



## **Britpop!: Cool Britannia And The Spectacular Demise Of English Rock**

*John Harris*

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Beginning in 1994 and closing in the first months of 1998, the UK passed through a cultural moment as distinct and as celebrated as any since the war. Founded on rock music, celebrity, boom-time economics, and fleeting political optimism, this was "Cool Britannia." Records sold in the millions, a new celebrity elite emerged, and Tony Blair's Labour Party found itself returned to government. Drawing on interviews from all the major bands including Oasis, Blur, Elastica, and Suede, and from music journalists, record executives, and those close to government, *Britpop!* charts the rise and fall of the Britpop moment. In this wonderfully engaging, page-turning narrative, John Harris, currently the hottest young music journalist in the UK, argues that the high point of British music's cultural impact also signaled its effective demise. After all, if rock stars were now friends of government, how could they continue to matter?"Cool Britannia was an empty promise that was bound to end in tears. John Harris captures the moment when New Labour, desperately wanting to seem hip, invited Britpop into Downing Street. Irresistible."-Billy Bragg

## **Britpop!: Cool Britannia And The Spectacular Demise Of English Rock Details**

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## **From Reader Review Britpop!: Cool Britannia And The Spectacular Demise Of English Rock for online ebook**

### **Nathan says**

George W. Bush's friend Tony Blair spent a lot of time catering to rock stars. This book covers Tony Blair's courtship of UK youth via the stars of Britpop. Though the stories mainly center around Blur and Oasis and their political activities, it covers an extended and arguably creatively vibrant period of British pop music, and any Anglophile over 25 would probably enjoy reading this. It's like a great article in the NME, before the NME went utterly crap.

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### **Peter O'Connor says**

I was lucky enough to live in London at the height of Britpop and it really did feel like being at the centre of the universe as the British labels clambered over each other to celebrate themselves. Looking back and with the help of this book, it is obvious in hindsight that the bubble had to burst. It was still a hell of a party though and now that the smoke has cleared and most have the players have gone home to bed, this account offers great perspective on the whole scene and some of the remaining heavyweights that helped kickstart a whole new renaissance.

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### **Ben Walton says**

The first 350 pages or so of this book are a fantastic, well written and balanced account of the Britpop years, taking into account it's origins with bands like Happy Mondays and The Stone Roses up until the end of 1997, when Blur had moved away from their Parklife blueprint, Elastica had all but given up the ghost, Pulp were fighting with demons on This Is Hardcore and Oasis had released the self-indulgent, depressingly overcooked Be Here Now.

Where the book falls down is in the final chapter and the appendices. In this chapter Harris loses all sense of objectivity and becomes dismissive of anything that came after Common People. Indeed, Harris comes off as being massively out of touch, using buzzwords that your gran might. He also makes the ludicrous claim that after Creation Records shut up shop, independent music simply ceased to exist, which is a laughable claim to make.

Overall, this book is deservedly the authority on the history of Britpop let down by a disappointingly baffling conclusion.

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### **III D says**

Real stellar read. Excellently well researched and equally well written. Although brimming with loads of

interviews from the stars themselves and well as plenty of additional (to some supplemental) historical (essential contextual considerations) information to flesh out and make sense of not only the very world Britpop was born into and briefly inhabited before its untimely, yet ultimately predictable, abrupt implosion in 1997- and the music scene (as well as the contemporaneity aesthetic aspirations) that preceded it, on both sides of the pond; we never get lost in the details or lose sight of the narrative itself. John Harris has a rare gift to keep us completely engaged with excellent pacing and pleasantly smooth writing while never getting us lost in immense details of the episodic and highly mercurial inner-band conflicts, excessive drug use, constant espionage of the paparazzi, compounded by the the complete and utter insanity that is the music industry; that the author captured in their full intensity and detail.

While I thoroughly enjoyed this book, my only real gripe is that the vast majority of his focus is on Damon Albarn, Justine Frischman, Noel Gallagher and their respective bands. While this makes sense, because Blur and Oasis are THE Britpop bands (well the only two that will matter to the global audience as a whole), way too much focus is given to Frischman's Elastica- which only released one album in the era and is largely inconsequential now (2015 addendum - they still don't matter)- unlike the previously aforementioned giants of Britpop.

Moreover, by focusing too much on these three bands, Harris loses sight, and almost seems to brush off the vast swathe of equally- and in my opinion, in some cases more so - talented bands of the era with just a casual mention of their names like the Boo-Radleys, etc... Really fantastic bands that not only were important to the Britpop movement historically but, have still continued to make fantastic music- such as Supergrass and The Charlatans (Hell, they've had 3 number one hits- I think that deserves much more than a simple casual name dropping of their front-man Tim Burgess. Mr. Harris could have gained a lot of vision if he had zoomed out a bit in his study of the era ).

I'll admit, I'm miffed that one of my favourite British bands of the Britpop Era, The Charlatans, doesn't get their due in this book. (Which honestly makes this criticism more of a personal vendetta than I'd like because The Charlatans will always have a special place in my heart.) But the book as a whole is a really fantastic account of an era that constantly reminds us of plenty universal constants in human nature that factor into the music industry just as anywhere else. (Also, that all movements are transient and Britpop is just one of the more fleeting ones) and its a good thing we have excellent writers like John Harris bring us a story of this movement, from its ups and its down- until the eventual and highly inevitable movement toward entropy that all human endeavors must face.

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### **David says**

A history of music from punk to around 2001

It bounced back n forth a bit throwing the time lines out, but every major band/label/make up and break up is in here.

It's an easy read explaining the ups with good anecdotes and fun. Also the MANY downs without getting too heavy.

A must read

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### **Chris says**

I recently read the book "Everyone Loves Our Town", an oral history of Grunge music. I was never a huge fan, but it sounded interesting. While I read it, I thought to myself, "I wish there was a book like this about Britpop." Well...duh. But I'm American, so you need to cut me some slack.

I was studying abroad in Scotland in the spring of 1990, so I feel like I was present for a tiny bit of the movement. You could tell something was brewing. When I walked down the streets of Edinburgh, every song that spilled out of the shops seemed to be The Happy Mondays' Step On, or sounded just like it. The lads walking down the street all wore a uniform of psychedelic paisley shirts, baggy jeans and big suede shoes in jewel colors. Their hair was intricate mops of curls. They all looked like they should be in bands and walked with a strut like the music was playing just for them. There was excitement in the air.

This book confirmed several things for me:

I've pulled out my old cassettes, and most of the music still sounds amazing. The Stone Roses still makes me want to dance wildly, Ned's Atomic Dustbin still sound like they have something extremely important and urgent to say in every song, Inspiral Carpets is still wistfully gorgeous, and the Happy Mondays, well, still good for a laugh.

I heart Blur forever n' ever. (insert fangirl squeal here)

I've always liked Oasis' music, but didn't really warm to the band's members. Too scowly and mean looking. All eyebrows and parkas. They didn't seem like nice people, and this book really confirms it.

Heroin sucks. That's stating the obvious, but the Grunge book and this one really show how damaging it was to so many careers and lives at the time. Imagine what some of these bands could have accomplished had they not been so drug addled.

What I learned:

I liked reading about bands that got little or no attention in the US, like Menswear and Suede. I've gone on Youtube to watch some Suede videos, and they are...wow....something else.

Justine Frischmann has an oversharing problem.

British politics can be sort of dull. Again, excuse the American, but if you are not that familiar with the people and situations, those sections sort of drag. My only complaint with the book, but really, it's just cultural.

I've found a new appreciation for Blur's This is a Low. I'd never paid it much attention, but finding out about the inspiration for the song was really interesting.

Altogether a great read. Still my all time favorite era of music.

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## Robert says

Unlike most people of my generation (late 30's) I did not get into alternative rock via grunge. One day in March 1994, I saw Blur's Girls and Boys on television. It was a revelation and weirdly I started to notice a ton of British bands started to creep into my life: Pulp, Oasis, Supergrass, Radiohead, Sleeper, Terrorvision, Reef, Echobelly, Suede, Cast, Shed 7 (yeah I now they are joke but they did have a couple of great tunes) and so many more. These songs were played on national radio (for Malta that means a lot) and also, for the first time, loads of compilations had these songs so if you were willing to spend 11.00 LM they were yours. Personally the last half of 1994, the whole of 1995 and the first half of 1996 were great times to be a teenager and getting into alt music. Then The Spice Girls came along and ruined everything until 2001 when The Strokes gave music balls again but that's another story.

Now looking back and re-listening to britpop hits, I am noticing that they don't hold up very well. The exceptions being Suede, Pulp, Blur and the first two Oasis albums.

Anyway John Harris documents the Britpop phenomena in The Last party and it is fantastic. From the

humble beginnings with Suede and Blur then the high points, drugs and record label excess. All culminating with Blair's election and the aftermath. If anyone wants some insight to this musical phase then this is the book to read.

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## **Edmund Bloxam says**

What this book is not:

- 1) about music
- 2) short
- 3) coherent
- 4) about the topic of its title

What this book is:

1) Primarily about the lifestyles of some well-known musicians, some you haven't heard of, some producers, and various other people. Almost everyone receives a tiresomely complete biography.

Did you want to know which musician you don't remember slept with which roadie from somewhere you've never heard of? (Also which celebrity musician slept with which other celebrity musician, and about how certain other celebrity musicians were annoyed by this.)

2) A Tony Blair love fest. His biography is the longest and he recurs throughout the book, never depicted in anything but a positive light.

The Red Wave politics stuff was musicians interacting with politics, the rest (ie. most) barely relates to the topic.

3) A complete mess of detail. The narrative is not linear. Okay, so the chapters are thematic. No. So we have an exhaustive list of precisely what concoction of drugs and or alcohol was being consumed and precisely which bar they were in, but since it could have been any time between 1992 and 1996, it matters even less. Throw in Tony Blair and the Labour party into this mix. Plus randomly timed biographies of a seemingly random list of people.

4) Definitely not a cultural history. Somewhere in this mud pie, there is comment on cultural trends, such as the rise of nationalism in pop music (eg. Union Jacks become prominent, lyrics become made to be as working class as they can be).

One story I liked was about a very short-lived band who went on tour (rinse-repeat: drugs, alcohol, hi jinks) with only four songs and the label kept throwing money at them, despite them having nothing to show for it. There should have been some comment about the pop music industry there. But we're soon back to exactly which clothes one or other of the Gallagher brothers (keep up-they're the ones from Oasis, so I remember their names) is wearing and which store they bought them from.

5) Not about 'The Spectacular Demise of English Rock'-the 'spectacular' overuse of adjective and exaggeration in the prose is another thing you have to wade through. In order for their to be a 'demise', it would have to have been strong in the first place. In fact, the book describes (I mean announces) many different 'great' bands from The Beatles, through the 70s, and the 80s, and the early 90s. So what is...demising? A demise FROM WHAT? Whilst its true that for a time, a couple of so-called rock bands became pop stars were quite famous, and that, like all pop music, quickly faded into nothing, the very title of the book betrays the fact that this is not really about rock music. The title is a contradiction in terms. British rock kept going and it's still going now. What are you talking about?

Art from artlessness or a lack of technique is important in understanding punk in rock, but instead of this we are given a vague impression that Oasis just weren't very good at playing their instruments.

Almost none of this book is about music. Here's a classic and indicative moment allegedly about the music: [Of Oasis' 'Some Might Say'] ...a musical power that offered the listener little opportunity but to surrender (that's impossible and meaningless-pointless opinion).

It's brutally constructed verses (okay, potential, what does that mean?)

thought they soon tumbled into doggerel (oh, he's off again, I guess we don't get to know what 'brutally constructed' means)

initially gave Liam lines that not only nailed what made him such a compelling presence (more celebrity worship-also meaningless: it requires that everyone find him compelling to make sense. Some might. I don't, so it doesn't)

but identified him with an unspeakably potent archetype: the same Dionysian menace that... (Eurgh, what? Tall about exaggeration. 'Unspeakably potent'. What?! Like something kind of satanic Dionysus? My socks at the end of the day? That doesn't even begin to make sense. Take a thesaurus, hit a random adjective, talk about Liam freaking Gallagher as some kind of evil god genius. What?!)

'a chorus that...sounded like a heartfelt acknowledgment of the Gallagher's mutual dependence' (Okay, musical comparison with The Beatles. Probably valid. In what way? That's right. We're not told. We just have to assume he's right. (It is a valid comparison, but the point is that Harris doesn't really describe the music at all, so it may or may not be true.)

but the Gallagher's sheer conviction meant that they managed to avoid sounding cheap.

That last statement is typical. Almost everything said about the music throughout the book is ENTIRELY dependent on opinion ('perhaps the greatest song ever/worst song ever' et. al.). He almost gets there by describing the shortness of early Elastica songs as 'cut up', but it's so bogged down in how angry somebody is about shagging or what drugs they're on, that you have to dig deep for the almost non-existent gold nuggets.

If you want a celebrity love/shag fest, like I said, because there is so much other crap, you have to get through that and a 'narrative of high jinks' doesn't work because the story is not linear, so it's just 'some high jinks', you have to have patience.

I think the word is 'indulgent', but this is a typical value judgement is precisely what this book feeds on. 'Bullsh\*t' is much more accurate. Or 'hot air'. Lots and lots and lots of words that say just about nothing.

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### **Bert says**

I thoroughly enjoyed this, and I'm so glad it exists. Captures that initial rush of euphoria at the start of the Nineties (oh suede...), that feeling of being in the right place at the right time, the ritual listening to a singles first airing on the radio, the glory of b-sides, talking like a cockney, smoking fags, and being excited about politics and art, and the inevitable slip into vacuous lad culture, betrayal, broken promises, bad drugs, and bands like Northern Uproar. Harris chronicles the era with insight, poignancy and wry humour, ultimately it's a sad story, and in retrospect occasionally embarrassing, but if you were there you'll have some fond memories of that time when, all too briefly, you felt a part of something big, something vital, something all our own.

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### **Agnese says**

In questo periodo di Brexit, di crisi dei governi e di delirio nazionalista - comune un po' a tutte le nazioni -

leggere questo libro è stato illuminante. Il Britpop è (o meglio, è stata) l'ultima grande scena musicale del 21° secolo, e in seguito non è più successo nient'altro di altrettanto grandioso. Un'imperterrita celebrazione durata un decennio, i cui capisaldi erano l'orgoglio di essere inglesi e la rivalutazione della musica britannica. In questo clima di positività e fioritura culturale nascono e crescono le più importanti band del periodo: Blur, Suede, Elastica, Pulp, Oasis, Menswear - per citare giusto le principali; i membri dei gruppi si amano, si odiano, sperimentano con sostanze più o meno legali, mettono su concertoni epici, fanno andare in paranoia i capi delle case discografiche, danno inizio a battaglie commerciali e si augurano di contrarre l'AIDS. Sembra che tutti si divertano un sacco, in un modo o nell'altro, ma ecco che dietro l'angolo si cela un'imminente presenza: Tony Blair, oramai confermato come prossimo primo ministro britannico laburista, cerca di arruffianarsi i musicisti in tutti i modi per rendere il suo nuovo governo il più figo possibile e più appetibile ai giovani; alla fine, c'è chi abbocca e chi volta le spalle sentendo puzza di fregatura. Ed ecco, in più di 400 pagine, perfettamente illustrato, il racconto della Cool Britannia: nascita, apice e decaduta. Qualcosa che si è voluto con fermezza ma che poi si è voluto uccidere perché diventato troppo stantio e opprimente. Una scena che celebrava sé stessa, i suoi valori e la propria nazione, ma con un'incredibile apertura al mondo. Un groviglio di musica e politica, uno spaccato di storia inglese in cui tutti si sono sentiti nel posto giusto al momento giusto. O quasi.

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### **Lee Broderick says**

From the outside, Britpop must have appeared to be a strange thing. For one of the only times since the 1950's the UK had a musical culture all its own - different from that in the USA (which was at the time, as I understood, dominated by college rock - or else rudderless). To see it this way though is to rather miss the point: Britpop was never a music genre, it was a zeitgeist. In the mid-nineties the banner covered bands and artists as disparate as Radiohead, Black Grape and PJ Harvey. That is it included rock and dance as well as pop; Britpop, really, was about British youth embracing a peculiarly British culture - one which assumed that British bands, British fashion designers and British everything was simply (contrary to everything we'd seen since the 1970's) better. Eventually, this resulted in the bizarre culmination of its stars being invited to 10 Downing Street.

This book does a good job of charting, conveying and explaining the rise and fall of Britpop and I found it entertaining (though perhaps this was partly through nostalgia). What I think it suffered from though was an isolationist perspective: Britpop may have appeared strange but actually (as with the college rock noted above) it was not unique. There were profound political changes in the 1990's in all of Europe, not just in the UK, and these were often related and had similar cultural outcomes in the Western World. In that light, this book seeks to answer the question of whatever happened to counter culture.

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### **Brian Macdonald says**

This is a very well written and well researched book. I highly recommend it. John Harris is a strong writer.

The printed paperback copy I bought, however, was not well produced. It's poorly typeset, poorly copy-edited, and poorly printed, on cheap paper. The interior black and white photos were blurry and low-resolution. Interior printing marks indicate that the book was a POD copy printed by LSI.

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## Warwick says

I've had to restart this review several times, because it keeps turning into a sort of personal playlist of my favourite tracks of the 90s. I'm going to try and keep the impulse in check, but it's hard, because Britpop came along at the perfect time for me. I had hardly been interested in current music, growing up – by my early teens, when everyone was music-mad, the prevailing genre was grunge and the prevailing mood was a concomitant affection of moody self-loathing and unwashed fringes. It just didn't speak to me at all. Then, suddenly, everything changed.

I can't remember who induced me to get a copy of *Modern Life is Rubbish* but I do distinctly remember listening to it for the first time in 1993. I was so unused to hearing people sing in English accents that I actually burst out laughing during 'For Tomorrow' – it almost felt like a comedy album to me, which is amazing to think now. And not just the accents – the words, too, were about the experience of London and suburban Britain that I recognised. The opening bars of 'Colin Zeal' still give me a vision of my bedroom that afternoon.

I never quite appreciated how deliberate this enhanced Englishness was to the inception of (what would be labelled as) Britpop – Blur wrote the album after a disastrous American tour and all of the major players were animated by a desire to oppose American grunge with something home-grown. At the time, to be honest it felt more like a happy coincidence than anything strategic. Harris sets out the chronology really well – from the first flutterings of the Manchester scene with The Stone Roses and Happy Mondays, through the transitional early work of Suede, and into the full Britpop explosion with Blur's second album and Oasis's first.

But, as Damon Albarn reflects later, far from being Britpop against the world, it was every band for themselves. It's astonishingly acrimonious from the inside – they all seem to have loathed each other with a fiery hatred.

'[Blur's] guitarist I've got a lot of time for. The drummer I've never met – I hear he's a nice guy. The bass player and singer – I hope the pair of them catch AIDS and die because I fucking hate them two.'

—Noel Gallagher

'We felt a common cause with Pulp at first. We really supported them. But in a lot of ways, they were even bigger cunts than Oasis. They were in our birds' knickers: devious little fuckers.'

—Alex James

It was a bit disconcerting finding out quite how obnoxious some of my teenage heroes really were. On the evidence of this book, they were all unremittingly awful to each other, and the bitchiness is exacerbated by an incestuous fluidity between band-members. Justine Frischmann, of course, originally part of Suede and dating Brett Anderson, left him for Damon Albarn, thereby prompting Albarn's gargantuan competitive streak; her guitarist Donna Matthews started off dating Elastica's drummer but dropped him for the guy from Menswear. Albarn himself was so extravagantly and consistently unfaithful to Justine that, when she went to visit him in Reykjavik, she stopped into a local comedy club and found someone performing a sketch about how all the new babies born that year were called Damon.

Her own band was one of the wittiest, most joyful pop-punk groups around in the early-mid nineties; the fact that they only managed one decent album before falling apart is as good an illustration as any of the deleterious effects of drugs on the 90s music scene. Unlike the mind-expanding 1960s, the 90s was all about cocaine, originally – which at least kept people fairly productive – and later, heroin, which just kept them sitting in the corner of a bedsit staring at the insides of their eyelids. Donna spent nights on tour getting beaten up or worse in crack dens; she tried Naltrexone implants to curb the cravings, but her addiction got so bad that she would just yank the stitches out, jam her fingers in her abdomen, and gouge the implants out so she could shoot up again.

As Harris says, ‘only the most talented minds could successfully navigate all this: in many cases, the basic chapters of most careers – aspiration, achievement and rapid decline – were enacted over little more than three years’. Damon Albarn is still around and still making interesting music, but it’s hard to think of anyone else who’s survived into the 2010s. OK, Noel Gallagher is still recording, but...meh. Oasis were the soundtrack to my last years of school, but I could never get over how feeble the lyrics were and they kept writing the same (pretty fun) song over and over again. (‘It was difficult to think of any group whose career had combined stratospheric success with such stubbornly limited horizons.’) Noel was always a talented songwriter but you kind of felt sorry for him; watching him drag his brother around always put me in mind of Clint Eastwood with that orangutan.

When it comes to assessing the music itself, though, Harris is as hit-and-miss as any other music critic; you either share his taste or you don’t. He can be quite dismissive of bands that weren’t in the top tier of Britpop; I loved Sleeper and Echobelly and Gene and several other groups that get pretty short shrift here, and other bands are excluded on the grounds that he does not consider them Britpop. So there is barely any mention of Radiohead (who did not have the kind of decline and fall that Harris considers emblematic), and no reference to my own favourite music of the time, namely trip hop and the Bristol sound. I suppose he’s right that they’re all different genres, but at the time it felt like part of one big renaissance to me.

At any rate, by the time it was big news, it was already all over: the fuck-you female leads like Frischmann and Louise Wener were diluted into the ‘girl power’ of the Spice Girls, Alan McGee went cold turkey, and Blur wrote their best work (the self-titled *Blur* (1997) and the brilliantly miserable *13* (1999)) when they ditched the music-hall vaudeville and finally opened themselves up to American influences. But while it lasted, the whole thing was glorious, and reliving it through this book will have you flicking through your old CDs with melancholy, nostalgic glee.

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## **Mark says**

An exhaustive history of four frantic years in British culture - the rise of Britpop, the end of 18 years of Tory rule and the coronation of Tony Blair.

The focus is mostly on the music, and covers it in great depth. Even hardened Britpop fans will find some revelations in here.

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## **Jordan Cullen says**

Published when New Labour was still full of life, this is an engrossing and level-headed history of arguably

the 1990s' most significant musical movement, its movers and shakermakers, as captured by a journalist at the heart of the coverage. As close to a definitive history of Britpop as you're likely to find.

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