

W7: Revenge of the Nerds: Fandom

Making great music and being great on stage no longer seem to be enough.

—Nancy Baym

Are you a superfan? Or just a fan? Who are you a fan of?

Whether it's a band, a filmmaker, an influencer, a sports team, or a videogame, we are all fans of somebody or something now. Fandom today is a social obligation, an expected marker of normal socialization: to **not** to be a fan of anything is weird, an indicator of social alienation. But even the socially alienated—known in Japan as **otaku** (roughly, nerds) or in extreme cases, **hikikomori** (shut-ins, who never leave their room and spend all their waking lives immersed in online gameworlds) are fans, even superfans. It's not always been this way, of course. Back in 1986, nerdy **Star Trek** fans were still being lampooned in **SNL comedy skits**. Even back then, though, nobody would have considered telling obsessive sports fans to "get a life", because being a fan of an actual sports team was not considered as excessive. But **Star Trek** was "just" a TV show, whose legitimacy as an object of such excessive devotion was far less obvious, given the longstanding (and still persistent) perception of television as trivial entertainment. This also explains, by the way, why fandom only began to be taken seriously in academia as a legitimate object of study from the 1990s onwards, beginning with Henry Jenkins's classic study of **Star Trek** fandom **Textual Poachers** in 1992, and soon after Constance Penley's **NASA/Trek**. Other areas of media fandom, particularly around Japanese anime, have taken much longer to establish their legitimacy. It can be seen from these examples that perceptions of fandom are intertwined with the status within the dominant culture of the media or platforms that are the object of the fandom in question (popular music, film, TV, videogames, anime, TikTok).

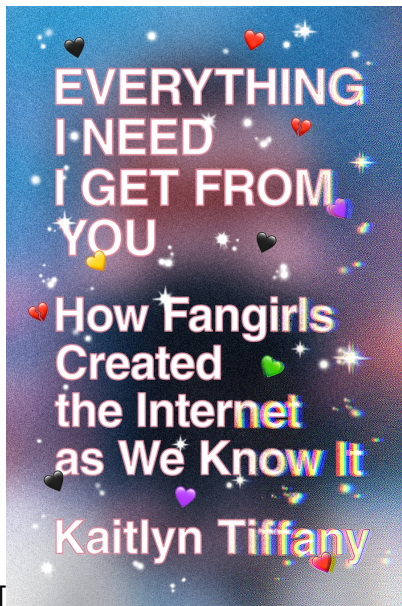
Fast forward a few decades, and as you see from the discussion about music fandom between Nancy Baym, Daniel Cavicchi, and Norma Coates, fandom has become a large and well-established field within media studies and related fields (cultural studies, ethnography). No longer stigmatized as in the 1990s, the nerd has become a staple of mainstream entertainment, from **Napoleon Dynamite** to **The Big Bang Theory** and its spinoff, **Young Sheldon**. How, when, and particularly **why** this cultural shift happened is a larger set of questions that there isn't space to adequately address here, but has also been the subject of much theorizing in the academic literature on fandom.

So much for the background; but let's come back to the specific focus of the second article assigned for this week: music fandom and its changing modalities in the emergence of digital culture and social media since the 1990s. For reasons explained above, books such as Kaitlyn Tiffany's first-person study of One Direction fans are today rou-

Nancy K. Baym, "**Social Media and the Struggle for Society**" Nancy K. Baym, Daniel Cavicchi, and Norma Coates, "**Music Fandom in the Digital Age: A Conversation**"

See also: Lauren Mayberry, "**Chvrches' Lauren Mayberry: 'I will not accept online misogyny'**" (*The Guardian*, September 2013).

Henry Jenkins, **Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture**. (New York: Routledge, 1992).
 Constance Penley, **NASA/Trek: Popular Science and Fantasy in America** (New York: Verso, 1992).



tine.[It's fine to publicly obsess over Harry Styles or other boy-band idols, while media scholars are devoting entire academic syllabi to Taylor Swift. Since fandom today has become such a vast field, then, I'll limit myself to a couple of observations arising from the article on music fandom in the social media age that may provide some starting points for this week's discussion.

Kaitlyn Tiffany, *Everything I Need From You: How Fangirls Created the Internet as We Know It* (New York: Strauss & Giroux, 2022).

The first of these relates to the question of **race** in relation to fandom. On the last page of the discussion of music fandom, Nancy Baym observes:

I think, for example, of black punks, and how they, like punk women (and, most of all, like black punk women), have already been written out of histories of punk. Fan scholarship has begun to talk about race, as phenomena like casting white actors to play Asian characters has become a topic that increasingly merits discussion beyond the purviews of fandoms themselves (151).

While Baym's point itself is valid enough, it's significant that it's the only reference to race in this discussion of music fandom by these three white scholars. While (as is clear from the discussion) the relationship between fandom and gender identities has been a major focus of attention in academic discussions of fandom, from Beatlemania to One Direction, it's also true that until relatively recently the field of fandom studies has been overwhelmingly dominated by studies of predominantly white fandoms by white scholars who have largely ignored racial and ethnic identities in relation to fandom. While there has been some diversification within the past decade or so, to my mind this remains very much the case even today. Where, say, black fandom has been discussed, it's been primarily focused on hip hop and/or Afrofuturism, as if these cultural forms were co-extensive with black cultural identity. But this is far from being the case, as both the controversial but longstanding white fandom for hip hop or anime attest, as well as the even more longstanding black fandom for hardcore and punk music. For more on the latter, I recommend the excellent documentary **Afro-Punk** (dir. James Spooner, 2003). Other than such isolated studies, there remains considerable scope today for exploring the question of race in music fandom and in other fandoms beyond it.

<https://youtu.be/eFgLgWsCvdk>

The Bots, "Stop" (2010)

The second point relates to the **transcultural** dimension of contemporary global fandom.

Questions to think about:

- What do fans **do**? => Fan **practices**
- What do fans **want**? => Fan **desires**
- What do fans **think**? => Fan **ideas**

Key concepts

- relational labor
- fake intimacy
- vulnerability dialectic