



Wenner, Jann (b. 1946)

by Craig Kaczorowski

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Jann Wenner, founder, publisher, and editor of the influential music and culture magazine *Rolling Stone*, is the editor in chief and chairman of Wenner Media, which also publishes the celebrity gossip magazine *Us Weekly* and the active lifestyle monthly *Men's Journal*. An emblematic baby boomer, Wenner is one of the founders of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and an ardent defender of free speech.

In 1995, Wenner found himself in the middle of a media storm when it was revealed that he was leaving his wife Jane after more than 25 years of marriage and had become involved in a relationship with Matt Nye, a former male model turned fashion designer.

Wenner's outing, which may or may not have been at his own instigation, seems to have had little effect on his business empire, but it inspired a number of accusations regarding an alleged "Velvet Mafia" of powerful closeted gay men.

Early Life

Born Jan S. Wenner in New York City on January 7, 1946, but raised in Marin County, California, he is the eldest of three children. His parents' marriage was not a happy one, and in 1958, while they were in the midst of an acrimonious divorce, the twelve-year-old Wenner was sent away to the Chadwick School (known, unofficially, as an "orphanage for rich kids") in the South Bay area of Los Angeles County.

Wenner has asserted that neither parent ever visited him at Chadwick, and that a heated custody battle ensued because neither parent wanted him. It was around this time that he added the second "n" to his birth name.

Wenner attended, but later dropped out of, the University of California, Berkeley. An intense young man, passionate about music, he moved to San Francisco in the mid-1960s and began promoting rock performances and ingratiating himself with musicians.

Rolling Stone

In 1967, Wenner married Jane Schindelheim. That same year, at the age of 21, after borrowing \$7,500 (about \$43,000 in today's currency) mainly from his wife's parents, he launched *Rolling Stone* in a rundown printer's loft south of Market Street in San Francisco.

His idea for the magazine was unique for its time: to treat rock music as a powerful cultural and political force. He made clear that *Rolling Stone* would not be just about music, but "also about the things and attitudes that music embraces," as he wrote in the first issue, published on November 9, 1967.

In the years that followed, *Rolling Stone* became known as the voice of a generation. According to the *New York Times*, the magazine became "both the reflection and interpreter of its times." Its early success can be attributed in part to its serious musical criticism, incisive artist profiles, and innovative, long-form, investigative journalism.

Wenner himself wrote articles, columns, and reviews for the magazine, and conducted interviews with subjects ranging from rock legends John Lennon and Bob Dylan to political figures such as Bill Clinton and Al Gore. Nearly 40 years after its founding, *Rolling Stone* remains one of the preeminent pop-culture periodicals.

Media Empire

Deciding he had outgrown San Francisco, Wenner relocated the magazine to New York City in 1977 and began actively courting movie and television stars, socialites, and political bigwigs. Wenner's infatuation with celebrities led him to buy a stake in the gossip magazine *Us Weekly* in 1985 and acquire it outright four years later.

He further expanded his media empire by launching such publications as *Outside*, *Record*, and *Men's Journal*, and publishing a multitude of books on music and other subjects through his Rolling Stone Press.

The advertising industry publication *Adweek* named Wenner "Publishing Executive of the Year" in 1994. Three years later, at the age of 50, he became the youngest inductee into the American Society of Magazine Editors Hall of Fame.

Wenner helped found the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Foundation in 1983 and later became the vice-chairman of its board. He was himself inducted into the Hall of Fame for "lifetime achievement in the non-performer category" in 2004.

Wenner has also made several brief forays into acting, playing himself in the 1985 James Bridges-directed movie *Perfect*, featuring John Travolta as a *Rolling Stone* reporter, and in a small role as a sports agent in the 1996 Cameron Crowe-directed film *Jerry Maguire*. He also appeared as a recurring character in four episodes of the television series *Crime Story* (1987 and 1988). His legs were featured in *Up Your Legs Forever* (1970), a 70-minute film by John Lennon and Yoko Ono comprised of continuous panning shots up a series of 367 human legs.

Outed

Although it had long been rumored that Wenner's marriage was an "open" one and gossip of his bisexuality was widespread and had been mentioned in gay magazines, in 1995 he was publicly outed--on the front page of the *Wall Street Journal*, no less--when the newspaper revealed that Wenner had left his wife of 28 years for Matt Nye, a considerably younger man who was a former Calvin Klein underwear model turned clothing designer.

The *Journal* ostensibly covered the story to speculate on how the news of Wenner's breakup with his wife Jane (who has a stake in the publishing group allegedly as high as 49 percent) would have on the future of Wenner Media, though they may have had other motivations as well. Following the *Wall Street Journal's* lead, major pieces, complete with salacious details of Wenner's personal life, appeared in the *New York Daily News*, the *Washington Post*, *New York* magazine, and London's *Daily Mail*.

Although some have alleged that Wenner may have himself instigated the outing, he reportedly telephoned several newspaper and magazine editors who were planning stories in an unsuccessful effort to stifle the scandal and protect his privacy.

Rumors of an alleged conspiracy to suppress the news began to circulate. Several journalists reported that the so-called "Velvet Mafia"--a coterie of powerful media, entertainment, and fashion executives who are reputedly gay--had threatened to pull advertising from any publication that wrote about the breakup.

Many people found these rumors more disturbing than the outing itself. As someone known for his support of press freedom, and as the publisher of magazines that traded on celebrity news, Wenner was hardly in a position to complain about invasion of privacy.

Aftermath of the Outing

Wenner's media empire weathered the storm caused by his outing and his breakup with his wife. He and his wife separated in 1995, but apparently there has never been a division of corporate assets. The Wenners remain legally married and continue to raise their three sons jointly. They also continue to be business partners.

Wenner's (homo)sexuality appears not to have had much of an impact on the editorial content of his magazines. Although *Rolling Stone* has published short articles and reviews of publicly out musicians such as Rufus Wainwright and groups such as Sleater-Kinney, glbtq performers and issues have rarely been featured

on the cover or in major pieces in the magazine. They certainly do not seem to be actively promoted by the magazine.

In fact, several lesbian and feminist musicians, most notably Amy Ray of the folk/pop group Indigo Girls, have castigated Wenner in interviews and song lyrics for his complicity in the music industry's institutionalization of sexism and homophobia.

Wenner currently lives in New York City with his partner Matt Nye.

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About the Author

Craig Kaczorowski writes extensively on media, culture, and the arts. He holds an M.A. in English Language and Literature, with a focus on contemporary critical theory, from the University of Chicago. He comments on national media trends for two newspaper industry magazines.