

# Sticky Fingers

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The Life and Times of Jann Wenner  
and *Rolling Stone* Magazine

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Wenner, “gave me a good and finer appreciation of the sexuality of the guys up there on the stage, and I could understand that in a way that other people didn’t, to understand how sexual this whole thing was. All of rock and roll is sex, defined. I got it more. And I could see it; I was open to it. I was enjoying it. Much like the girls, and much like the guys who may not admit it, but it was really sexual.”

Exploiting the talents of Annie Leibovitz, who was in love with his wife, Wenner could divine the homosexual subtext of a hetero rock culture through acts of image making, personally manning the turnstile to his distinct American moment—*Rolling Stone*’s cover. Leibovitz’s nude photograph of teen idol David Cassidy on the cover in 1972—with a *Playboy*-inspired centerfold inside—was a signal moment, selling thousands of copies of *Rolling Stone* and establishing a new standard for self-exposure (and self-reinvention). It was also something Jann Wenner enjoyed looking at. Wenner turned the cover of *Rolling Stone* into a rock-and-roll confession box, with Paul Simon, George Harrison, Fleetwood Mac, James Taylor, Carly Simon, and Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young all eager to climb inside the Oxford border and expose their dramas, and very often their flesh, so as to be sanctified by the essential *self-seriousness* of *Rolling Stone*. And as the cover became the prime sales pitch for selling records, and the prime sales pitch of Wenner’s magazine, Wenner made *Rolling Stone* into a cultural event, adding vibrant colors (a rainbow border around a fedora-wearing Truman Capote), moody studio portraiture (Kris Kristofferson in shadow), winking humor (a Vargas girl riding a silver dildo for a Steely Dan profile), adventurous illustration (Daniel Ellsberg as a Roman bust), and liberal doses of insouciant sexuality whenever possible (Wenner commanded Annie Leibovitz to make Linda Ronstadt look like a “Tijuana whore”).

None of this was exactly unique to *Rolling Stone*—art director George Lois pioneered pop irony at *Esquire*; Hugh Hefner liberated sexuality in *Playboy*—but *Rolling Stone* authenticated celebrity in a new way. Under Rick Griffin’s banner, Wenner could place Dustin Hoffman, Jane Fonda, Bette Midler, Richard Pryor, George

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In 1971, Jann Wenner heard a delectable rumor: David Cassidy, the fresh-faced twenty-one-year-old heartthrob who played the eldest brother in ABC-TV's *Partridge Family*, was desperate to break out of his teenybopper career. So Wenner went on a months-long campaign to court Cassidy for *Rolling Stone*, offering a surefire way to wreck his image. "They sent me limousines; they put me up in the Plaza hotel," Cassidy later recalled. "They spent months trying to get me to do a cover."

When Wenner convinced Cassidy to cooperate, he assigned the story to Danny Fields, who was thoroughly smitten with the sweetly grinning idol. When Fields filed a story in the fall of 1971, Wenner initially praised it in letters. But later he told Fields the piece was too fawning, and he reassigned it to Robin Green, who was getting a reputation for taking a sharp scalpel to her subjects. (Another reason Wenner might have canceled Fields's assignment was the sudden emergence of the "Pinck on Wenner" tape at a time when he was getting back with Jane; Fields never had a byline in *Rolling Stone*.)

While Green was on the story, Wenner went to New York to meet Cassidy and his entourage at the Plaza. That afternoon, Wenner invited Green back to the Sherry-Netherland, and when she got there, Wenner was stoned on Quaaludes and in the mood for sex. "There wasn't a lot of chitchat," Green said. She would write one of the classic *Rolling Stone* profiles, depicting the cosseted teen idol, stoned on pot, watching an episode of his own TV show: "Watch,

here's where I do my pouting shtick. I always have to do one of these things." But it was the photograph by Annie Leibovitz that would go thermonuclear: David Cassidy naked on his back, arms behind his head, a look of dreamy postcoital satisfaction on his face. Danny Fields said he gave Cassidy his first snort of cocaine moments before he dropped the heartthrob off with Leibovitz. Recalled Wenner, "When Annie brought that back, it was like, 'Oh my God, if you cut it here and it's just a little bit of pubic hair, and he's naked, it's like a *Playboy* Bunny. It's unbelievable, you get a teen star to do that? It's huge. That was something very special that only Annie could have done."

Wenner immediately set about publicizing the picture of the "darling of the bubble-gum set," issuing a press release saying, "Burt Reynolds did it for *Cosmopolitan*. Now David Cassidy is doing it for *Rolling Stone*."

At first, Leibovitz was startled by Wenner's salacious salesmanship. "This makes me feel rotten," she wrote to him in a memo. Wenner not only put it on the cover of *Rolling Stone*—titled "Naked Lunch Box: The Business of David Cassidy," alongside a William Burroughs interview—but also included a pullout centerfold of Cassidy in imitation of *Playboy*. For Wenner, the gambit worked: As *Rolling Stone* reported later, Woody's Adult Books of Hollywood rush ordered a thousand copies as Cassidy's mother flew to Mexico to escape the press glare. "Jann Wenner told me years later that until John Lennon died and he was on the cover that week, it was the biggest-selling, the fastest-selling issue," Cassidy said.

The results were more than Cassidy bargained for. For the next year, young fans would wave the poster in the air at his concerts. "It pissed a lot of people off," recalled Cassidy. "It pissed Coca-Cola off, it pissed Columbia Pictures off, it pissed my manager off, it pissed everybody who was really profiting from the business of David Cassidy off."

At least one part of the story was tabloid froth: Annie Leibovitz's original uncut photo never actually showed David Cassidy's full plumage. "I wasn't interested in the penis," she said.