fall Out Boy slasher).

And academics should rise to this occasion, taking not just critical data but also a methodological model from bandom's example. Bandom should compel our critical eyes precisely because it is so richly conflicted. There is no wonder that production is such a sore and fascinating spot in the cultural artifacts associated with celebrity fandom. (A more

detailed survey of this theme appears in my appendix.) When the power that produces culture and selves works in ways this ambiguous and feedback-looping, "normal" fans can become stars-- as in the musicians of Panic! at the Disco-- and "normal" fans can also become like slashers-- as in the discussion of the relationship between Pete Wentz and Mikey way. "Accessible" bands (in the words of *Rolling Stone*) like Fall Out Boy promise constant personal interaction with their stars, which means no interaction with their stars is personal. The "scene queen" ex-girlfriends of musicians can be grist for the fanfiction writers' narrative mill, *and* fellow fans of the musicians, *and* semi-journalist sources of factual information, *and* collaborators in the construction of fictional musician-personas. Authentic-self Pete Wentz's personal blog is also professional Pete Wentz's PR spin.

As the disclaimers on bandom fanfiction state repeatedly, celebrity fanfiction processes false ideas about the real, fake personas of real people. After all, fans' only access to the notion of musicians' "real" private selves is via the "fake" public personas they display. Even fans deeply aware of their own fiction, involved in a careful discussion of their musicians' public personas versus private selves, can get their rhetoric mixed up and explain their reasons for keeping a musician's public persona and authentic private self separate in terms of their fictional understanding of the musician's private self. As scholars of contemporary culture, we can take a cue both from their conscientious self-awareness and their genuine confusion.