

Groupies, From Sex Symbols to Style Icons

When Pamela Des Barres and other backstage women came to prominence in 1969, the news media focused on their brazen sexuality. Now the focus is on their fashion.

By **JIM FARBERNOV**. 11, 2015

Cultural photographers try to capture images others miss. But even when they do, some people don't see what is really there.

Case in point: Baron Wolman's pictures of the original groupies in 1969. Billed on the cover of "[A Special Super-Duper Neat Issue](#)" of Rolling Stone (then a fledgling magazine), they inspired outrage in readers unfamiliar with the sexual innovations of the counterculture. In addition, the sometimes salacious articles that accompanied the photos irked some of the women portrayed. But Mr. Wolman said his portraits had a different intent.

"The thing I noticed immediately about these women was that they had spent a lot of time putting themselves together in ways that were so creative, you couldn't believe it," he said. "They mixed together outfits of the day with things from antique clothing stores to create a real vision. They weren't appearing half-naked to get the men's attention. They were dressing up to put on a show."

Mr. Wolman's view of the women as style icons comes into sharp focus thanks to a new coffee-table book, "[Groupies and Other Electric Ladies](#)." It collects his published portraits along with outtakes, contact sheets, the original articles from the issue and new essays that put the subjects into a modern context. The thick paper stock and oversize format emphasizes Mr. Wolman's view of the groupies as pioneers in hippie frippery.

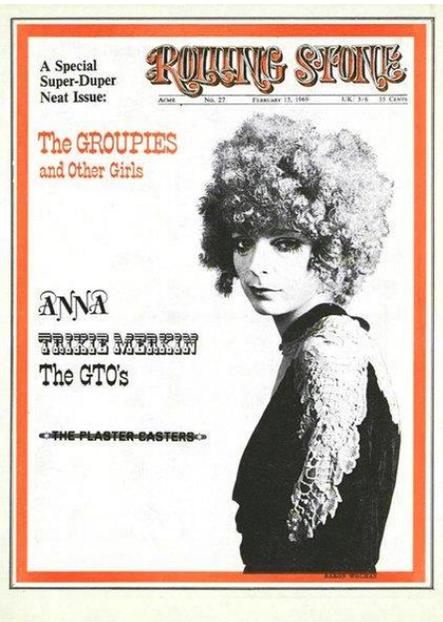
"It was all feathers and boas and frills," the fashion stylist Phillip Bloch said. "It was whimsy and color. They'd put a Victorian blouse with boots. Or velvet pants and masculine shoes. They created a highly eclectic mishmash that together announced, 'We break the rules.'"

The revival of these images comes at a propitious time. The Twitterverse has amplified the movement to condemn judgments against women's expressions of their sexuality, no matter how flip or free.

"Sex positivity has permeated mainstream dialogue, particularly among people who have the benefit of growing up with social media," said Andi Zeisler, the editorial/creative director of the feminist media company Bitch. "That brought things like slut shaming into the cultural lexicon."

But in order for that to come about, decades had to pass, during which the news-media image of groupies adopted any number of guises. When the Feb. 15, 1969, issue of

Rolling Stone appeared, with the cover line “The Groupies and Other Girls,” it created a media pile-on. There were catch-up articles in magazines like Time and Life, along with harrumphing commentary in newspapers.



Before the issue reached newsstands, the term “groupie” was not common, having turned up sporadically in places like The Village Voice. After the issue was published, the word became codified, aided by drooling pulp novels like “Groupie” or the voyeuristic 1970 documentary “[Groupies](#).”

Mr. Wolman, 78, began his career in photojournalism after serving in the military in Berlin in the early 1960s. His first published photo essay captured life behind the just-erected wall in Communist-controlled East Berlin. After moving to San Francisco, Mr. Wolman met Jann Wenner, who asked him to become chief photographer for a publication he was starting, to be called Rolling Stone. Mr. Wolman held that position for three years, before Annie Leibovitz took over.



Baron Wolman CreditAnna Webber/WireImage

During his time with the magazine, he earned the trust of the musicians and the women in their circle. Mr. Wolman brought the idea for an article focused on the women to Mr. Wenner, who immediately recognized it as media gold. He felt so sure, he spent \$7,000 for a full-page ad on a back page of The New York Times to herald the special issue.



Mr. Wolman's coffee-table book, "Groupies and Other Electric Ladies."

"We seized the opportunity to use this as a steppingstone to build awareness of the magazine in New York advertising circles," Mr. Wenner said. "It stimulated a lot of attention on Madison Avenue and even more in the press and with the public."

The ad's tag line was, "If we tell you what a groupie is, will you really understand?"

"The whole idea was to say, "There's something going on here, and you don't know what it is, Mr. Jones,"" said Mr. Wolman, paraphrasing a famous Bob Dylan lyric. "But if you read Rolling Stone, you'll get it."

While many of the women who posed for Mr. Wolman loved the portraits, they were not pleased with the text surrounding them. “I never hated a word in the English language as much as I hated ‘groupie,’” said Sally Romano (then [Sally Mann](#)), who is now a lawyer in Huntsville, Tex. “The term is just stupid. And in the article I sounded like a complete moron.”

Ms. Romano, who was living in the Jefferson Airplane house at the time (and was involved with the band’s drummer, [Spencer Dryden](#)), said the band “never let me live it down.”

Trixie Merkin, a Radcliffe graduate, enjoyed being included in the issue but wasn’t thrilled about being lumped in with groupies.

Though the magazine pointed out that she wasn’t one (she was one of the “other girls” alluded to in the cover line), her connection to them seemed implicit. At the time, she was a bassist in the band Anonymous Artists of America, as well as a member of “the next commune down from Ken Kesey’s Merry Pranksters,” as she describes it.

It’s indicative of the sexism of the day, and the fact that there were few female musicians in the scene, that Ms. Merkin’s only way into the magazine was the groupie issue. She appeared topless among the otherwise largely chaste photos, and said the idea to do so was hers.

“I asked myself before the shoot, ‘What should I wear — or not wear?’” Ms. Merkin said with a laugh. “It was meant to be zany. I was a bit of a Dadaist.”

If the photographs and articles drew ire from certain guardians of opinion, they didn’t necessarily diminish the women’s status within the counterculture. “The groupies had very high prestige,” said Richard Goldstein, perhaps the first true rock critic. “They had been chosen, but they had chosen as well. The musicians had to be selected by them. It was a mutual conveyance of prestige through sex.”

They also had an influence on fashion. Their on-the-fly street style — stitched together from 1920s bohemia, bordello chic, Victorian lace and mod leftovers — created the vintage rock look. “You see it now in the designs of Anna Sui, Catherine Malandrino and Mary-Kate and Ashley,” Mr. Bloch said of the Olsen twins. “Some of these groupies look like mothers to the Rodarte sisters.”

But the women weren’t idealized, even in their day. The flip side of their cool appearance found enduring expression in the 1969 ballad “[Groupie \(Superstar\)](#),” written by Bonnie Bramlett and Leon Russell. In that song, the groupie pines for a rock star who remains out of reach, always on the road with someone else.

The song’s message entered the mainstream when it became a No. 2 hit for the Carpenters in 1971, if with a chastened lyric. (The Carpenters whitewashed “I can hardly wait to sleep with you again” into “I can hardly wait to be with you again.”)

By the late '80s, amid the panic of AIDS, different attitudes prevailed. When Pamela Des Barres of the groupies-turned-band the G.T.O.'s published her blockbuster memoir, "[I'm With the Band: Confessions of a Groupie.](#)" in 1987, she drew criticism. Mainly, she said, it came from other women.



They're With the Band

CreditBaron Wolman

"I had to fight my way out of a lot of difficult situations," Ms. Des Barres said. "I was on a TV show, and Gloria Steinem didn't even want to be on the stage with me. I was seen as a submissive slut. But I was a woman doing what I wanted to do. Isn't that feminist?"

Ms. Des Barres said she had to come up with snappy comebacks in order to make her way through the talk-show circuit. "Some lady said to me, 'How could you shame yourself this way?'" she said. "I said, 'I'm so sorry that you didn't get to sleep with Mick Jagger and I did.' That shut her up."

Attitudes began to alter again in the aughts. Cameron Crowe's 2000 movie, "[Almost Famous](#)," portrayed the main groupie character, Penny Lane (played by Kate Hudson), as a haloed muse.



Kate Hudson as the groupie Penny Lane in "Almost Famous."
Credit DreamWorks Pictures

The 2002 comedy "[The Banger Sisters](#)" went further. In it, Susan Sarandon played a former groupie whose move away from the scene represents a denial of her true desires and a descent into ruinous repression. To cure this, she requires the brassy presence of her former partner in groupie-dom, played by Goldie Hawn (the real-life mother to Ms. Hudson).

Groupies still exist, and always will, but they seem not to have the prominence of their foremothers. Perhaps their most common current media depiction would be the women used decoratively in certain hip-hop videos.



Pamela Des Barres with Alice Cooper in Los Angeles, circa 1974. Credit Richard Creamer/Michael Ochs Archives, via Getty Images

If the profile and prestige of groupies has sunk, their lingering, historic image has become more complicated. On the one hand, Ms. Zeisler said, many third-wave feminists admire the fact that the '60s groupies "transgressed the boundaries of what was considered proper female sexual behavior."

On the other, "they contributed to a culture in which women have had to struggle very hard to be seen as human and professional. They made it harder for women in music to be seen as anything other than groupies."

Many of the original women on the scene say they have no interest in such reactions. A measure of the women's ownership of their legacies can be seen in the title of Ms. Romano's forthcoming autobiography. It inverts Ms. Des Barres's title into "The Band's With Me."

Still, the women's enduring confidence may find its purest expression in Mr. Wolman's photos. To focus on their power, he said he made the decision to shoot them "in as uncluttered a way as possible. I took them into the studio and treated them like celebrities, in the style of my two favorite photographers, Richard Avedon and Irving Penn."

"I wanted to isolate them so people would really look at the women," Mr. Wolman said. "I wanted to say to the viewer: 'See who is really in the image. See who these women really are.'"