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If you ever step into the Wayback Machine and zip to the 1980s, you will have some interesting conversations, even though nobody will believe a word you say. You can tell people the twentieth century will end without a nuclear war. The Soviet Union will dissolve, the Berlin Wall will come down, and people will start using these things called “ringtones” that make their pants randomly sing “Eye of the Tiger.” America will elect a black President who spent his college days listening to The B-52s.

But there’s one claim nobody will believe: Duran Duran are still famous.

I can’t believe it myself. I’ve always been a Duran Duran fan. I was an Eighties kid, so I grew up on them. I watched Simon Le Bon and Nick Rhodes give “Save a Prayer” its world premiere live on MTV. I listened hard to the lyrics of “Is There Something I Should Know?” and pondered its existential vision of romantic love. I have studied their fashion, learned their wives’ names, bought their solo albums. I’ve always been obsessed with Duran Duran. But, even more so, I’ve been obsessed with how girls talk about them. I’m pretty sure Duran Duran would cease to exist if girls ever stopped talking about them. Except they never do.

Talking to girls about Duran Duran? It’s how I’ve spent my

life. I count on the Fab Five to help me understand all the females in my life, all the crushes and true loves, the sisters and housemates, the friends and flames and confidantes and allies. Girls like to talk, and if you are a boy, and you want to learn how to listen to girl talk, start a conversation, keep it going, that means you have to deal with Duran Duran. You learn to talk about what the girls want to talk about. And it is a truth universally acknowledged that the girls want to talk about Duran Duran.

My little sister Caroline understands. "It's like talking to boys about wrestling," she says. "You can't just name check, oh, Hulk Hogan or Roddy Piper, because all that means is you used to watch WWF with your brother. So you have to act casual and mention Billy Jack Haynes or Hercules Hernandez. Then the boys are putty in your hands."

I've never heard of these wrestlers, though I assume my sister knows what she's talking about. But I guess Duran Duran are an obsession for me because they were the girls' band that I loved, and because I loved them at a time when I was figuring out what it meant to be a guy. So trying to figure them out is how I keep figuring myself out.

There's a character in a Kingsley Amis novel who asks, "Why did I like women's breasts so much? I was clear on why I liked them, thanks, but why did I like them *so much*?" I wonder the same thing about Duran Duran. I get why women love them, but why do women love them *so much*? I feel like if I could solve that riddle, I could solve a lot of others.

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The Durannies liked girls. Like Bowie or the Beatles, they liked girls enough to want to look like girls. The admiration was mutual, and at this point they have been famous and beloved for thirty years. It's fair to say that at the time, we all thought this band would be forgotten by now, yet everyone in the Western world can still sing "Hungry Like the Wolf." Simon, Nick, John, Andy and Roger remain icons of adolescent female desire. Even the tenderoni who weren't even born in the 80s know what "Girls on Film" is about, and nurture that special relationship all ladies seem to share with John. (Sometimes also Roger. Frequently Simon. Not Andy.) How did this happen?

The 80s, obviously. I was thirteen when the 80s began and twenty-three when they ended, so this was the era of my adolescence, and I never figured anybody would remember the 80s fondly after they were over. But like everything else that happened in the 80s, Duran Duran symbolize teenage yearnings. Girls still grow up memorizing *Pretty in Pink* and *Dirty Dancing* during those constant weekend TV marathons. Any time *Sixteen Candles* comes on, my sisters can recite every scene word for word. (If I'm lucky, I get in a few Jake lines.) When Michael Jackson, John Hughes and Patrick Swayze died, these were national days of mourning. Every night in your town, you can find a bar somewhere hosting an Awesome 80s Prom Night, where you can count on a steady loop of "Tainted Love" and "Billie Jean" and "Just Like Heaven." Any wedding I attend degenerates into a room full of Tommys and Ginas screaming "Livin' on a Prayer." If that *doesn't* happen, the couple could probably get an annulment.

If you were famous in the Eighties, you will never be *not* famous. (In theoretical physics, this principle is formally known as the Justine Bateman Constant.) Any group that was popular in the Eighties can still pack a room. When 80s darlings Depeche Mode come to town, my wife, Ally, begins picking out her dress weeks before the show, even though I already know it's going to be the short black one. And I know I'm her date for the show, and I know she will look deep into my eyes when Dave Gahan sings "A Question of Lust." We played Kajagoogoo's "Too Shy" at our wedding and nobody even walked out.

I've built my whole life around loving music. I'm a writer for *Rolling Stone*, so I am constantly searching for new bands and soaking up new sounds. When I started out as a music journalist, at the end of the 1980s, it was generally assumed that we were living through the lamest music era the world would ever see. But those were also the years when hip-hop exploded, beatbox disco soared, indie rock took off, and new wave invented a language of teen angst. All sorts of futuristic electronic music machines offered obnoxious noises for the plundering. The radio could be your jam, whether you were a new wave kid, a punk rocker, a disco fan, a hip-hop head, a Morrissey acolyte or a card-carrying member of the Cinderella Fan Club. I was every one of these, at some time or another—I loved it all.

But even I didn't think there was so much going on in the Eighties that people would still be trying to figure out all these years later. I didn't expect I'd still be trying to figure it out, either. A few years ago, I went to the Rocklahoma festival, devoted to the

Eighties hair-metal bands. I stood in a field, surrounded for the first and last time by thirty thousand of my fellow Quiet Riot fans, listening to the band play “Metal Health (Bang Your Head).” Was it strange? Very. Did it rock? Brutally.

It’s always weird to see how the Hair Decade lives on, even for people barely old enough to remember it. At the time, we all figured we were stuck in an Epoch of Bogus. The country was in horrific shape, with Reagan and his cronies running amok. It was customary to blame music for the poisonous state of the nation. Nobody would have suspected that anyone would ever go to the movies to relive 1985 (*The Wedding Singer*), 1987 (*Adventureland*) or, Jesus, 1986 (*Hot Tub Time Machine*). I mean, the biggest movie of 1985 was the one where Michael J. Fox used a time machine to get the hell OUT of 1985. We were young, bored and dumb, so we couldn’t wait for it all to end. But something has kept this all alive. And in retrospect, the Epoch of Bogus evolved into the Apex of Awesome. Who made this decision?

Girls, obviously. As Tone Loc said, “This is the Eighties and I’m down with the ladies.” The ladies were not necessarily down with Tone Loc—but they’re down with the 80s, and it’s feminine passion that sustains the whole mythology of 80s teen dreams. And of all the absurd and perverted artifacts from that time, nothing keeps them feeling fascination like Duran Duran. Which is why I’ve always been fascinated too. How the hell did men and women communicate before they had this band to discuss? Fortunately, I’ll never have to know.

The first girls I shared them with were my high school pals

Heather and Lisa, girly girls who liked to talk about Duran Duran because they liked to say the name, which they pronounced, “Jran Jran.” Heather and Lisa taught me about sushi, high heels, “Wake Me Up Before You Go Go,” the value of earrings shaped like pieces of sushi, and the importance of never letting Lisa drive your car, but the most crucial lesson was Duran Duran. We would go out for ice cream and they would sing along with the radio, using spoons for mikes, and we would wait until the next time “Union of the Snake” or “Hungry Like the Wolf” came on WHTT, which was never a long wait.

Lisa’s cousin was a model who was married to the keyboardist in this band, and she went to their wedding. We grilled her for the details—apparently her uncle gave a moving toast, which was drowned out by the ecstatic squeals of Roger Taylor’s date in the backless dress as he licked her entire spine, vertebra by vertebra. Lisa also had sordid backstage gossip of drugs and sex. But what really mattered to me? The way Lisa said their name: “Jran Jran.” I tried to say it that way too.

Heather and Lisa had disposable boyfriends, who suffered at their hands, and made me feel secretly grateful to be above such things. I was better at being a girlfriend than a boyfriend anyway. I wasn’t really living the Duran Duran lifestyle, which seemed to involve dedicating your life to traveling to distant locales where you would flip over tables and pour champagne for pouty vixens who would help you apply your mascara. I might have been a shy, bookish geek, but I was totally hung up on this pop group who were devoted to sex and glamour and danger. I loved how

fiercely girls loved DD, and how fearless DD were in the face of so much girl worship. I was pretty sure I had a lot to learn from these guys.

I envied the religious intensity of their fandom. One day, you're a perfectly ordinary suburban princess, content with Journey and Styx, and then you hear something new and all of a sudden you're one of *those girls*. It's funny because a female audience is often a fickle audience, and yet it goes both ways. A "girls' artist," whether it's Depeche Mode or Neil Diamond or Duran Duran or Jeff Buckley or Luther Vandross or REM or the New Kids, commands a certain loyalty that never really goes away. An adult woman might have a slightly mocking, slightly ironic relationship to her teenage Duran-loving self, and yet she can still feel that love in a non-ironic way. And when the adult women talk about them, they turn into *those girls* again.

That's why Duran Duran always keep coming up in conversation, no matter where I am or who I'm talking to. A few weeks ago I went to see a band called the Cribs at Bowery Ballroom in New York, and wound up at the bar talking to a music-industry lawyer who represents the biggest names in hip-hop. Within five minutes, she was raving about John Taylor. She'd just been in the Bahamas, staying at a posh resort where (by coincidence) Duran Duran were staying, in rehearsals for their upcoming reunion tour. She was in the pool with John Taylor, swimming past him in her bikini, trying to turn his head, telling herself, "I am swimming in John Taylor's water. The chlorine touching his body is touching mine."

This woman obviously loves them in a way that's very different from how I love them, yet in some ways not so different, and I guess those differences intrigue me. Even if I didn't share those dreams of splashing in John Taylor's backwash, I definitely associated the music with sexual yearning, and I loved how girls would get a certain glow in the throes of pop passion. My feelings for these girls could get all mixed up in identification with the band—maybe girls would scream for me the way they screamed for DD, if only I modeled my life on Simon Le Bon, and borrowed his lipliner, and spiced my conversation with lines like “My mouth is alive with juices like wine.” It might take years of monastic devotion. I might have to go to exotic locales and have sex with actual wolves.

When I had my first actual girlfriend, she tried putting makeup on me; I begged her to “give me the Nick Rhodes,” although I was secretly hoping she would accidentally give me the John Taylor. As a die-hard punk rock chick, she hated Duran Duran, but she liked the idea of a boyfriend who looked a little bit more like John Taylor. Unfortunately, I ended up looking kind of like Andy Taylor's bag-lady auntie. I had to face the facts. Being Duran Duran was never going to be an option. I would have settle for being a fan.

When you're a boy, you sometimes begrudge the rock stars who are bogarting your share of feminine attention. When I met Peter Buck of REM, he mentioned something I'd written about resenting how much girls loved his band. I was mortified, but he just smiled and said, “In my day it was David Bowie. I blamed him because my girlfriends liked him better than me.”

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Duran Duran rank high on this chart. Boys always hated them, and there's no way the band didn't know it. They simply didn't care.

The way girls raved about DD was so different from the way we boys talked about the bands we liked. I remember hours of debate in the high school lunchroom about the Clash: Which was better, *London Calling* or *Sandinista!*? Is "Lover's Rock" really about oral sex? Which member of the band truly understood the geopolitical context of Nicaraguan history? Who had a cooler name, Joe Strummer or Tory Crimes? My female rocker friends call this "boy list language," and they won't tolerate it. When I talk about Duran Duran with other guys, which admittedly doesn't happen all that often, we end up debating whether the Power Station was a better side project than Arcadia. No Duran Duran chick, not even the hard-core obsessives, would sit through a conversation like that.

I will always love the Clash, because I loved them so much when I was fourteen, and I love how you can start a conversation with almost literally any dude about the Clash. For instance, if you *are* a dude, you are still stuck halfway through the last paragraph, spluttering, "*London Calling* is MUCH better than *Sandinista!*" This is just the way we dissect the things we love. But it's tougher to talk to women about the Clash. (They love "Stand By Me" but they don't care that it's really called "Train In Vain" instead of "Stand By Me.") So Duran Duran are a much bigger part of my day-to-day life.

I still feel like I have a lot to learn from Duran Duran.

They're Zen masters on the path of infinite sluttiness, shower-nozzle heroes devoted to inspiring female fantasies. One of the things I admire about them is how they sincerely do not give a shit whether boys like them. They surrender gracefully to female desire. They still wear the makeup, they still dress like tarts, and every time they do a reunion tour, they play the hits they know will make the Durannies scream. They have never sold out their girls, and there's nothing about them that would evoke the dreaded words "guilty pleasure." As Oscar Wilde said, no civilized man ever regrets a pleasure, and no uncivilized man knows what a pleasure is.

The songs in this book are some of my favorite Eighties relics, the songs that warped my brain with dubious ideas, boneheaded goals, laughable hopes and timeless mysteries. They might not necessarily be the greatest songs of the pre-Snoopy era, or the most important, or the most popular. But they're all songs I love. And they add up to a playlist that gives a taste of that moment. In a way, you could think of these songs as Bobby Brown's pants. There's an episode of VH1's trashy reality show *Celebrity Fit Club* where everyone sits around the bonfire. They're supposed to bring some personal possession that represents the old life they're leaving behind, so they can toss it into the fire. Bobby Brown holds up a pair of baggy, sequined pants that could only come from the Eighties and says, "You *know* I had to be high to buy these." (Sebastian Bach nods. He understands.) But I'm not tossing these songs into any kind of fire—I'm just shaking them to see

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what memories come tumbling out. And of course, a lot of those memories have to do with love, and learning about love through pop music.

It's complicated, the way we use pop culture artifacts in our day-to-day emotional relationships. The popular stereotype of this is the overbearing boyfriend who tries to get his girlfriend to appreciate free jazz, football or World War II documentaries—but everyone knows it goes both ways. Consider *Pretty Woman*, a movie that only exists so women can force their boyfriends to watch it. Your boyfriend has probably seen it more times than you have, once for every relationship. (Never more than once—unless something was seriously wrong.) And while you may kid yourself he thinks the women are hot, he's really just showing off that he's man enough to take the punishment. When you're a guy watching *Pretty Woman* with your girlfriend, you *are* Julia Roberts, in the scene where Richard Gere takes her to the opera to see if she cries, because if she does, it means she's sensitive and deep and worthy to operate Richard's gear. Watching this scene on a date, you're the pretty woman, the ho on display in the opera box. And maybe you really do want to cry, if only because the supposed opera music is just the piano riff from Bruce Springsteen's "Racing in the Streets."

But there's nothing at all wrong with an exchange like this. As a boy, experiences like this are part of learning girl languages. What else is pop culture for? Since I grew up with rock-and-roll parents, bonding over the songs they loved, it never really occurred to me that love and music belonged in separate categories. When

my mom and dad were growing up as 1950s rock and rollers, both sang “In the Still of the Nite” with their respective high school friends; my mom took the lead while my dad took the “shoo-doo shooby-doo” part, so they were a natural match. I’m sure that my mom and dad would find lots of other ways to bond if they didn’t have music. But bringing people together is what music has always done best.

Learning to speak girl languages is a tricky business. Since I am married to an astrophysicist, I am constantly looking for ways to drop the Kuiper belt or Oort clouds into conversation. I try to impress Ally by making clever references to 3753 Cruithne, the earth’s little-known “second moon,” although it’s more precisely described as a dynamic gravitational companion. I don’t know if I impress her, but she appreciates the effort. She likes lots of 80s goth bands that I hated at the time—The Sisters of Mercy, Love and Rockets, Nitzer Ebb—but I love them now, because they’re part of her language. She likes noisy spazzy math-rock bands that only boys like, so she is also used to speaking boy languages. She’s the only person I’ve ever met who can critique the accuracy of Google Mars as well as the Birthday Party discography.

But it’s possible we will never agree on anything the way we agree on Duran Duran. Something in the music keeps promising that if I could finally figure out Duran Duran, I would finally understand women, and maybe even understand love.

Loving Duran Duran has been one of the constants of my

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life, but I have no idea what they would sound like if the women in my life stopped loving them. I guess I'll never know. I could claim that Duran Duran taught me everything I know about women, but that's not exactly accurate: I learned it from listening to girls talk about Duran Duran.