

# Sexual culture, celebrity and the press since c.1960

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### Structure

This presentation will start with some general observations about the general sexual culture of the period, before discussing the freedom of action for celebrities in the pop culture of the period, and the role of the press in reporting the sexual activities of public figures. It will conclude with a few brief comments about Savile himself.

### The changing sexual culture of the period:

The 1960s-70s was a period of significant change in British sexual culture, shaped by a number of factors

- the liberalisation of the media censorship and regulatory regimes after 1959 (affecting literature, television, cinema, theatre, newspapers and magazines), which led to the sexualisation of popular culture
- improved health and nutrition led to a steady lowering of the age of puberty: by early 1960s the mean age at which girls began to menstruate was 13 ½, down from 17 in late 19th c
  - > this led to a prominent public debate [e.g. Chesser, Carstairs] about whether pre-marital chastity was realistic or necessary, with many prominent commentators denying that it was
- there was a dramatic expansion in the cultural and economic prominence of youth culture; sexuality became central to music and fashion cultures; 'Beatlemania' and pictures of screaming girls were explicitly read in terms of sexual release
- the counter-culture questioned all aspects of conventional sexual morality, including marriage, monogamy, age of consent; there was a valorisation of the free sexuality

of children<sup>1</sup>; on the fringes, some radicals called for a rethinking of adult-child relationships

- the growing availability of the contraceptive pill enabled greater control of fertility, and, in some circumstances, could make it harder for women to refuse sex

Although I would not want to exaggerate pace of change of sexual behaviour across the nation, in some circles greater sexual freedoms were being expected and claimed.

### **Celebrities and the music scene**

The popular music world, in which Savile moved, was one of the most sexually free scenes, and a celebrity like Savile would have expected considerable sexual access to young women and men.

Drawing on the research of Patrick Glen, some indicative stories about music world:

- the 'groupie' culture well-established by the 1960s; many of the girls/ women involved were young
  - Jimmy Page (Led Zeppelin guitarist) had a relationship with fourteen year-old 'groupie' Lori Mattix which was not mentioned in the music press;<sup>2</sup>
  - Mick Farren witnessed underage girls being brought to a hotel by band management in Los Angeles<sup>3</sup>
- journalists drew a veil over these activities, because of a sense of fraternity, because they were sometimes participating themselves (journalists were sometimes offered women by agents) and because they knew that access would be denied in the future if secrets were revealed

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Richard Neville, *Play Power* (1970), pp. 223-4: 'Infants get the most out of their sex life. They play with themselves unashamedly, anarchistically, freely, and solely for the purpose of gratification. As they grow up, their sexuality becomes repressed, neurotic, perverted.'

<sup>2</sup> The story of Maddox and Page is covered in the controversial memoir, Stephen Davis, *Hammer of the Gods: Led Zeppelin* (New York, 1985), p. 164-168. Michael Walker, *Laurel Canyon: Inside Rock-and-Roll's Legendary Neighbourhood* (New York, 2006) p. 190.

<sup>3</sup> cf also Blind Faith album cover

- when the issue was raised, it was rarely taken seriously: on 17 February 1968 *Melody Maker* printed a letter to from a concerned mother which accused rock bands of raping young girls who sought to enter the back-stage area at concerts > this led to denials
- A few weeks later Chris Welch reignited this controversy by asking Carl Wayne, the lead singer of the Move, 'Mothers tend to warn erring daughters to steer clear of the Move. What did Carl think of a recent correspondence in Mailbag on the subject of rape attempts on young girls by groups?'

[He replied] 'Girls do knock on dressing room doors and later boast who they have slept with. But they're not all the same. Some are just nice kids who want to have a talk. Some wear tight sweaters and dance up close to the group. It's bad for the business sure, but males are more frustrated than females and you can't blame groups for what happens. They live on nerves anyway. I'm not saying they should go around taking advantage of every little scrubber, but some of them just ask for it.'<sup>4</sup>

- See also Nick Kent's *NME* interview of Roxy Music in Amsterdam in 1973, in which a conversation with Brian Eno was reproduced. 'One letter started out: "Hi, I am 18-years-old and a good screw." I wish these girls would send photographs... In fact, I would like to take this opportunity to exhort, through the auspices of *New Musical Express*, all these young girls who have a definite sexual interest in me to enclose photographs of themselves. I would be more than grateful.'
- And Rob Randall's piece, 'Glitter', in *Melody Maker*: 'Reviews of Glitter's new album, "Touch Me," have singled out the track "Happy Birthday" as a possible next single. For the uninitiated "Happy Birthday" is supposedly sung by a young man during the minute before his girlfriend reaches the legal age of consent – 16. [Glitter:] "It's really sending it up a bit – a bit tongue in cheek, like most of my things. He staying on the side of the law by waiting to give her her 'present'. The thing is that I get, honestly, loads and loads of letters from young kids of 13, 14 and 15. Some of them are very, very to the point. The letters come from both sexes, but mostly from girls.'

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<sup>4</sup> Chris Welch, *Melody Maker*, 9 March 1968.

They say the most incredible things for their age. But, even if one wanted to pursue any of their suggestions, one couldn't by law, of course. And that's partly how the idea for 'Happy Birthday' came up."

Accustomed to such a world, Savile may well have taken this behaviour into spheres of his own life.

### **Changing press attitudes:**

Why wasn't such behaviour picked up by the press?

- The popular press were becoming more intrusive in this period: in the late 1950s, a market started to emerge for intimate revelations and confessions (the press had to offer something different in the television age) <sup>5</sup>
- After the Profumo scandal, Lord Denning [Master of the Rolls, asked by Macmillan to investigate the scandal] noted that 'Public men are more vulnerable than they were before [because]... scandalous information about well-known people has become a marketable commodity'. <sup>6</sup> And indeed, once Profumo had offered his resignation to the House of Commons on 5 June 1963, the press publicised and investigated the story far more extensively than might have been expected in earlier decades. <sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The payment of £40,000 by Stuart Campbell of *The People* for Errol Flynn's memoirs in October 1959 heralded this era of the celebrity confessional: see Adrian Bingham, *Family Newspapers? Sex, Private Life, and the British Popular Press, 1918-1978* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), ch. 7.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Press Council, *The Press and the People: Eleventh Annual Report*, (London: Press Council, 1964), 19-20.

<sup>7</sup> Fleet Street was awash with gossip about sexual indiscretions in elevated circles. Reporters were dispatched to investigate the activities of Keeler, Stephen Ward, and their associates, in a bid to uncover further scandal. Readers were presented with a flurry of vague stories and unsubstantiated rumours about incriminating photographs taken at high-society orgies. The *News of the World's* Peter Earle tracked down and interviewed Mariella Novotny, the host of one such party: 'She Knows The Man In The Mask' screamed a front-page headline, referring to one of the most sensitive photos. A week later the *People's* front-page was dominated by the news that three unnamed ministers had been caught up in Lord Denning's investigation of 'damaging rumours': The *Daily Mirror*, meanwhile, ran a headline reading 'Prince Philip And The Profumo Scandal – Rumour Is Utterly Unfounded', without specifying the rumour in question. (While rejecting a complaint about this story, the Press Council observed disapprovingly that its 'sensational treatment... was distasteful and did not accord

- Yet it should be remembered that news of Profumo's affair with Christine Keeler had been circulating in Fleet Street for several months without any paper acquiring the confidence to publicly challenge the War Minister.
- Despite publishing a welter of rumours after Profumo's resignation, the press did not go so far as to satisfy public curiosity by naming the high-profile individuals linked to the most sensational stories.<sup>8</sup>
- Part of the caution was because British libel law was heavily weighted in favour of the plaintiff; as Lord Devlin, the chairman of the Press Council, observed in 1965, while many agreed that the libel laws were 'oppressive', they were regarded as 'a form of rough justice to be set against excesses which are within the law.' As long as statutory regulation seemed unattainable, the libel laws were viewed as one of the few means of taming an unruly press.
- The danger of accusing public figures was illustrated by the Boothby scandal of 1964. On 12 July, the *Sunday Mirror* sensationally claimed that Sir John Simpson, the Metropolitan Commissioner, had ordered Scotland Yard to investigate an 'alleged homosexual relationship between a prominent peer and a leading thug in the London underworld'. The unnamed peer was Lord Robert Boothby, the 'thug' was Ronnie Kray, and the *Mirror* was in possession of a photograph of the two together. Story was continued the following week. It later emerged that there may indeed have been a 'hardcore of truth', but when Boothby wrote a letter to *The Times* strenuously denying the rumours and threatening to sue the *Mirror*, the paper backed down. Cecil King, quickly agreed to pay Boothby the huge sum of £40,000; editor Reginald Payne was sacked shortly afterwards. Fleet Street could hardly have

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with the newspaper's apparent attitude of being activated by the highest motives'). Malcolm Muggeridge claimed that in his forty years in journalism he had never experienced anything like the 'tidal wave of slanderous talk' that was coursing through Fleet Street.<sup>8</sup> Some journalists regretted that more of their material was not actually used. Alfred Draper, one of the *Express's* leading reporters, later recalled that 'During the months of investigative journalism we built up an enormous dossier of stories which had all been thoroughly checked and owed nothing to gossip. But Lord Beaverbrook did not use any of it. Once the question of security was ruled out he lost interest'.

been given a clearer warning of the consequences of being unable to support scandalous accusations.<sup>9</sup>

- It was not until 1973 that the press brought about the resignation of ministers as a direct result of their sexual indiscretions. In May 1973, Lord Lambton, the Minister for the RAF, resigned when he found that his liaisons with prostitutes were about to be exposed by the Sunday press. Earl Jellicoe, the Leader of the House of Lords, followed days later after admitting that he too had paid for sex. Even in this case, the *News of the World* passed up the story despite very strong evidence; was left to Sunday People to publish<sup>10</sup>
- It was not until the 1980s that press, led by the *Sun* and the *News of the World*, became more accustomed to publishing 'kiss and tells'; but stories could often be kept out of papers by maintaining good relationships with editors and journalists; using agents such as Max Clifford; threatening litigation
- Newsrooms remain male-dominated until 1990s, and feminism had a limited impact; stories were usually viewed in terms of titillation rather than in terms of exposing abuse

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<sup>9</sup> This was exactly the sort of story that might have been suppressed in previous decades, but after the events of 1963, the *Mirror* editor Reginald Payne decided to run it (although without taking the precaution of checking with either of his superiors, Hugh Cudlipp and Cecil King). The following week, the *Mirror* told readers revealed that 'The Picture We Must Not Print' showed 'a well-known member of the House of Lords seated on a sofa with a gangster who leads the biggest protection racket London has ever known'. In private, the government was seriously concerned: the Solicitor-General admitted that he didn't believe Boothby's explanations, and inconsistencies were found between his statements to the police and to the Home Secretary. 'According to British press tradition, it can be taken as reasonably certain that there is a hardcore of truth in all of this', wrote one Home Office official. 'It can thus be assumed that Lord Boothby... will soon be the central figure of a scandal that will overshadow the Profumo affair'.

<sup>10</sup> The *News of the World* had been investigating a 'vice ring' featuring prominent individuals for some months, and reported at the end of the April that the 'laws of libel and the need to protect our sources of information inhibit this newspaper from revealing all it knows on all these topics'. The paper was then contacted by Norma Levy, one of the women that Lambton had visited, her husband Colin, and a friend, Peter Goodsell, who offered to sell incriminating photographs of Lambton. With the assistance of Goodsell and the Levys, *News of the World* journalists took photos of Lambton in 'compromising situations', but after a dispute over payment, the Levys sold their pictures to the *People*.

- the ‘paedophile’ threat became an intermittent moral panic from the mid-1970s, but it was very rarely linked to public figures<sup>11</sup>

### **Savile himself:**

In private, Savile seems to have been regarded with some suspicion by contemporaries

- [Glen evidence from oral history interviews] that Savile was ‘a nasty guy who would take you to court for looking at him the wrong way.’
- One interviewee noted that Savile was famous for taking money to play records: ‘I’m sure Jimmy Savile was supposed to be famous for it. He was the worst, the worst for everything, give Jimmy Savile fifty quid and he’ll play anything. That was generally the attitude.’

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<sup>11</sup> By the mid-1970s, the popular press started to mark out paedophiles as a separate category of people who posed a threat to society. In May 1975, for example, a front-page report in the *Sunday People* denounced the leaders of a paedophile self-help organisation as ‘The Vilest Men in Britain’:

These are faces of three leaders of a society whose aim will horrify every parent in the country. They are members of PAL – the Paedophile Action for Liberation. Paedophile means literally: “Lover of children.” But these vile men do not talk of normal love of a child. They mean sex with a child.

The report generated an immediate reaction. While MPs demanded action and petitions were drawn up, individuals mentioned in the article were attacked, and bricks were thrown through the window of the PAL headquarters. The Press Council rejected complaints that the report was irresponsible, concluding that the language used, although strong, did not ‘go beyond what is acceptable in a free society in such a case’.

Two years later, the *Daily Mirror* identified a similar organisation, the Paedophile Information Exchange, as a menace to society, and highlighted the growing commercial exploitation of child pornography. Marje Proops sought to inject some moderation into the coverage, arguing that treatment should be ‘readily available’ for those who suffered from the ‘dreadful sickness’ of paedophilia, and that punitive action should be directed at the pornographers. Most journalists ignored such distinctions and denounced both sets of men as ‘perverts’. Margaret Thatcher picked up on the *Mirror*’s crusade and pledged to press for action from the government, leading the normally loyal Labour paper to give favourable coverage to the Conservative leader... As society gradually accepted a range of sexualities, the paedophile remained distinct as the epitome of sexual ‘perversion’, an unquestioned enemy against which columnists and editorialists could fulminate.

But in public this tended only to result in claims that he was ‘eccentric’, ‘larger-than-life’ etc: see the following examples from the *Mirror*: 1962 ‘the most extraordinary disc-jockey in this spinning business’; 1964 ‘larger than life’; 1969 ‘flamboyant chattery chap’; May 1983 ‘rather strange celebrity’

Savile’s self-presentation strategy was to

- embrace ‘eccentricity’ while fiercely rejecting anything more sinister – threatening to sue c.f. Savile CPS report p. 64: ‘He told the officers that he had sued five newspapers in the past and they had all settled’ (Oct. 2009); his ‘policy’ was ‘If I was going to sue anyone, we would not go to a local court, we would go to the Old Bailey ‘cos my people can put time in the Old Bailey. So my legal people are ready and waiting. All we need is a name and an address and then the due process would start.’
- he cultivated a reputation for charitable works (publicised as early as 1962<sup>12</sup>) and adhered to ‘family morality’: he was a member of the Longford committee investigating pornography 1971-72
- he cultivated the local press and police

But I found one remarkable piece in the *Daily Mirror* from 1971 – at a time when the BBC was under scrutiny about the ‘Payola scandal’ and accusations of inappropriate behaviour by DJs to Claire MacAlpine/ Samantha Claire – in which Savile did little to hide the fact that he is surrounded in young girls, but denied – rather unconvincingly – a sexual dimension to their relationship: “I’ve met young crumpet that would knock your eyes out... Fourteen-year-olds with bodies on ‘em like Gina Lollobrigida. I love ‘em. But not in the going-to-bed sense... I have lots of girl friends... These young girls don’t necessarily want you to take them to bed. That is an adult misconception... They want prestige – not sex.’

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<sup>12</sup> *Daily Mirror*, 9 August 1962, 12.