

sex-ed in schools

One

**RAUNCH  
CULTURE** by Levy



**Late** on a balmy Friday night in March 2004, a crew from *Girls Gone Wild* sat on the porch of the Chesterfield Hotel on Collins Avenue in Miami, preparing for the night of filming ahead of them. An SUV passed by and two blonde heads popped out of the sunroof like prairie dogs, whooping into the night sky. If you ever watch television when you have insomnia, then you are already familiar with *Girls Gone Wild*: late at night, infomercials show bleeped-out snippets of the brand's wildly popular, utterly plotless videos, composed entirely from footage of young women flashing their breasts, their buttocks,

or occasionally their genitals at the camera, and usually shrieking "Who!" while they do it. The videos range slightly in theme, from *Girls Gone Wild on Campus* to *Girls Gone Wild Doggy Style* (hosted by the rapper Snoop Doggy Dogg), but the formula is steady and strong: Bring cameras to amped-up places across the country—Mardi Gras, hard-partying colleges, sports bars, spring break destinations—where young people are drinking themselves batty and offer T-shirts and trucker hats to the girls who flash or the guys who induce them to.

"It's a cultural phenomenon," said Bill Horn, Girls Gone Wild's thirty-two-year-old vice president of communications and marketing, a shaggy-haired young man in a T-shirt and Pumas. "It's like a rite of passage."

A couple of girls with deep tans in tiny, fluttery skirts were chatting across the street from the Chesterfield. "Ladies, throw your hands up!" a guy hollered at them as he passed by. They giggled and complied.

Horn said, "It's the next step."

Girls Gone Wild (GGW) is so popular they are expanding from soft-core videos to launch an apparel line, a compilation CD with Jive Records (of GGW-approved club hits), and a Hooters-like restaurant chain. GGW has a celebrity following: Justin Timberlake has been photographed in a GGW hat, Brad Pitt gave out GGW videos to his *Troy* castmates as wrap presents. And the phrase "Girls Gone Wild" has en-

tered the American vernacular... it works well for advertisements (Cars Gone Wild!) and magazine headlines (Curls Gone Wild!).

Puck, a surprisingly polite twenty-four-year-old cameraman, was loading equipment into their van. He wore a GGW hat and T-shirt, which seemed to be enough to draw women to him as if by ensorcellment. Two stunning young women who were already very close to naked asked Puck if they could come along with him if they promised to take off their clothes and make out with each other later for the camera, possibly even in a shower. There was no room for them in the car, but Puck was unconcerned; there would be other such offers. "It's amazing," said GGW's tour manager, Mia Leist, a smiley, guileless, twenty-four-year-old. "People flash for the brand." She pointed at a young woman sitting on the other end of the porch. "Debbie got naked for a hat."

Besides her new GGW hat, nineteen-year-old Debbie Cope was wearing a rhinestone Playboy bunny ring, white stilettos that laced in tight X's up her hairless calves, and wee shorts that left the lowest part of her rear in contact with the night air. Body glitter shimmered across her tan shoulders and rose in a sparkling arc from her cleavage to her clavicle. "The body is such a beautiful thing," she said. "If a woman's got a pretty body and she likes her body, let her show it off! It exudes confidence when people wear little clothes." Cope was a tiny person who could have passed for fifteen. On the preceding night



she had done a "scene" for GGW, which is to say she pulled down her shorts and masturbated for them on camera in the back of a bar. She said she felt bad for "not doing it right" because for some reason she couldn't achieve orgasm.

"People watch the videos and think the girls in them are real slutty, but I'm a virgin!" Cope said proudly. "And yeah, *Girls Gone Wild* is for guys to get off on, but the women are beautiful and it's . . . fun! The only way I could see someone not doing this is if they were planning a career in politics." Then a song Cope liked came on the radio inside the hotel and she started doing that dance you sometimes see in rap videos, the one where women shake their butts so fast they seem to blur.

"She calls that vibrating," explained Sam, another cameraman. "She told me, 'I can vibrate.'"

"Crazy Debbie," said Mia Leist. "I love her! She gets so many girls for us."

Everyone piled into the van and followed Crazy Debbie to a dance club in nearby Coconut Grove, where she knew all the locals. "Fun girls," Cope promised.

It was a vast, multilevel place and every song had a relentless, throbbing beat. Bill Horn surveyed the scene and landed his eyes on a cluster of blondes in tops tenuously fastened by lots of string ties. "Now *those* are some girls who should go wild," he said. "Jesus, listen to me . . . this job is turning me into a straight guy." Horn, who briefly pursued a career in

academia before taking up with GGW, talked about his boyfriend constantly and was the second in command at GGW.

Puck and Sam, the cameramen, passed by with three young women who'd volunteered to do a "private" out on the balcony.

"Here we go," said Horn. He gave a little laugh. "There's some part of me that always wants to shriek, 'Don't do it!'"

But he didn't, and they definitely did . . . the trio started making out in a ravenous lump, grabbing at each other's rears and rutting around while trying to remain upright. Ultimately, one girl fell over and landed giggling on the floor—a characteristic endpoint for a GGW scene.

Later, the girl, her name was Meredith, said she was a graduate student. "It's sad," she said, with only a slight slur. "We'll have Ph.D.s in three years. In anthropology."

A few weeks later, on the telephone, she was upset: "I'm not at all bisexual . . . not that I have anything against that. But when you think about it, I'd never do that *really*. It's more for show. A polite way of putting it is it's like a reflex," she said. "My friend I was with felt really bad, the one who told the first girl to kiss me, the one who started it. Because in the beginning, I felt so dirty about the whole thing. I hate Miami."

"It's a business," said Mia Leist. "In a perfect world, maybe we'd stop and change things. But we know the formula. We know how it works."



"If it gets guys off..." said Bill Horn.

"If it gets *girls* off!" Leist interrupted. "It's not like we're creating this. This is happening whether we're here or not. Our founder was just smart enough to capitalize on it." GGW's founder, Joe Francis, has likened the flashing girls he captures on his videos to seventies feminists burning their bras. His product, he says, is sexy for men, liberating for women, good for the goose, and good for the gander. Francis estimates GGW is worth \$100 million. He owns a mansion in Bel Air, a retreat in Puerto Vallarta, and two private jets. That weekend in Miami, ABC had just finished shooting a segment on Joe Francis for the show *Life of Luxury*.

GGW may not exactly have bought respectability for Francis: Charges were pending against him for racketeering, although a judge had dismissed charges that he'd offered a girl \$50 to touch his penis. ("As if!" Horn shrieked when I asked about it. "As my boyfriend said, when has Joe ever had to pay for a hand job?") But GGW has made Francis rich and fairly famous and certainly a particular kind of L.A. celebrity. His ex-girlfriends include such prize girls gone wild as Paris Hilton and Tara Reid.

Joe Francis didn't come on this particular leg of spring break, but his presence and preferences were felt. The cameramen received bonuses if they captured a hot girl—as opposed to a normal girl—flashing on camera. "Joe's looking for tens," said Leist. "You know, 100 to 110 pounds, big boobs, blonde,

blue eyes, ideally no piercing or tattoos." Leist herself was short, with brown hair and a soft chin line. She got her job through one of her professors at Emerson College who had known the previous GGW tour manager. "I've had discussions with friends who were like, 'This is so degrading to females,'" said Leist. "I feel that if you walk up to someone all sly and say, 'Come on, get naked, show me your box,' that's one thing. But if you have women coming up to you *begging* to get on camera and they're having fun and being sexy, then that's another story."

I asked Leist if she would ever appear in a GGW video herself. She said, "Definitely not."

Usually the girls, tens or otherwise, started out joking. They would plead with Puck and Sam to give them GGW hats, and then they'd pretend to peel up their shirts or lift their skirts. But little by little, the tease became the truth, and they took off their clothes as the cameras recorded them for future viewing by God knows who.

Later that night, GGW hit a second bar, part of a chain called Señor Frog's. (It was within walking distance of the Delano Hotel, but minimalism and snobbery felt very far away.) Señor Frog's was having a "sexy positions contest." Two chunky young women with the familiar spring break combination of hair bleached to a radioactive white and skin sunned an angry pink were pretending to hump each other on a raised platform. A group of mostly men circled around them and a rhythmic chant of "TAKE-IT-OFF!"



TAKE-IT-OFF!" rose from the crowd. It was followed by a chorus of boos when the women declined to do so, but as a consolation the taller woman poured beer all over the shorter woman's head and breasts.

"Girls! This is not a wet T-shirt contest!" the MC bellowed over the sound system. "Pretend you are fucking! Let me emphasize, pretend you are *really* fucking! I want you to pretend like you're fucking the shit out of her doggy style." The women were too inebriated to achieve sufficient verisimilitude, and the crowd called them offstage.

Mia Leist was suddenly very excited. The bartender had just told her about a "girl-on-girl box-eating" contest in Fort Lauderdale later in the week, which would yield ideal footage for the tapes sold to GGW subscribers, the people who get an explicit video every month for \$9.99, as opposed to the occasional buyers who pay \$19.99 to purchase a tape of milder content from a GGW infomercial or a Virgin Megastore.

"It's all girl-on-girl, we never shoot guys," explained Bill Horn. "That's not what Joe wants. And no pros. It has to be *real*."

Reality has always been Joe Francis's beat—specifically, those realities that appeal to people's darkest impulses: voyeurism, violence, and erotomania. On the GGW Web site, you can still purchase Francis's debut effort, *Banned from Television*, a hideous compilation featuring "a public execution, a great white shark attack, a horrifying train accident

and an explicit undercover video from a sex club bust!" as the video is described on the site. "That's how Joe made his first million," said Horn.

Out on the back porch, a phalanx of young men watched, entranced, as a very pretty nineteen-year-old from Jupiter, Florida, named Jennifer Cafferty lifted up her pink tube top for the camera. "Okay now, show me your thong," said Puck. She laughed and twirled her honey-colored hair around her forefinger. "Just show me your thong," he said again. "Just really quick. Just show me your thong. Show me your thong now." She whipped around and lifted her skirt.

"Yeah," shrieked one of the young men watching her. "Yeah, yeah!"

Then she put her hands on her hips and said, "Where's my hat?"

The next day at the beach, only the light was different. "We want our picture with you!" a blonde in a bikini yelled at the crew, shaking her digital camera in the air.

"We don't want pictures," Leist called back. "We want boobs!"

"I think I'm going to have that embroidered on a pillow," said Horn.

A pack of guys were drinking beer out of a funnel, and they decided they wanted GGW hats. Badly.

"Show them your tits," one yelled at the two girls splayed on towels next to him. "What's your problem? Just show them your tits."

Puck set up the shot and waited with his camera



poised for the female response. "No way!" the girl in the black bikini said, pouting.

"You know you want to," the funnel-wielder taunted. People started to circle around, like seagulls sensing a family about to abandon their lunch. "Do it," the guy said.

"Yeah, do it!" yelled a spectator.

"Show your tits!" screamed another.

"Show your ass!"

There were maybe forty people now gathered in a circle that was simultaneously tightening inward and expanding outward around Puck and the girls and their "friends" with every passing second. The noise rose in volume and pitch.

I caught myself hoping the crowd would not start throwing rocks at the girls if they decided to keep their clothes on.

We'll never know, because after a few more minutes passed and a few more dozen dudes joined the massive amoeba of people hollering and standing on top of beach chairs and climbing up on each other's shoulders to get a good view of what might happen, it happened. The girl pulled down her black bathing suit bottom and was rewarded by an echoing round of shrieks that sliced the sky.

"More!" someone yelled.

Other people pulled out their cameras. The people who had cameras built into their cell phones flipped them open and jumped up to try to get shots of the action over the human wall.

The second girl rose up off her towel, listened to the cheers for a moment, and then spanked her friend to the rhythm of the hooting.

"Yo," a guy said into his phone. "This is the best beach day ever."

It sounds like a fantasy world dreamed up by teenage boys. A world of sun and sand where frozen daiquiris flow from faucets and any hot girl you see will peel off her bikini top, lift up her skirt . . . all you have to do is ask. It's no surprise that there's a male audience for this, but what's strange is that the women who populate this alternate reality are not strippers or paid performers, they are middle-class college kids on vacation—they are mainstream. And really, their reality is not all that unusual. People on spring break are obviously young, and Horn was right to call the flashing a rite of passage. But it is an initiation into something ongoing rather than a one-shot deal, more like having a first beer than a bat mitzvah. The heat is turned up a little in Miami, but a baseline expectation that women will be constantly exploding in little blasts of exhibitionism runs throughout our culture. *Girls Gone Wild* is not extraordinary, it's emblematic.

If you leave your house or watch television you probably already know what I'm talking about, but let's review some examples:



• Jenna Jameson, the world's highest grossing adult film performer, is her own industry. She has been in music videos for Eminem and Korn and advertisements for Pony and Abercrombie & Fitch (a brand whose target market is teenagers). She has taped voice-over for the video game *Grand Theft Auto*. She was on the best-seller list for six weeks in 2004 with her memoir *How to Make Love Like a Porn Star*, which was written up in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and *Publishers Weekly*. There was something profoundly weird about the fact that one of the most widely read authors in the country was simultaneously selling "ultra-realistic, life-like" replicas of "Jenna's Vagina and Ass" with complimentary lubricant on her own Web site.

In 2003, there was a massive, four-story billboard of Jameson hovering above Times Square. The group Women Against Pornography used to give tours of the area in the late 1970s, when Times Square was a seedy red-light ghetto, in the hopes that "radical feminists, with our deeper understanding of porn and our sophisticated knowledge of sexuality, would succeed in turning around public opinion where old-fashioned moralists had not," as the feminist Susan Brownmiller wrote in *In Our Time: Memoir of a Revolution*. It didn't work, but decades later, developers, chain stores, and Disney succeeded where the feminists had failed and the neighborhood became the spit-shined shopping smorgasbord it is

today—a suitable destination for red tour buses with guides far less invested in overthrowing the patriarchy than Susan Brownmiller was. Now that porn stars are no less mainstream or profitable than Mickey Mouse, however, a giant billboard of Jameson—the star of movies like *Philmore Butts* and *Up and Cummers*—is perfectly at home at the Crossroads of the World.

In 2005, Jameson's publisher, Judith Regan, told CBS, "I believe that there is a porno-ization of the culture . . . what that means is that if you watch every single thing that's going on out there in the popular culture, you will see females scantily clad, implanted, dressed up like hookers, porn stars and so on, and that this is very acceptable."

• Female Olympic athletes took time out from their rigorous training schedules in the weeks before the summer 2004 games in Athens to appear naked in *Playboy*, or next to naked in *FHM* (*For Him Magazine*). There was high-jumper Amy Acuff laying on the ground—her blonde hair pooled around her, eyes closed, hips thrust skyward—in *FHM* (pages away from a sex quiz that included the question "Have you ever participated in a gang bang?" and the answer "Why else do you think my parents shelled out more than \$100,000 for college?"). A few pages later, Amanda Beard, the world record-holder in the two-hundred-meter breast stroke, knelt with legs spread and lips parted while she used one hand to hike her