



On the trail with

THE SUPERFANS

What makes professional women abandon everything for a glimpse of their idols? **EMILY GULLA** goes on tour with them to find out >

Photographs ANTONIO PETRONZIO

Natasha glances down at her watch quickly, not wanting to peel her eyes away from the glass doors in front of her. She doesn't have very long; it's approaching 8am and a familiar weariness has settled within her bones. She's been standing outside Radio 2's studios in London since last night, tightly wrapped up in layers of scarves and jumpers, guarding her from the frosty night.

Finally, at just past the hour, she gets a glimpse of the person she's been waiting for – sandy-haired and emerging from a black Mercedes. "Gary!" she yells, waving her arms in his direction. "I need to go to work!"

The Take That frontman spots her, flashes a smile and comes over. He knows what she wants, recognising her from the 28 *other* selfies he's taken with her over the years, and the countless times he's seen her perched front row at his gigs.

Selfie acquired, Natasha dashes to make the 40-minute journey to her office, where she's a senior administrator in the NHS. Sneaking into work before anyone can see her, she



Natasha often goes to gigs before work

sprays some Batiste into her hair and changes her blouse for the 10am start. With no sleep at all, she embarks on an eight-hour shift, before she tracks down Take That *again*, ahead of their performance at the Royal Albert Hall.

You think you know superfans. They're teenage girls, screaming at concerts, sweaty and crying, desperate for their idol to catch their eye among the masses. But walking past the groups gathered outside gig venues and radio stations, you'll see not just the teen crowd, but people of *all* ages – many of whom, like



PREVIOUS PAGE, LEFT TO RIGHT: EMILY WEARS JUMPER, HER OWN DRESS, TOPSHOP; SANDALS, OFFICE. NATASHA WEARS T-SHIRT AND TRAINERS, HER OWN JEANS, BONPRIX. MEG WEARS TRACKSUIT, ADIDAS; TOP, LOOT VINTAGE; TRAINERS, OFFICE. NENEH WEARS T-SHIRT AND TRAINERS, HER OWN JEANS, BONPRIX

Natasha, 31, juggles their obsessions with full-time careers and the demands of friends and family.

Yes, they may be loitering in the doorways of hotels and queuing for hours outside concert halls, but they're also sitting next to you in your office, working in the shops and restaurants you go to, and standing opposite you on your morning commute. And I would know because, secretly, I'm one too.

THE PRICE OF FAME

It's with a sense of familiarity that I find myself jostled by a 50-strong crowd at 8am in the morning, shivering in paper-thin tights. I used to scour social media for One Direction's hotel details and skip school to await Ed Sheeran's arrival at the BBC studios. Now I'm here, outside Capital FM in London's Leicester Square, to find out what makes women like Natasha – and myself – give up their time, money and creature comforts, just for a glimpse of their hero.

The throng simmers with resentment. If they get a whiff that I don't love Miley Cyrus quite like they do, I could be in trouble. There's the short, scowling fan who keeps shouting at us all to "stay in line" each time someone shuffles a few steps to avoid the early morning lorries dropping off supplies to the surrounding restaurants.

Behind me I hear two male fans grumbling. "F*cking autograph sellers," says one. "And the paparazzi..." replies his friend.

Later, I find out that Michael and Adam have both been waiting here since 3am – and they're unhappy about these "professionals" getting in the way of "real" fans' celebrity interactions.

The paparazzi chew gum lazily and chat to one another, their cameras slung around their necks. The autograph hunters begin to unwrap brand-new *Hannah Montana* vinyls from cellophane, ready to be signed. Next to them is a middle-aged man standing beside the door with his hands on the shoulders of what I assume to be his young daughter, ready to push her forward at any second. He too, I'm told, makes a living from doing this, touting signed merchandise online for profit. The daughter, her hair tied in a cascading ponytail, is "bait".

"I think that when you sign up [to be a fan] you should get a membership card," says Michael, arms folded as he glares towards the door. He wants something that proves his real-fan status for the times when the genuine can't be differentiated from the greedy.

But in this instance, even a Miley face tattoo

wouldn't be enough. Capital staff emerge and call out a handful of names, inviting individually selected fans inside to meet her – each of whom has been carefully chosen by

"I once went to eight gigs in nine days," she tells me

the singer's PA for their homages to Miley online. Perhaps the "membership card" that Michael envisages now takes the form of a Miley-dedicated

social-media account. Like these die-hard Miley fans, Natasha's love for Take That comes above most things. It's the reason she continues with her NHS job. "I've been able to go crazy because I work shifts and weekends, so I can get extra annual

leave days off in order to feed my habit," she tells me. The furthest she's travelled for Take That is more than 4,000 miles to Dubai, just to meet them at the airport. For this tour, to celebrate their 30th anniversary, she's been to 18 gigs in the UK alone, with more to come in Europe. And she'll often camp for 48 hours outside the venues in order to be the first to enter. She once went to eight gigs in nine days, putting her NHS lanyard on between shows. "I'd often get back home at midnight and have to start work at 8am," she says. "It was really exhausting but I'm so glad I did it"

With concert tickets becoming notoriously expensive, plus travel and hotel costs to contend with, it's not a cheap hobby to fund. "It's basically £200 a time for a front-row >



Emily, 21, kisses Harry (in cardboard form)

seat, or sitting in the first couple of rows,” says Natasha. “*Wonderland*, the previous tour, was two years ago. I put everything on credit cards and dealt with it later. I think it must have been about £12,000 in total.”

Neneh’s colleagues see a charismatic, smiley woman, whose ability to talk to anyone makes her ideal for her job as a studio tour guide at a popular tourist attraction. But she keeps her identity as a BTS superfan very well hidden. She’s blocked colleagues on social media so that she can skip shifts to see the K-pop boy band, but also to avoid being teased – she was once mocked so much that she ended up crying in the toilets at work.

Previously she’s fallen out with her best friend

because she flew to Korea to see BTS without Neneh, and her mum definitely doesn’t understand: “She’s never loved anything as much as I love boy bands,” Neneh tells me.

Like Natasha, Neneh, 27, has travelled the world for BTS, going to their concerts in Paris and New York. “I was like ‘YOLO!’ and bought plane tickets. When I came home, I was instantly poor.” She once spent £5,000 on flights to Korea, not to see the band perform, but simply to see the country they hail from. “I did the BTS Tour around Seoul, where you can go to places they’ve been and restaurants they’ve eaten at,” she tells me before

“I was like ‘YOLO!’ and bought plane tickets”

thrusting a digitally altered photo of her cuddled up next to her favourite BTS member, Suga, into my hands. She has not met any of the BTS boys in real life, but

this CGI picture feels special to her. She travelled to a studio in Paris for it, and tells me many fans queue overnight for the same privilege.



HOPELESSLY DEVOTED

As I wait in vain for Miley to emerge, people come up and ask us what we are doing. When they hear, most roll their eyes before walking away. Ever since the Beatlemania of the ’60s, fandom has been dismissed and sneered at. Every superfan I’ve spoken to has tales of being called “pathetic,” “stupid” or “crazy.” Most were reluctant to speak to me at first, as they were so used to being portrayed in the press in a bad light. When I confessed I was once a superfan, they began to open up. I spent the two days before my GCSE English exam huddled behind a barrier outside a five-star hotel in Manchester hoping to catch a glimpse of (the then-whole) One Direction. Three years later, I would finally achieve my dream of meeting Harry Styles, spotting him outside Radio 1 in

London. I’d waited since 6am, informed of his location by myriad Twitter “update” accounts I’d programmed to send notifications directly to my phone. I was powered by a night of broken sleep (and pure excitement) and four years’ worth of impatient anticipation.

Neneh was also there on that day. Before she became dedicated to BTS, she had routinely camped outside Harry’s shows, once for six nights at a time. Somehow, being a superfan is less about the actual stars – they can be interchangeable. (When Take That split, for example, the Jonas Brothers filled the void for Natasha.) Rather, it’s more about the action of dedicating your time to someone you idolise, having somebody to cling to when things get tough. It’s no different to buying a season ticket to the football or queuing overnight for the release of a new computer game – things that thousands of people do across the globe, rarely attracting the same judgement and dismissal that female music fans do.

For Natasha, becoming a superfan coincided with the breakdown of her relationship. “When I split up with my ex, apart from my family, I had no one – no friends whatsoever,” Natasha tells me. “Joining [online] Take That discussion groups and finding like-minded people was part of the attraction.”

It’s a sentiment echoed by Meg, 30, who travelled



Neneh visited South Korea to feel closer to her beloved BTS

Seoul-searching



apart from those of the past is undoubtedly the invention of social media. Fans now have increasing access to real-time information on celebrities’ whereabouts, all available 24/7 and in the palm of their hands. It means that where once fans used their love of pop stars as a form of teenage rebellion, now being a fan is more about finding your community – rare companionship to combat the increasing loneliness of modern life. Research shows that a weak sense of belonging correlates with depression, and people who feel more connected have lower rates of anxiety. So in a world where everything from our global-warming-affected weather to who’s running the country is constantly changing, can we really blame fans for seeking out something constant? For investing their time and money in a hobby that gives them stability? Of course, there will always be a line – and everyone I spoke to was careful that they remained respectful

of the stars they loved. But as long as you don’t cross it, where is the harm?

Waiting with all the Miley fans, cameraphones poised, excitedly sharing theories of her next move, brought me back to my own superfan stunts, and helped me forget things like the cost of my rent and my growing pile of unpaid bills, even just for a few hours. It was comforting, a flashback to a simpler time, when getting that signature and photo were all that mattered.

So next time you see those groups huddled outside the stage door, or camping on the pavement outside a radio or TV station, don’t judge them too harshly. They are simply the physical embodiment of the things we all crave deep down: a sense of belonging and the affirmation that we’re part of something bigger. ♦

BEHIND THE SCENES



Emily Gulla

“After we met, Meg offered me a spare ticket to join her at the Spice Girls’ first Wembley gig. Looking around, I saw adults waving frantically at the stage and holding each other, crying as the show ended. I used to feel the same at 1D concerts. If they ever reform, I’ll be on the front row.”



Meg with her autographed Spice Girls plaque

Meg with Baby & Ginger



ADDITIONAL REPORTING: EMMA FIRTH, HAIR AND MAKE-UP: JOLANDA COETZER, USING URBAN DECAY AND AVEDA; MUZHDAH LONE, USING LAURA MERCIER AND AVEDA, BOTH AT LHA REPRESENTS; STYLING: LILY AUSTIN, SPICE GIRLS T-SHIRT, MUG, PIN AND CAP, ALL SPICE GIRLS OFFICIAL MERCHANDISE (STORE: UK.THESPICEGIRLS.COM)

from Toronto to stand shivering on the street outside Geri Halliwell’s London home. “No matter what kind of a bad day I’m having, I can put on their music and it’s just so positive.” She’s loved the Spice Girls most of her life and seeks them out whenever she comes to London. Geri, she says, was pleased to see her. As was Victoria Beckham (who she once waited 12 hours for in a shopping mall) and Emma Bunton (when she met her outside

Heart’s studios). When we meet, she proudly shows me a worn-out wooden plaque embossed with an image of the Spice Girls, which Mel B first signed in 2007 (not visible in the picture, far left, as it has faded over time). Meg has spent the past 12 years trying to collect the rest of the band’s signatures – today, Mel C’s is the only one still missing. But, unlike the flash-mob-style antics of Beatlemania, what sets these present-day superfans

SUPERFAN Spellcheck

STAN

A portmanteau of the words “stalker” and “fan”, referring to the Eminem song.

SAME FACES

Used among Take That fans to refer to the small group found on the front row of every gig.

STILL WAITING

Rivals to Take That’s “Same Faces”, this is the name given to the fans who haven’t met the band yet.

SASAENGs

How K-pop lovers describe the more obsessive fans, who they think go too far.