

## Britpop and Blairism

The cover of star of the Autumn 1996 edition of New Labour New Britain, 'The Magazine for Labour Party Members', was not the suited and smiling shadow-cabinet spokesperson one might expect, but an enigmatically be-shaded Noel Gallagher. Not only was Oasis' guitarist/songwriter on the cover, but the centre-fold of the magazine was a feature co-written by Martin Moriarty and no less a person than the party's press secretary, Alastair Campbell, entitled 'New Labour, New Britpop'. The article offers a brief account of Britpop which is remarkable at once for its precise and incisive analysis, and for its rather terrifying political implications.

Having dwelt on last year's much-hyped rivalry between Blur and Oasis, the piece concludes :

But if the bands are very different, it might even be that it's what they share that so marks them. Neither of them could have happened without The Smiths in the 1980s (Damon inherited Morrissey's sense of theatre, Noel always wanted to play like guitarist Johnny Marr). And both of them are rooted in the 60's tradition of song-writing that includes the hummability of The Beatles, the alluringly rough edges of The Rolling Stones and the essentially English quirkiness of The Small Faces or The Kinks.

And its not just pop history that echoes down the decades. Thirty years ago the country was escaping from the stifling austerity of the Tory 1950s into the white heat of the technological revolution and Harold Wilson's 1960's Labour governments. After the first wave of Black American dance music (from Motown), it was British bands that provided the soundtrack for a generation as young people wanted an alternative to dancing away the blues, more rooted in their own experience of pet-shops, bus stops and pie and mash.

Thirty years on, after another wave of American-inspired dance music, (the house beats that dominated the charts from 1988 onwards) there's a demand for songs that couldn't have been written anywhere else but here, that Blur, Oasis and everybody else have shown themselves more than able to satisfy.

Something has shifted, certainly. There's a new feeling on the streets. There's a desire for change. Britain is exporting pop music once again. Now all we need is a new government.

The historical elisions and inaccuracies here are less important than what this article gets right. That the Labour Party's official publication should happily endorse the sentiments expressed here says much about New Labour and the types of Britain that it is and is not prepared to envisage.

There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack...

Let's not be coy. The implications are clear. Britpop is being praised in this article for supplanting Black American music with White British sounds. This process is presented as in both cases being deeply connected with the welcome onset of a period of Labour government. The story being told (as stupidly misinformed as it may be) is this: Black American dance music dominates British youth culture; Authentic Native White guitar pop supplants it at the same time as a Labour government is elected; this constitutes a moment of national renewal. So in our case, Britpop=Blairism=the triumph of native white culture over Black American culture. The fact that Acid House (the music which first really popularised House in the UK) originated in black gay clubs in Chicago might unsurprisingly allow us to discern a little homophobia in with this story's explicit racism.

Britpop's little-England fairy tale, with its whiter-than-white version of 'The Sixties', might be wholly inaccurate (most Mods remained more interested in soul music than in those tiny handful of British guitar bands who claimed their allegiance, right through to the Northern Soul phenomenon of the 1970s), but that doesn't alter the fact that Campbell and Moriarty have clearly grasped the fundamental nature of Britpop; that it's an attempt to build a popular cultural hegemony on the basis of the discourse of 80's 'indie'. What's more, Campbell and Moriarty clearly understand that this discourse - exactly, it's beginning to seem, like Blairism - was and remains at the same time a reaction to Thatcherism and a defensive reaction to the threat posed to white suburbia by various unpleasant outsiders. Black cultures, queer cultures, feminist interventions (which abounded in the early 80's, just before The Smiths emerged) are all to be fended off with the magic formula of 4-piece guitar band and 3-minute pop song, or a platitude about family values.

Nothing has ever seemed to condense all of the multifarious threats which white straight middle-class men face as vividly and potently as the various musics which have streamed forth from urban American dancefloors. US nightclubs have been intersections of black, Hispanic and gay cultures for more than 20 years. According to the traditional white rocker, dancing is for girls, for gays, for blacks, for the poor. Whether it's punks wearing 'Disco Sucks' T-Shirts, Morrissey exhorting us to 'Hang the DJ', the Manic Street Preachers decrying 'Motown Junk' or indeed the Labour Party's press secretary thanking Blur and Oasis for ridding the charts of House music, black-originated dance musics have been the hate-objects of choice for terrified white boys for a very long time.

#### New Labour, New Lads

Britpop isn't just about ethnic identity, and its emergence at exactly the same time as 'New Lad' culture is no co-incidence. Having explicitly rejected Grunge - and with it Kurt Cobain's cross-dressing, his amazing public endorsement of archetypal British post-punk feminists The Raincoats, and the Riot Grrrl movement - Britpop prefers a far tamer, more English approach to sexuality. This is entirely symptomatic of the reactionary sexual politics which informs Britpop' - and Campbell's and Moriarty's - apparent nostalgia for The-Moment-Before-the-Women's' Movement. It's no accident that 1966 is the moment which Britpop and much of 'New Lad' culture looks back on as Golden Age. The era of Alfie and the dolly bird, of silent wide-eyed girls on the back of bikes and scooters, is remembered with an unproblematic affection by the readers of Loaded and Melody Maker alike. It's not just that we won the World Cup; the moment immediately before Women's Liberation, Black Power, Gay Pride etc. shook the self-confidence of normative white male heterosexuality is an obvious point of reference for this group who no longer occupy quite the privileged place they once did. The anxiety being suffered by a generation of young men no longer sure of their place in the scheme of things is well-documented, and Loaded and Oasis are symptomatic of this malaise just as is Tony Blair's reluctance to offer any moral support to single mothers.

If Britpop makes concessions to liberal feminism in allowing a couple of woman-fronted bands to join its second or third ranks, it's only on condition that singers like Justine Frischmann and Louise Wiener adopt an identity forged from an almost impossibly unthreatening alloy of sex-appeal and androgyny. Compared to anyone from the Riot Grrrls to Madonna to Pram to the Spice Girls, Britpoppers look and sound like people who've abandoned any kind of feminist project (as Wiener for one is more than happy to make explicitly clear). Just like Blairism, Britpop offers a gender settlement in which a few women are allowed to act like men, but in which the feminist demand for autonomous recognition is to be wholly abandoned and disavowed. 1966 was hardly a golden year for feminism; if it had been then the feminist resurgence which immediately followed it would not have been necessary. We shouldn't share this nostalgia for a world we fought hard to be free of. And while-thankfully - Blair seems to have a genuine commitment to certain versions of liberal

feminism and gay liberation, an equally nostalgic discourse on the importance of traditional family structures (which inevitably marginalises those who cannot or will not participate in them) remains central to the communitarian rhetoric of New Labour.

### A Settled and Insular People?

This isn't to overlook the fact that in many other ways 1966 was a high point for the British people. This was, apart from anything else, the only time since 1945 that a Labour government has won an outright majority in a general election. No-one can entirely be blamed for harking back to the moment before mass unemployment, declining expectations, the destruction of the welfare state and the collapse of socialism as a time when there at least seemed to be hope for a better future. But it's difficult to put a positive gloss on even socialist nostalgia when its cast in terms like these, and as a vision of Britain past, present or future it ought to leave us cold. Campbell and Moriarty's nostalgia for a 'world of pet-shops, bus-stops and pie and mash' doesn't sound much different to John Major's evocation of cricket on the village green and spinster's cycling to evensong.

Even without explicit racism, sexism and homophobia, a vision of British culture which emphasises domesticity and localised authenticity is a depressingly limited one. Philip Dodd takes up just this issue in a recent Demos pamphlet. Dodd could be referring directly to Britpop and this New Labour elegy to it when he refers to the persistence - and historical inaccuracy - of

the story the British people are told: that they are a settled and insular people.

Writing against that imaginary Britishness which is insular, parochial and conservative, Dodd writes

Just for a moment imagine a Britain that has been a multi-ethnic state for along time, has had an appreciable appetite for change (as well as for power) and has been in the import/export business or as long as anyone can remember, trading goods, materials and ideas'

This Britain, as Dodd points out, has had just as much historical reality as any other. And unsurprisingly one of Dodd's own examples of such a Britain is to be found in the history of 'the traffic between American and Caribbean black music and British musicians.'

Now, although Campbell and Moriarty may see Britpop as evidence that 'Britain is exporting pop music', and although the music industry has looked to Oasis to re-build a bridgehead into the American market, the fact is that the long hoped-for Second British Invasion simply is not happening. 'Americans just don't get it' one of the Gallagher brothers quipped last year, after Oasis distinctly failed to take America by storm. British insularity is not selling abroad, and Britpop remains a prime example of a discourse on Britishness which has no time for import/export, preferring an ideal of a localised, essentialised, conservative and ethnically homogenous British identity. In opposition to such a notion, Dodd writes 'in praise of mongrels' in praise of a notion of British identity which recognises its hybrid fluidity, its internationality and multi-ethnicity, and which welcomes change and innovation. Such a version of Britishness is a million miles away from the self-conscious conservatism of Britpop and its advocates.

Simon Reynolds has actually made just this point with some force, while also pointing to other developments in our music culture which would sit much more comfortably with Dodd's vision of a hybrid nation. In an article worth quoting at length, Reynolds writes:

Relatively unheralded by the media, another generation of Britons are waiving the rules. There's the post-rock experimentalism of Laika, Pram, Techno-Animal etc.; the trip hop of Tricky, Wagon Christ and the Mo'Wax label; the 'artcore' jungle of 4 Hero, Dillinja, Droppin' Science, the Moving

Shadow label; the art-tekno weirdness of Aphex Twin, Bedouin Ascent, et al. All these strands of UK activity are either offshoots of, or deeply influenced by, club music and sound-system culture; sonically, they're informed by the rhythm-science and studio-magick of dub reggae, hiphop and techno. And all speak eloquently if non-verbally of the emergence of a new hybrid British identity, a mongrel, mutational mix of black and white. Britpop is an evasion of the multiracial, technology-mediated nature of UK pop culture in the '90s....

Perhaps even more than race, it's covert class struggle that underpins the Britpop phenom: the fetishising by mostly middle class bands and fans of a British working class culture that's already largely disappeared, is really a means of evading the real nature of modern prole leisure, which remains overwhelmingly shaped by rave.... E and rave transformed the UK into one funky nation, but you wouldn't be able to tell that from Britpop. From Blur's rickety arrangements of *Elastica* to the raunch-less turgidity of Oasis, Britpop is rhythmically retarded, to say the least. Partly, it's the result of cultural inbreeding, of a white pop tradition that's long since distanced itself from the R&B roots that made the Beatles and Stones dance bands; partly, it's a deliberate avoidance of anything that smacks of lumpen rave.

Thanks to rave, the most vital sectors of '90's UK subculture are all about mixing it up: socially, racially, and musically (DJ cut'n'mix, remixology's deconstructive assault on the song). Returning to the 3 minute pop tune that the milkman can whistle, reinvoking parochial England with no black people, Britpop has turned its back defiantly to the future. Here's hoping the future will respond in kind, and remember Britpop only as an aberrant, anachronistic fad--like trad jazz, the early '60s student craze that resurrected the Dixieland sound of 30 years earlier.

Let's hope so indeed, but I fear that more is at stake in Britpop than was at stake in Trad Jazz. As little as Trad had to do with the 'White Heat of Technology' (depsining even the saxophone as a dangerous innovation!), Blairism and Britpop seem to be playing frighteningly in tune.

### New Labour, Middle England

Two discourses on Britishness are in competition here - Little Britain vs, the Hybrid Nation - and it's clear enough which side New Labour is on. Not that one needs to analyse its musical tastes to get a sense of just how little New Labour cares about retaining Black Britain or working class youth as part of its imaginary coalition. As Kevin Davey points out, Blair and Straw have been happy to appeal to Middle England's deep-seated social conservatism:

New labour's economic orthodoxy and low taxation policies were therefore given a moral spin and wrapped in an appropriately conservative social policy. Blair addressed the rise in crime and the fall of education. Jack Straw promised to clear the streets of winos, graffiti and 'squeegee merchants' and to imprison noisy neighbours.

This appeasement of Middle England reinforced the party's restricted pluralism and cultural inertia. It also impaired new Labour's relationship with Britain's black communities, overwhelmingly but not exclusively Labour voters....

The criminalisation of black politicians is a related and deep-seated political reflex common to both parties. Racialised codes link it to Labour's wider crusades against crime, single parents and drugs, which are interpreted - by visible minorities and Middle England - as promises to police rather than appease Britain's black communities.

A recent survey has shown that the number of young black Britons not intending to vote at the next election (a proportion approaching a record 80%) could be enough to swing the result in several key marginal constituencies. It would be good news for Labour if any significant number of them were to return to the political process from which they are so obviously excluded at present, but as

things stand the mass abstention of young Black Britain could leave many vulnerable Tory MPs in place. New Labour may be making a serious tactical error in rejecting young blacks and their cultures, as well as displaying appalling taste in music.

Simon Reynolds' comments on the class character of Britpop and rave and also have a great deal of relevance for a consideration of the class contours of New Labour. In particular, New Labour displays not the slightest interest in working class youth. Campbell's and Moriarty's satisfaction at (as they see it) Britpop displacing House is the satisfaction of a layer of suburban white middle-class men who believe that they have successfully hegemonised contemporary popular culture, and hope soon to do the same within political culture at large. House music has its main constituency among working class white youth, unlike the self-consciously prole-playing Oasis (decried in *The Sun* but feted in *The Guardian*), and the adoption of 'indie' as Radio One's Most Favoured Genre is a victory for that tiny section of the population - all those pale and funkless NME subscribers - who stuck with it through the eighties and early nineties. At the same time, it is a blow against dance culture and all the good that it has done. New Labour seems more than happy to go along with this. New Labour's support for the Criminal Justice Act and its self-declared war on noisy neighbours include no proposals for providing young people with the facilities to participate in their own culture legally. While Blair speaks the language of community, the attempt by groups like Exodus collective in Luton to forge a real grassroots community politics gets no support at all from Blair or the fun-hating Jack Straw. The marginalisation of dance culture in the courts as in the media is something that New Labour is more than happy to support. It needn't be like this. It wouldn't be hard for councils and lottery-money administrators to give some support to local groups who want to put on free parties, for instance. If rumours of a Goldie/Gallagher collaboration prove true (and rumours that John Peel is being prevented from having non-Britpop acts on his show don't), then perhaps we could soon hear a more pluralist tune being played, to inspire New Labour to soften its stance and open to the left a little, remembering Labour's Sixties liking for liberal social policies as well as 3-chord guitar pop. But at the moment this seems unlikely.

Britpop and Blairism between them might be said to constitute an almost fully-fledged hegemonic project, an attempt to build a broad-based coalition around a specific idea of British identity, community and history. The Britpop/New Labour project has some things to commend it, certainly as an alternative to another four years of half-baked Thatcherism. After all, remembering the 60's as a Golden Age is better than remembering the 50's as a Golden Age, and a lot has happened in the past 30 years which all of us would rather forget. But in trying to forget 30 years of disturbance, dislocation and decline, this Story of Britain forgets too much else. The hard-won gains of feminism, the sexual revolution, and multiculturalism are in danger of being lost in the process of re-imagining Britain as a non-Thatcherite nation whose Typical Individual is a Straight White Lad. Britpop-Blairism proposes a version of British identity which is profoundly undemocratic and anti-pluralist, closing doors to many people. Blacks, queers and feminists, working-class youth (not to mention the heavy metal fans whose music has been arbitrarily banned from Radio One); the list of enemies -of -Britpop is precisely the same as the list of groups of traditional Labour supporters which New Labour is in the process of alienating beyond the point of reconciliation. If it really believes that it can govern for a term without the support of these people, then it can happily carry on regardless. If not it ought to start humming a slightly different tune. Preferably one with a breakbeat.

## Bibliography

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