

BEHIND THE COVERS OF AUSTRALIAN *ROLLING STONE*: NEGOTIATING THE PERSONA OF A FEMALE MUSIC MAGAZINE EDITOR

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ABSTRACT

Singers, songwriters and musicians create personas and perform the (gendered) role of rock star, punk, heart-throb, crooner, diva, or rock chick. We expect performers to put on a show, but do we expect music magazine editors to adopt a gendered celebrity persona and a public self too? This article examines the persona of the music magazine editor and the construction of music celebrity in Rolling Stone magazine, with a particular focus on the now defunct Australian Rolling Stone magazine. Interviews with Kathy Bail and Elissa Blake, the first two women to edit the title in magazine format, provide insights into the history of the magazine and the role of the magazine cover in the success of any title. Their career narratives underscore the self-fashioning of cultural intermediaries and the challenges to women in leadership roles in Australian media workplaces, as the two women negotiate personas embodying authority, authenticity, and a rock and roll edge.

KEY WORDS

Rolling Stone; Magazine Editors; Music; Persona; Women and Leadership

INTRODUCTION

“Rock and roll is not just another form of mass communication and Rolling Stone is not just any magazine” (Pompper, Lee and Lerner 2009, p. 287).

As this special issue recognises, the relationship between music and public identity is complex and dynamic and it evolves as we age. Robert L. Root’s (1986) “A Listener’s Guide to the Rhetoric of Popular Music” remains central to discussions about music and persona, despite being published more than 30 years ago. Root’s contribution to the way we think about music as an act of communication and identity-formation draws on Aristotelian rhetoric. Root posits that: “Ethos is attention to the persona of the speaker, the character he projects, his personality” (p. 16). We might think of Aristotle’s “ethos” here as not only the personality of the speaker but their authority and authenticity – their reputation. Root calls attention to the persona that the songwriter creates in a musical composition and the persona of the singer who conveys a persona via the performance of the music (p. 16). Further, Root argues that the world of the fan and the audience’s connection with the song or the singer is at the core of “the fantasy life inspired by pop music” (p. 19).

Music magazines like *Rolling Stone* play a key role in generating that fantasy life and in creating celebrity culture. The music magazine is an integral part of fan culture, given that

magazine covers and accompanying features convey and construct a singer or band's persona and can turn musicians into stars. This article argues that although technically not "cover girls" themselves, female music magazine editors of titles like *Rolling Stone* are expected to perform a rock and roll "fantasy life" of the "rock chick" persona. Their age, gender, and other facets of their identity, such as race, education, socio-economic background, and sexuality, also intersect to form part of that persona. This article investigates how two female journalists negotiate the construction of a rock and roll persona while at the same time negotiating a sexist workplace and barriers to advancement in the Australian media.

MUSIC AND IDENTITY

Sociologists and popular music scholars have long argued that popular music offers an accessible and recognisable means for young people to negotiate and construct their identity as part of a cultural community that has its own history, codes and uniforms. We might think here of how hip-hop, punk, ska, heavy metal, dance or trance music communities are articulated and authenticated in fan culture and perhaps even drive music tourism (Johinke 2018, p. 321). As Lashua, Spracklen, and Long explain:

Music articulates identities, rebellion, conformity, performance, status, product, community, subculture, high culture, distinction, place, space and more. In the construction of distinctive spaces, styles and genres, music reproduces the inequalities and struggles of the late modern world (2014, p. 3).

Many studies, by scholars such as Hebdige (1979), Adorno (1994), Hall and Jefferson (1976), Pottie (1993), Grossberg (1984), Frith (1983), and Fryer (1986), have investigated the way that popular music binds listeners and fans together into communities. As I will argue, music magazines like *Rolling Stone* act as agents of socialisation within these fan communities and the editor plays a pivotal role in constructing that community. But what "inequalities and struggles" are reproduced on their covers and pages and who is welcome in the community?

THE EDITOR

Magazines are aspirational. They sell readers the promise of membership to a fashionable in-group of people who are "in the know" about what is new, on trend, and desirable. In the case of a music magazine, the magazine's function, or its service to its readers, is to inform them about the hottest new bands, new music trends, essential music trivia, and provide insight into the musicians themselves. Purchasing commodities (records, CDs, t-shirts, books, concert tickets) to obtain this cultural cachet and cultural capital is part of the negotiated identity of a committed reader. It is the magazine editor's job to welcome readers into a readership community, but it is also their commercial responsibility to court advertisers to facilitate this commercial interaction with the reader.

Internationally, the best-known study of female magazine editors is still Marjorie Ferguson's classic *Forever Feminine* (1983), which focuses on the individual power and personality of the editor and how women's magazines construct femininity and indeed a "cult" of femininity. The editor, Ferguson states, carries "creative, ethical and legal responsibility for every word or illustration that appears in 'her' magazine" (Ferguson 1983, p. 126). Like many others, Ferguson suggests that editors are "gatekeepers" and she goes as far as to liken them to "priestesses" who shape cultural norms (Ferguson 1983, p. 10). Building on Ferguson's work, Anna Gough-Yates' (2003) *Understanding Women's Magazines* provides further insights into the role of the editor. More recently, Susan L Greenberg (2018) has argued that the central tenets of editing are selecting, shaping and linking material, and her broader thesis is that editing can

productively be categorised via a rhetorical lens as poetics – making texts. Ben Crewe’s *Representing Men* (2003), about men’s magazines and male editors of British lad magazines in the 1990s, is perhaps the most relevant in relation to *Rolling Stone*. Crewe likens editors to “rock stars” and his case studies demonstrate that some lad magazine editors in the UK in the 1990s confused their own role with that of the celebrities upon which they were reporting (2003, pp. 83–151). Locally, Mark Dapin’s memoir *Sex & Money* (2004), about his time editing lad magazine *Ralph*, provides a valuable insight into the role and responsibilities of the male editor.¹

Editors are certainly the public face of the magazine, whether they seek celebrity status or not, and the two women that are the focus of this case study, Kathy Bail and Elissa Blake, discussed their experience of inhabiting the persona of “cool” music magazine editor in the interviews I conducted. Others, like former *Vogue* editor Kirstie Clements, have written about the pressure to inhabit the persona of the editor (2013, p. 208). She was bemused and slightly irritated that she was perceived to be “terrifying” and states “But that was the persona they wanted me to play” (p 208). Despite their own feelings about the “celebritization” of the role, or their politics and tastes, at the end of the day it is the editor’s responsibility to sell magazines and to improve circulation.² In reality, editors perform a difficult dance as they try to please advertisers, readers, publishers, and media bosses. How we define a magazine in an age when the magazine is supposedly “dead” has become a complex debate and many now argue that the typical modern editor is now a brand manager and influencer managing content across multiple platforms (Abrahamson 2009).

THE *ROLLING STONE* BRAND

Internationally, the most famous music magazine in the west is *Rolling Stone* magazine and its distinctive red nameplate is still instantly recognisable. Emerging from the politically conscious underground press of the 1960s, *Rolling Stone* was founded by Jann Wenner and Ralph J. Gleason in 1967 in San Francisco as a counterculture newspaper aimed at young music fans (Frontani 2002; Pompper et al. 2009). It quickly distinguished itself from other more radical underground press titles and became “the voice of a generation” (Frontani 2002, p. 39). Of course, that generation is the baby boomer generation and that group remains a core readership segment of this “youth” magazine. The magazine’s early success was based on its reporting on the Beatles, the Rolling Stones and alternative lifestyles (Frontani 2002) but it soon became an authoritative, and eventually iconic, magazine that defined American popular culture (as it was constructed by the magazine). It was immortalised in the 1973 hit song *Cover of the Rolling Stone* by Dr Hook and the Medicine Show and in the 2000 film *Almost Famous*, which fictionalises Cameron Crowe’s early years on the road as a journalist for the magazine. Although always centred on music journalism, it has consistently also prioritised political reporting, most famously the gonzo-style journalism of Hunter S. Thompson.

As many have argued, and as Jenkins and Tandoc note: “The magazine has achieved a ‘mythical power’ in American popular culture, thanks not only to its in-depth and investigative journalistic work but also to its ‘star-making abilities’ for performers and others still seeking fame” (2017, p. 282). As Frontani observes, the title that was defiantly counterculture and anti-consumerism in the 1960s became increasingly commercial in the 1970s and, in 1977, moved its headquarters to New York (2002, p. 56). It was criticised for becoming too focused on celebrities and “light” entertainment in the 1990s and early 2000s and, as will be discussed, this is all played out in the Australian arm of the title and posed particular challenges to the Australian editors. *Rolling Stone* is frequently criticised for, on the one hand, its conservative music coverage that caters to the tastes of aging white baby boomers and, on the other hand, for its liberal politics, which also reflect the politics of aging white male baby boomers and, one

imagines, those of founder Jann Wenner (Rosen 2006; Pompper et al. 2009; Fitzgerald 2018). Supposedly a magazine about youth culture, it now has an aging readership, which, of course, makes it less attractive to the young people who are the target demographic. The 2019 media kit for American *Rolling Stone* illustrates that the readers are predominantly male (60%), and that the readership is aging (54% of readers 35+ with a significant number 55+). As Adams and Harmon observe: “However inaccurate the descriptions of baby boomers being uniformly counter-cultural are, there is no disputing that they made rock ‘n’ roll their music, did not grow out of it as they were expected to do, and still consume it...” (2018, p. 339). As they observe, “For baby boomers, then, musical taste and participation in a relevant fan community is sometimes a serious matter ...For some baby boomers, their collective music fan identities have remained important to them throughout their life course” (2018, p. 340). Reading their favourite music magazine is therefore an important way for them to keep up to date with the cultural zeitgeist.

As this special issue flags, “contemporary capitalism demands and facilitates the pervasive experience of musician personas as brands”. As already noted, readers buy into the community as part of a commercial transaction. To that end, Muniz and O’Guinn argue that “brand communities” arise when consumers of a brand form social relationships that share a consciousness of kind, shared rituals and moral responsibility (2001, p. 413). These brand communities – in this case, readers – are “quite self-aware and self-reflexive about issues of authenticity and identity” (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001, p. 415). Indeed, this has previously been argued in relation to readers of fitness magazines, but it is equally pertinent in relation to readers of *Rolling Stone* (Johinke 2014). As Jenkins and Tandoc illustrate, regular readers of *Rolling Stone* identify very strongly as “real readers”: controversies like the decision to feature Boston bomber Dzhokhar Tsarnaev on the cover act as a critical incident in journalism where there is debate within an interpretive community about the “proper” way to read a cover in the context of the magazine’s history (Jenkins and Tandoc 2017, p. 289). It is in these debates, I would argue, that a reader’s identification with the *Rolling Stone* brand and what they believe it stands for is so central to identity and persona construction. As this special issue acknowledges, brands help shape identities around pastimes, lifestyles, places and events and music shapes our public selves. Consumption of magazines and the knowledge they contain contribute to readers’ cultural capital and social constructions of meaning and selfhood (Bourdieu 1993). Ellen Gruber Garvey has likened magazine-reading communities to Benedict Anderson’s “imagined communities”, who share an imagined link with fellow readers they will likely never meet (2004, p. xii). Community interaction occurs in places like letters to the editor and, in a Web 2.0 environment, on magazine websites and social media platforms.

AUSTRALIAN *ROLLING STONE*

The Australian edition of *Rolling Stone* was first published by Phillip Frazer in 1970 as a supplement to *Revolution* magazine and then as a fully-fledged magazine in 1972 (Cock 1979, p. 43; Kent 2002).³ Frazer and Geoff Watson launched Australian *Rolling Stone* in 1972 as a fortnightly newspaper-style publication. They sold the licence to Paul Gardiner, Jane Mathieson, and Paul Comrie Thomson in 1975, and the title moved from Melbourne to a new base in Sydney. The title changed to a monthly circulation in 1982 and it was during this period that contributors like Clinton Walker and Toby Creswell joined the magazine, with Creswell becoming editor in 1986. Paul Gardiner and Jane Mathieson sold the licence to Creswell, Philip Keir and Lesa-Belle Furhagen in 1987 (Boots 2007). In 1992, there was a falling out between Keir, Furhagen and Creswell. Keir took control of *Rolling Stone* while Furhagen and Creswell formed Terraplane Press and launched *Juice* magazine in direct competition with *Rolling Stone* (Boots 2007). Soon after this transformation in early 1993, Kathy Bail became editor of *Rolling*

Stone. Elissa Blake followed in her footsteps as editor during 1999–2004. It is this period, when the magazine was distributed by Next Media, that will be discussed further in this article. In 2008, Next Media was purchased by Worsely Media and *Rolling Stone* was acquired by ACP (later acquired by Bauer Media), in 2013, Matthew Coyte's Paper Riot purchased the title from Bauer Media, but it folded in January 2018 and ceased publication after 46 years (Fitzgerald 2018; Wise 2018; Wallbank 2018). The licence for *Rolling Stone* reverted back to its American owner at that time.

Like so many popular and successful magazines published in Australia, including *Cosmopolitan*, *InStyle*, *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Marie Claire* and many others, *Rolling Stone* was always an American product (with all of the suggestions of colonisation and cultural imperialism that implies). These iconic or legacy titles are licensed internationally by publishing companies for national editors and journalists to tailor to local tastes. Good-quality local journalism content is not cheap to produce (hence the closure of *Dolly*, *Cleo*, *Ralph*, the *Bulletin* and others in recent years) and so part of the editor's role is to balance international and local content. More often than not, covers are imported from the international masthead, as it is more economically viable to use that image rather than style and shoot a local cover. Moreover, the international offices have greater access to major celebrities who make the most bankable cover stars. For local editors, this means there is a constant tension for them to make their publications relevant and "authentic" for their devoted readers in a manner that cannot come at the expense of profitability and circulation.

Choosing the right cover is critical. While the magazine cover has to capture the attention of an impulse buyer, it also acts as the "face of the publication" and ideally conveys a consistent image and message (Jenkins and Tandoc 2017, p. 282). Covers function as "cultural symbols" that are "frequently discussed, reprinted, exhibited, and immortalized in displays, books, and other magazines" (Jenkins and Tandoc 2017, pp. 282–283). This is also true of Australian *Rolling Stone*; for example, an exhibition of Australian *Rolling Stone* covers from 1972 to 2010 was held at the Yarra Ranges Regional Museum in Lilydale in 2013. The exhibition's curator, Kristen Fitzpatrick, declared at the time that "this exhibition chronicles the evolution of our cultural landscape" (Ore 2013). She went on to say that "The influence of *Rolling Stone* extends beyond music – this magazine has been the birthplace of some the greatest careers in photography, journalism, and design" (Ore 2013). The famed Annie Leibovitz, for example, was chief photographer of the American edition for much of the 1970s and early 1980s and locally, eminent photographer Lorrie Graham contributed to Australian *Rolling Stone*.

Matthew Coyte, the 2013 editor-in-chief of Australian *Rolling Stone*, declared of the exhibition:

Rolling Stone is much more than a music magazine – it's about everything that makes music matter, from the political to the personal to the profound. With wit, originality and flair, Rolling Stone covers everything that's important to the leading thinkers among today's young adults. (Ore 2013)

Despite its cultural legacy, by 2018 a print magazine such as Australian *Rolling Stone* was not sufficiently appealing to "young" adults to generate a profit because, as had already been noted, the readership was aging and so it became commercially unviable in an age of digital disruption. The glory days of print magazines are now in the past but their covers remain important cultural artefacts.

KATHY BAIL (EDITOR AUSTRALIAN *ROLLING STONE* 1993–1997)

Australians have a reputation for being the highest consumers of magazines per capita in the world (Bonner, 1997, p. 112). The 1990s were very good times for Australian print magazines as, pre-internet, magazines were the main source of popular culture journalism, where young people could read what was new and fashionable in music, fashion, and the broader cultural scene of films, art, and books. At that time, newspapers and television news bulletins did not report on popular culture and celebrities, so magazine editors had enormous influence over the cultural zeitgeist. Editing a print magazine was an achievable goal for talented and ambitious female journalists. While a university student, Kathy Bail was one of the editors of the University of Melbourne's student paper *Farrago*, after graduating she became deputy editor of *Cinema Papers*, a columnist at *The Australian*, and then *The Independent Monthly*. She was head-hunted to become the first female editor of Australian *Rolling Stone* in late 1992, a role she held for nearly five years, from 1993 to 1997. In her mid-thirties she began working for magazine giant ACP, where she went on to edit *HQ* magazine, the *Bulletin* and *Newsweek*, and the *Australian Financial Review Magazine* before moving into book publishing. She is now CEO of UNSW Press. Clearly, her tenure as editor of *Rolling Stone* is of most interest here.

As her work history attests, although Bail had solid experience writing about arts and culture – cinema, education, and political affairs – before joining *Rolling Stone* she did not have specific experience as a rock journalist. Bail was familiar with the American edition of *Rolling Stone* and the fact that “it was a magazine that was at the intersection of music, culture, fashion, ideas and politics -- it brought all of those elements together. And so my reticence about not being a top music critic was probably balanced by the sense that I had the skills to produce a contemporary magazine about a wide range of subjects”. Given the success of the title under her editorship, Bail's confidence that she could traverse the content was justified. When questioned about the attraction of the title, Bail admits that “one of the appeals about editing the Australian issue of *Rolling Stone* was that it connected me to *Rolling Stone* in New York and to Jann Wenner and the editors there. He employed brilliant writers, many of them women, and so I got to know them as well”. Although none of the other senior editors at the time were women, Bail felt that “there were other women making a contribution in the commercial area of the organisation”. In addition, the kudos of being the editor of the *Rolling Stone* magazine opened doors locally and internationally. As she explains, people take your calls if you are editor of *Rolling Stone*. As editor, Bail took on the ethos and persona of the brand and she enjoyed playing up the persona in interviews: for example, for a story by Chip Rolley that appeared in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, she posed strumming a giant paper-maché guitar (Rolley 1993, p. 176). She recalls it being a “performance” where she playfully embodied the rock god persona and in doing so deconstructed some of the gendered assumptions that came with that persona. Again, this persona plays into the “fantasy life inspired by pop music” that Root foreshadowed so long ago (1986, p.19).

An editor's age is important in constructing a relationship with readers. Bail believes that titles where she worked during the early 1990s, such as *Independent Monthly* and *Rolling Stone*, covered youth culture and matters of great importance to young people that were largely glossed over by mainstream media (like the suicide of Kurt Cobain). As she was just 30 years old when she became editor, Bail understood that younger readers were interested in grunge, social issues – suicide, mental health, drugs – and popular culture and she believed that the responsibility of the alternative media editor was to produce or locate quality journalism about those topics. The agency to include content about these important social issues, exemplifies the power that Ferguson (1983), Gough-Yates (2003) and others have argued give magazine editors enormous influence. Clearly, Bail's persona as editor of *Rolling Stone* was cultivated as a

journalist who was serious about political and social issues and how they might intersect with music culture. Exemplifying the common argument that a key element of editing is to act as a gatekeeper, Bail observes: “I think magazines are a filter – an editor needs that ability to sift, select, filter, and understand what is going to appeal and to matter to your readers. If you are not close to your readers it is very difficult to edit a successful magazine. There has to be that connection with the people featured in the magazine and the people who are reading the magazine. It is a community and the editor plays a significant role in constructing that sense of community”.

Bail’s tenure as editor was launched with Lorrie Graham’s now iconic image of politician Paul Keating wearing Ray Ban sunglasses on the cover. The issue sold extremely well and attracted significant media attention and Bail was invited to speak about the cover on radio, television and in other print publications. Keating, of course, was delighted. Bail admits:

The timing in the lead-up to the 1993 federal election was brilliant. This cover story was also a way of signalling that this was a magazine that was engaged in politics and culture and a magazine aimed at a younger readership, and a magazine not just for the boys but for a much broader readership.

From the beginning, there was intense interest in the fact that Bail, a female, was editing a rock and roll magazine and as a feminist Bail was reluctant to draw further attention to her gender.⁴ She remembers:

I think there was a lot of pressure to perform but I don’t think I ever wanted to talk about that publicly as I just wanted to get on and do the job and so I didn’t really want to dwell on it. At the same time, I was proud to be there as a woman and a feminist. And why not? I’d grown up being told that I could do anything.

Bail’s attempt to minimise attention to her gender, while at the same time “own” her success and support other women, is typical of the difficult position that high-profile female editors and journalists occupy. De-identified surveys and studies of female journalists (where respondents can answer truthfully without fear of reprisal) reveal a deeply sexist “blokes club” in the media, as Louise North’s (2016) scholarship reveals. Given the persistence of this culture, women have been advised to “lean in” (as Sheryl Sandberg famously advised) and to adopt more “masculine” personas. However, this emphasis on “fixing women” (as Catherine Fox (2017) puts it) places responsibility for cultural change on the shoulders of women rather than men.

Whether she liked it or not, Bail’s gender attracted attention from her journalist peers and from readers. Bail explains that she understood that as editor it was a critical part of her role to interact with her readers and advertisers and respond to their mail. She describes receiving many entertaining letters but also a number of abusive, threatening, and misogynistic missives. Bail concedes that because of her profile as editor she attracted this unwelcome attention, but she resolved to ignore the abuse as she wanted to steer attention away from her gender. Bail kept her persona and ethos centred on her reputation as a journalist with expertise and authority and tried to take the focus off her gender while at the same time promoting women in music. This required skill and diplomacy.

Bail’s editorship gave her significant cultural cachet and power that she was able to employ to promote other women. The mid-90s witnessed the birth of the internet, geek girls, and grrrl bands and Bail was at the centre of the action given her editorship and her feminist sensibilities. She put together a book entitled *DIY Feminism* (Bail 1996) as a passion project she worked on after hours. In that collection, she writes:

I was appointed editor of Rolling Stone in late 1992. While there was interest in my editorial plans, most of the excitement centred on my gender, which I always tried to play down. I wanted to prove myself as an editor first. It wasn't always easy because there was a lot of discussion in the media about sexism in the music industry and there was pressure for me to speak "for women". I felt more comfortable doing that when I started to meet some DIY-style women in the Australian music industry who were leading by example (p. 12).

DIY Feminism drew attention to the issues that women active in music and the arts were engaging with and Bail became increasingly passionate about encouraging and facilitating girls and young women to engage with technology. On the back of that publication, she was invited to give the annual Pamela Denoon lecture in Canberra in 1998. The title of her speech was, "Log on or drop out: women in a wired world". This was remarkably prescient as few back in 1998 could foresee the way that technology would transform workplaces.⁵

When asked about the possibility of advancement, not just at *Rolling Stone* but in publishing and the media in Australia generally, Bail reflects that "editors are chosen because of their cultural fit", as are editors-in-chief, publishers and CEOs. She continues diplomatically:

Publishers and proprietors tend to employ editors in their own image. They are not actively seeking diverse views and they are not identifying people who will challenge them in a more overt way at this senior level.

This observation is supported by Fox's research into recruitment in the media (2017, p.68). Bail's discreet observations about sexism in the music industry and in the media are echoed candidly by her successor, Elissa Blake. Both women's experiences illustrate exactly what feminist media scholars like Anne O'Brien (2017), Carolyn M Byerly (2013), and Karen Ross (2014) have argued: "Women continue to be under-represented in the decision-making structures of major media organisations" and this has been "clearly established at global, European, and national levels" (O'Brien 2017, p. 836). The situation in Australia mirrors global trends (North 2013 & 2016). These studies back up their claims with solid empirical data about the paucity of women in senior management roles, CEO roles, sitting on board and the gender pay gap. Happily, Bail is now a CEO and board member of several prestigious institutions.

ELISSA BLAKE (DEPUTY EDITOR 1997–1999 AND EDITOR 1999–2004).

Given Bail's success as editor of *Rolling Stone*, she served as a role model for up-and-coming female journalists aspiring to adopt the responsibilities and persona of rock and roll editor. After serving as deputy editor from 1997 to 1999, Elissa Blake was the second woman to take on the role as editor of Australian *Rolling Stone* (1999–2004). Like Bail, Blake completed a degree, majoring in literature before moving into journalism. When I spoke with Blake about how she came to edit *Rolling Stone*, she explained that she moved into magazines very early after some time as a newspaper journalist at *The Age* showed her there was no avenue of advancement for women there. She said that in looking around the newsroom, it was clear that capable women were not being promoted and that they were stuck in relatively low-level roles for up to a decade. For women who left to start families, most returned to more junior or diminished roles. Understandably, as a long-term career trajectory, this was unappealing. Blake went on to explain that:

Being the editor of The Age or the Sydney Morning Herald was unthinkable for a woman in the 90s – even being the deputy editor or the news editor. I felt that women were able to be the TV guide editor, the lifestyle editor. There was even a women's editor, which was considered important at the time, and maybe a

features editor or arts editor if you are lucky – so those sorts of mid-level section editing roles were what women could strive towards. They were never going to be the state politics editor or the foreign affairs editor or the news editor: they were all considered roles for men. That was never said out loud, but it was demonstrated in the office.

Blake's observations are supported by feminist research on women and leadership in the media, and in gendered newsrooms in particular. North, for example, states that: "Women journalists in the Australian news media are typically located en masse in lower-paid, lower-status positions than their male colleagues" (North 2013, p. 333). Moreover, studies by van Zoonen (1988, 1989), Melin-Higgins (2004) and O'Brien (2017) all report that newsrooms are particularly hostile work environments for women. Van Zoonen reports that women who work in newsrooms are less likely than their male counterparts to have children (1988, p. 37). Van Zoonen's research also confirms that women are relegated to "soft" news and men to "hard" news (1988, p. 38), which Blake's experience confirms. More recent studies that are global in scope, like Marjan de Bruin and Karen Ross's (2004) *Gender and newsroom cultures* and Carolyn Bryerly's (2013) *The Palgrave international handbook of women and journalism* report that despite increased numbers of female journalists, women continue to be marginalised into "soft" news and women's magazines. Even more recently, O'Brien's 2017 research into media in Ireland was similarly pessimistic about the number of leadership roles for women.

There is a tradition of women editing women's magazines but, as Bail and Blake's experience proves, it remains difficult for even the most talented women to reach roles above the level of editor in news or general interest magazines. Blake explains that she saw a move into magazines as a way to pivot her newspaper knowledge and experience into a different area of journalism and that: "*Rolling Stone* was a very unique magazine and the *Bulletin* was another one ... a kind of generalist magazine that wasn't about gossip or baking cakes". Blake started writing freelance pieces for Kathy Bail while still working full-time at *The Age* and she eventually relocated to Sydney and to full-time employment at *Rolling Stone*. She served as deputy editor under Andrew Humphreys, before assuming the editor role, aged 27. Blake feels that Bail paved the way for her and that it was not such an issue that a woman was the editor, but she does reveal that there was "still a lot of everyday sexism in terms of men casually talking down to you" and the "small stuff" that every woman endures in the workplace. As previously noted, Lashua, Spracklen and Long argue that "music reproduces the inequalities and struggles of the late modern world" (2014, p. 3) and this casual sexism is a case in point. Rock stars, she admits, sometimes treated her like a fan or veered off topic and so her priority was always to remind them that she was conducting a professional interview and to maintain respect and authority in the exchange.

Like Bail, Blake was focused on cultivating a journalistic persona that was authentic and had gravitas. On the scarcity of female editors, Blake explains:

Internationally, I think Kathy and I were the only female editors and Jancee Dunn as a writer and there were a couple of other freelance writers and so they had some female writers who were really well regarded in America. But it was interesting that there were no female Rolling Stone editors in the States. There were plenty of female support staff in all different areas, but it is those decision-making roles that are difficult to get into.

Again, Blake's experience is reinforced by the previously cited feminist media studies research that confirms this disparity.

Editing Australian *Rolling Stone* clearly did not come with the same perks that editing the American edition provided. In a 2007 interview with the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Blake spoke candidly about the challenges of working at *Rolling Stone*: long hours, no overtime, impossible budgets, and pressure to improve profits by featuring bikini-clad young women on the covers (Boots 2007). In 2019, she recounts that “both news and rock and roll are very male dominated at the highest levels and so I didn’t ever have a feeling of comfort or entitlement”. She expects she probably would have been paid more if male and this is supported by North’s findings about the gender pay gap for Australian journalists (2013, p. 338). Catherine Fox’s *Stop Fixing Women* (2017) and *Women Kind* (2018) co-authored with Kirstin Ferguson also provide evidence about the persistence of the gender pay gap in Australia. The 2017 high-profile Australian case of former magazine editor and now television presenter Lisa Wilkinson accusing her employer, Channel Nine, of underpaying her in relation to her male co-host is a case in point (Fitzsimmons 2017).

Despite some challenges, there were, obviously, many positives aspects of being the editor of *Rolling Stone* and Blake clearly enjoyed her time at the title. She explains that there was a “fantasy” element:

In the world of Rolling Stone: in the music world all of the record companies and the film companies and the entertainment business area, it was very high status. The Rolling Stone editor would have priority over many of the other smaller fan publications because it was such a big name. To be fair, that very big name was coming from America as Australian Rolling Stone was tiny but no one knew that!

Budgets were modest and most travel to events, awards, or tours (if it happened at all) was paid by record companies seeking publicity for their artists. Blake took annual leave and paid her own fares to visit *Rolling Stone* colleagues in New York, Madrid and Berlin. However, as Blake told a journalist from *The Age*, broad support from advertisers at the time ensured that they could write authentic content in the style that made *Rolling Stone* famous (Mangan 2002).

Ethos for a *Rolling Stone* editor is equated with “clout” and being “cool”, “heavyweight”, and having a “massive reputation”, all of which add to an editor’s authority. Blake explains: “*Rolling Stone* also had some clout with politics because people like Kathy had put Paul Keating on the cover and so people of a certain age (baby boomers) felt that *Rolling Stone* as a brand was cool and heavyweight, which was an unusual combination. And so, politicians who were in their 40s at the time would take a phone call from *Rolling Stone*”. Blake explains that they were also considered more heavyweight than titles like *Smash Hits* because *Rolling Stone* covered politics and social affairs (drugs, homelessness, mental health, suicide). Younger readers would read the title for the music coverage and older readers (baby boomers) also expected news and current affairs. Within the industry, she believes that they were accorded the same status as publications like *Cleo* and *Cosmopolitan* who dwarfed their sales but, she believes, that “as a brand it [*Rolling Stone*] punched above its weight. If you look at it in Australia at the time it was a small publication with a massive reputation”.

Blake recalls being very proud of the content that she produced for the title, particularly in the 1990s when she was writing a substantial volume of material about youth social affairs. However, as she explains, the quest for higher circulation in the early 2000s was a challenging one for a female editor as the American title increasingly featured more lightweight content that sexualised young women. This was particularly the case after British lad magazine editor Ed Needham was recruited as editor in the USA in 2002 (he left in 2004 to head the lad magazine *Maxim*). Needham was replaced by James Kaminsky, a former *Playboy* editorial director, and so the editorial focus of the title internationally continued a shift from serious music, political and

social affairs reporting to content previously the domain of lad magazines (Lambiase 2005, p. 2). Blake admits, with a young male readership in Australia, “when you do the figures on what gives you higher circulation the covers tend to be half-naked women and I think, unfortunately for me, while I was there *Rolling Stone* America moved to doing popstars and film stars that were in their underwear. I was always very against those covers but they did do well and so I tended to be shouted down”. She explains that they were competing with lad magazines like *FHM*, *Maxim*, and *Ralph* and “they were all putting bikini-dressed popstars or film stars on the cover and so we started to compete in that market”. Dapin’s observations about editing *Ralph* during this period echo Blake’s. Listed in his “Ten Immutable Rules of Magazine Publishing” were number one “Beautiful Women Sell Magazines” and number three “Celebrity Nudes Sell Out Magazines” (2004, p. 236). However, these techniques only sold magazines effectively before celebrity sites and internet pornography became widely available in the 2000s. As Crewe’s (2003) research documents, these lad magazines were hugely popular in the 1990s but just as quickly as they rose, they disappeared when pornography became widely available on the internet and on personal devices like smart phones and tablets.⁶

Blake’s experience of the changes occurring at that time are verified by at least two comprehensive longitudinal studies of covers of *Rolling Stone*. A study by Hatton and Trautner (2011), analysed 931 *Rolling Stone* covers from 1967 to 2009 to investigate whether Western popular culture had become more “sexualized” or “pornified” and whether women, in particular, were increasingly hypersexualised on magazine covers. Their study proves that “sexualized images of men and women have increased, though women continue to be more frequently sexualized than men” and that “women are increasingly likely to be ‘hypersexualized’ but men are not” (Hatton and Trautner 2011, p. 256). Hatton and Trautner claim that factors such as “body position, extent of nudity, textual cues” (2011, p. 257) and other related elements “point to a narrowing of the culturally acceptable ways for ‘doing’ femininity as presented in popular media” (p. 256). They found that by the 2000s “just 17% of women were nonsexualized” (Hatton and Trautner 2011, p. 270) and that there were “more than 10 times the number of hypersexualized images of women than men” (Hatton and Trautner 2011, p. 273). Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera are mentioned as specific case studies and regular covers of those artists along with those featuring Jennifer Aniston in the 2000s loomed large in Blake’s memory.

A second study of *Rolling Stone* covers conducted by Pompper, Lee and Lerner (2009) found the same result. They found that “males appeared three times more often than females on the *Rolling Stone* magazine covers, that females were nude twice as often as males, and that ethnic minorities featured ... infrequently” (p. 286). As Blake remembers it in Australia:

For about five years during the lad mags period there was not much we could do to compete; but Britney Spears in a bikini was very hot and Christina Aguilera and Jennifer Aniston were very hot. We had Jennifer Aniston on the cover three times a year and this was during the Friends period. I think that the staff could just about tolerate Britney or Christina in a bikini because they were still recording artists and so there was a fit, but Jennifer Aniston was a TV star and putting a TV star on the cover of Rolling Stone made no sense to us.

It did not make sense to some letter-writing readers either who, as a form of epideictic rhetoric, wrote to the American magazine to praise or blame the editor for the choice of covers. Jacqueline Lambiase conducted a rhetorical analysis of 51 letters sent to US *Rolling Stone* between 1996 and 2001 in relation to sexualised and revealing cover images (Lambiase 2005, p. 5). Her study revealed a predictable schism between male and female readers, with women typically complaining about sexism and objectification and young male readers expressing gratitude to the publication for offering up images of their fantasy figures in swimsuits or

underwear. Some readers, regardless of their gender, failed to see the relevance of a television star gracing the cover of a *Rolling Stone* magazine.

Blake explains that it was a “tricky time” and that as licensees of the *Rolling Stone* franchise they were not obliged to run the same covers but, perhaps frustratingly, Aniston sold a lot of magazines and so Blake improvised and ran with the Aniston image but included smaller photos of Australian bands down the side of the cover. This, I suggest is a powerful metaphor for the hierarchical relationship of American popular culture, which relegates Australian culture to the margins. Blake remembers being particularly disturbed by the sexualised way that young women were described in terms that infantilised them and sexualised them at the same time. Happily, for Blake, just as Lambiase (2005) reports about the American title, there was some pushback from readers locally who objected to that content and Blake did her best to ensure that the journalism produced locally did not have superficial content about relationships, beauty routines and make-up and instead focused on the artists’ work.

Notwithstanding the pressure to entice readers with celebrity covers and the pressure to attract advertisers, Blake worked hard behind the scenes to ensure that the magazine had credibility despite what the cover images might suggest. As Milkie observes, and as Blake’s experience demonstrates:

Editors are operating within and are a key part of both organizational, market, and institutional constraints and symbolic constraints as they negotiate the multiple voices and demands about the portrayal of femininity. The cultural gatekeepers’ role involves a complex weaving of the input from the audience, including critical feedback of the images they produce, with the practices of the organization and the larger industry connected to it. They must balance all of this with their own career and job demands and with rigid deadlines. It is not easy. (Milkie 2002, p. 855)

The lad-magazine era of the 1990s was clearly an especially challenging one for female editors.

For Bail and Blake their visibility as women in a male domain was a key factor that they had to negotiate while working at *Rolling Stone*. Not only do female editors need to negotiate portrayals of femininity on their pages but they also need to negotiate how they themselves will perform femininity on the job. When editing a rock and roll magazine like *Rolling Stone*, there is an expectation that female editors will embody the wardrobe and persona of a “rock chick”. Blake explained that it was a casual workplace and so she wore jeans and t-shirt like her male colleagues. She was, however “aware of that rock chick vibe” and as much as she liked dressing casually she felt that “as a female editor being called a rock chick was somehow diminishing”. As she notes, the men were not called “rock boys”. She recalls, “I think there was an expectation that the editor of *Rolling Stone* would be rock and roll and not be a serious journalist. So, the serious journalist in you was a little bit suppressed and you might have worn a bit more eye-liner or a leather jacket and looking back on that I think that was kind of silly”. She is grateful, however, that she was not editor of a major glossy women’s magazine as “the level of grooming that they had to do was incredible: I think they had to look photo ready at all times”. She says, “I think those expectations were less for me, but they were still there”. She admits:

I never felt that I lived up to what the editor of Rolling Stone was meant to be ...When people found out they would be OH MY GOD! And there was a look on their face like maybe I wasn’t old enough or cool enough or I didn’t wear leather trousers. I think there is a really big expectation of what the editor of Rolling Stone should be and whatever that idea that people had in their heads wasn’t me and probably wasn’t Kathy either. I think that there is the confusion that you are

meant to be a little bit rock and roll yourself even though you are actually a publishing professional. It would almost be like dress-ups or make believe if you started acting like a rock star.

Along with her gender, Blake's relative youth was clearly a factor that was noticed, but typically the editors of other magazines published at the time, such as *Dolly*, *Girlfriend*, *Countdown Magazine*, *Cleo* and *Cosmopolitan*, were all edited by young women in their twenties. In separate interviews with the editors of those magazines the former editors all looked back with wonder at the budgets and responsibilities they were entrusted with at that age.^{7,8} Youth is valued in the media and it becomes increasingly challenging for women, in particular, to argue their worth as they age. This complex ageism is backed up by memoirs, including Tracey Spicer's (2017) *The Good Girl Stripped Bare*, and scholarship about female journalists working in the Australian media where there is significant evidence that ageism is rife (North 2014, 2016). Blake was clearly astute as she realised that for a brief time her relative youth as commented on before she was very quickly deemed too old for the job. If we tie Blake's experiences back to music and persona, then Root's (1986, p. 16) advice about ethos, character, and reputation are useful here in relation to the seriousness with which Blake and her colleagues reflect upon and negotiate their role as media professionals and journalists. Blake says:

We would have discussions in our office where we would remind each other that we work in the publishing industry and not the music industry and so let's behave like proper journalists and not behave like baby rock stars. I didn't really want to be famous myself. We tried to keep our distance and we tried to be respected and respectable and so we weren't acting like a rock star.

The contrast with male editors like James Brown (editor of UK lad magazines *Loaded* and *GQ*) in the 1990s in the UK could not be more stark. Indeed, Ben Crewe's *Representing Men* includes many anecdotes about Brown's career and celebrity status, including Brown's statement to the *Guardian*: "I don't know about the others ... but I'm a fucking star" (2003, 118).

Blake left *Rolling Stone* when she was 34 and pregnant with her first child and she now works in media at a university as she knew it would be "utterly incompatible to be editor of *Rolling Stone* and be pregnant and have children". Apart from the practical considerations of maternity and childcare, presumably a married woman with children would not possess the "cool enough" factor that informed the rock chick editor persona. There was no likelihood of getting maternity leave and no provision for carer's leave and any absences would put impossible pressure on what was already skeleton staffing. As North's research demonstrates, "a journalist must give 'unlimited time to the job'. It's a response understood through a neo-liberal discourse, where the ideal worker is free, autonomous and flexible" (2016, 320). That flexibility includes being able to drink and socialise with clients and colleagues after hours. Blake makes it clear that there was no overt discrimination but rather that the editor of *Rolling Stone* was expected to be out seven nights a week at events, movie screenings, and gigs and there was a drinking culture associated with the music and entertainment industry. Therefore, the culture itself was discriminatory. Again, the persona of music magazine editor is conflated with that of the swaggering (and potentially staggering) rock performer rather than that of observer and reporter. Motherhood and the editorship were incompatible but, Blake reflects, "how radical would it have been if I had pushed for maternity leave, and demanded flexibility and more days off?" Since 2011, paid maternity leave is now a right in Australian workplaces but in small organisations it is still extremely challenging for women to claim the benefits and flexibility to which they are entitled. As other studies about women in leadership in the media have demonstrated, many of the women in more senior roles do not have children (and often they are paid less than their male counterparts; North 2013, p. 338). In an article addressing the

“motherhood dilemma in journalism” in Australia, North concludes that newsrooms remain a “boys club” (2016, 315). In an attempt to ensure that another woman could break into the “boys club”, Blake made sure that Rachel Newman (then a casual staff member), had the training necessary to take the editorial reins in the future.

CONCLUSION

The period that Kathy Bail and Elissa Blake spent as editors of Australian *Rolling Stone* in the 1990s and early 2000s was an important time for *Rolling Stone* magazine internationally, but also for the magazine industry in general. As we have seen, the 1990s heralded the era of lad magazines, and hypersexualised images of young female celebrities became the norm given that, as this special issue recognises, “contemporary capitalism demands and facilitates the pervasive experience of musician personas as brands”. Young female musicians and entertainers recognised that in order to sell themselves in this marketplace as personas or brands, performing as a cover girl was expected. For female editors and feminists making decisions about covers and cover lines, this made the job challenging and required a form of DIY feminism. While some compromise was required on covers, Bail and Blake focused on music journalism and political and social reporting to ensure that their magazines and their characters and reputations had substance. They had no ambition to become rock stars, rock chicks or celebrities themselves. As so many studies about sexism in the media and its impact on leadership positions for women have demonstrated, working life in the media is difficult when female journalists are also judged on their appearance and the persona they perform in the workplace.

The magazine climate since the global financial crisis of 2007 (with reverberations felt long after the initial collapse), the launch of the iPhone in 2007, and the subsequent introduction of tablets like iPads in 2010 (along with the rise of Instagram and other social media platforms) has placed enormous pressure on traditional music and popular culture magazines like *Rolling Stone*. Magazines are now much more than print publications: they are multi-platform content providers operating around the clock rather than with, what now seem like “quaint”, monthly deadlines. News about music and musicians is expected on a 24-hour news cycle and this puts even more pressure on editors, who as Bail predicted back in 1998, would be required to “log on or drop out”. Technological change and digital disruptions mean that musicians and bands can now sculpt their own personas online and control their own media (to a large extent) and so they are less reliant on the goodwill and the gatekeeping role of magazine editors. As Marshall and Barbour signal with the launch of this journal, “Something quite extraordinary has shifted over the last twenty years that has led to this intensive focus on constructing strategic masks of identity” (2015, p. 1). In the age of the selfie, musicians are still preening for a camera and posing provocatively but they have more control over the persona that is being constructed. *Rolling Stone* Australia was one of the casualties of the enormous changes that have swept the publishing landscape in the last decade and magazines and magazine editors reinvent themselves in what could be called the era of DIY publishing.

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END NOTES

¹ Interestingly, in that memoir Dapin states that at one time one of his goals was to be the editor of Australian *Rolling Stone* (p. 107).

² The interviews with Bail and Blake were conducted as part of a broader project relating to the role of the Australian magazine editor. The interviews were in-depth interviews of approximately one hour, with open-ended questions about one topic and so they were a type of qualitative research that could loosely be called 'oral history' (see Patricia Leavy's *Oral History*, Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 9–13).

³ A comprehensive history of the early years of the magazine and its relationship with Frazer's *Revolution*, *Go Get*, *Core*, *High Times* and *The Digger* in the years 1966–1974 is available in a 2002 thesis by University of Canberra student David Martin Kent.

⁴ This strategy to ignore or neutralize attention to gender is one commonly adopted by women in the workplace and it is discussed at length by Kirstin Ferguson and Catherine Fox in *Women Kind* (2018).

⁵ Interestingly, *Vogue* Australia now holds coding workshops for girls and women and runs a *Vogue* Codes series of events and so they are similarly focused on encouraging women to take a more serious approach to technology.

⁶ Smart phones like the iPhone were released in 2007 and tablets like the iPad in 2010.

⁷ Interviews conducted in 2017–2019 with former editors of these magazines like Sarah Wilson, Sandra Hook, Marina Go, Justine Cullen, Ita Buttrose, Pat Ingram and Paula Joye will soon appear in *Queens of Print* (2019).

⁸ Thank you to one of the anonymous reviewers for pointing out the significance of age and ageism in relation to persona.

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