

Commercial Alternative

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- Slow down / You're taking me *over*...¹
- Another victory like that and we are done for.²

By the end of the 1980s, popular culture and media commentary brimmed with a self-conscious desire to name and describe the present. Few decades have had as clear an account of themselves as the 1980s, whatever the gaps and limits of that account. The 1990s became ever more sure of what had happened in the 1980s; but packing the 1990s themselves into a compelling summary proved more difficult. For the time being, those looking for stories of the last decade must make do with tracts like Stephen Bayley's *Labour Camp*, a brief, bilious assault on the aesthetics and politics of Blair's first term. For all his rancour, snobbery and carelessness, Bayley lands a few hits, and leaves a few hints. Bayley reads New Labour in terms not of social and economic policy, but of taste and image: Blair's choice of car, the efforts at 'rebranding Britain', the design of the Dome. The cultural emblem of the Blair years, he proposes, is Elton John:

He is a popular phenomenon, therefore it is irrelevant and elitist even to wonder if he is actually any good. He is emphatically middle-of-the-road. He is classless.... After a much-reported past of rock-star excess, he is clean, dried out.... Whoever would have thought you could relaunch old Labour? Whoever would have thought you could relaunch Elton John? The parallels between the two transformations are remarkable.³

The thought is suggestive, but leaves much unsaid about the new terrain inherited and shaped by the Blair government. The problem from which this essay will proceed is that 'middle of the road', by the end of the 1990s, was not what it had once been. Nor, for that matter, was the hard shoulder. Elsewhere Bayley sees as emblematic Tony Blair's brief consortation with Oasis – 'Or at least, with Oasis's yobbish, simian, leering, foul-mouthed songwriter and guitarist sharing a glass of People's champagne at

¹ Suede, 'The Drowners', Nude records single, 1992.

² James Joyce, *Ulysses* ed. Hans Walter Gabler, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986, p20.

³ Stephen Bayley, *Labour Camp: The Failure of Style over Substance*, Basingstoke: Pan, 1999, p46.

Downing Street with the Prime Minister'.⁴ But are Oasis, an act from independent guitar rock, really part of the same cultural milieu as Elton John? If they are, how and when did it happen? Trying to answer this question will lead us toward some major issues in the culture of the 1990s. The general argument of this essay is that the decade witnessed a new configuration of taste – including the construction of new, enlarged and profitable 'alternative' fields – across various kinds of cultural production. These ultimately seemed to parallel, and to support, the new configuration of politics. To explore these developments requires detailed analyses of particular fields. Many are possible – film, television, publishing, politics itself. The particular route here, one of the most telling available, will be the fate of 'alternative' pop music.

The history of popular music has long included the history of immanent subversion that is independent pop. But the 1990s saw this area operationalized much more fully within commercial culture. We might say not that the division between mainstream and alternative was broken down, but that (paradoxical, or even impossible, as it sounds) the division was resituated within the mainstream. 'Alternative' culture did not, on the whole, simply replace its previous antagonists: a coexistence was brokered between them. Both alternative and middle-of-the-road culture became subdivisions within corporate culture: options, tools, images.

My account of the recent importance of what we may call Corporate Indie – or what a Teenage Fanclub title wryly dubbed 'Commercial Alternative'⁵ – does not mean blindness to the compromises made by previous forms of independent culture. This culture has always been in a changing relationship with large cultural organizations and sources of capital, from EMI to the BBC. Equally, its formal development has always occurred in relation to that of the mainstream: the history of independent pop is among other things a dialogue with non-independent pop, in which both participants have repeatedly been transformed. Nonetheless, the 1990s saw a new chapter in this story, in which independence became – depending on one's perspective – a more problematic ideal, or a more profitable idea. Before discussing its recent fate, let us examine how that idea of independence was initially formed.

Loser Wins: Towards Indie

The definition of indie is a notorious conundrum. The obvious definition is important: it implies the products of independent record labels – in turn

⁴ Bayley, *Labour Camp*, p87.

⁵ On Teenage Fanclub, *Thirteen*, Creation Records LP, 1993.

defined by their difference from the corporate 'majors'. But the idea of indie is no more reducible to this than 'postmodernism' simply means anything after modernism. Independent record production has existed alongside major label record production since before rock & roll, when small labels were known as 'mongrels',⁶ and most musical genres have been released on independent labels; in the 1990s and since, dance music is a notable example. (It is arguable, in fact that each genre of popular music has generated its own independent wing, a challenge to the centre and a provocation to change.) In the 1980s, the fact that Stock, Aitken and Waterman's phenomenally successful chart-pop dominated the indie as well as the main charts was a striking anomaly, and awkward for anyone wishing to define indie in strictly economic terms. The definition of indie in question here is narrower. It denotes, in effect, an sub-plot in the history of rock: of pop music associated with white musicians and listeners, and aurally dominated by guitars. More specifically, it signifies the concerted attempt, in the wake of punk rock in the early 1980s, to forge a popular music apart from the major labels and governed by imperatives other than commerce. Central to the indie ideal is the refusal to sell out; mainstream chart success is viewed as a potential source of corruption. A suggestive analogy is offered by Pierre Bourdieu's theorization of the 'cultural field', in which 'the economy of practices is based, as in a generalized game of "loser wins", on a systematic inversion of the fundamental principles of all ordinary economies: that of business (it excludes the pursuit of profit and does not guarantee any sort of correspondence between investments and monetary gains), that of power (it condemns honours and temporal greatness), and even that of institutionalized cultural authority (the absence of any academic training or consecration may be considered a virtue)'.⁷ The rhetorical priority of an indie scene is, in Bourdieu's terms, the 'autonomous' perfection of the form, not the 'heteronomous' attempt to cash in on it. (Perfection here, though, is not consecrated or 'musicianly' as in progressive rock: punk leaves behind an aesthetic of acceptable amateurism.)

Historically, two other emphases have vied with commerce for centrality in pop music. One is deviance, which was central to early cultural studies' interest in pop.⁸ Pop, in this view, is associated with protest: or more simply with generational anger, ennui or general disturbance. The other is art. The 1960s' nervous interest in the quality of McCartney's melodies and Dylan's 'poetry' marks a key instalment of this

⁶ On early independent pop labels see Charlie Gillett, *The Sound of the City*, London: Sphere, 1971, ch. 5.

⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* ed. Randal Johnson, Cambridge: Polity, 1993, p39.

⁸ See Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, London: Methuen, 1979.

idea⁹, but the more abundant fruit is in the beginning of the tradition of rock criticism. In the *New Musical Express* and *Melody Maker* in Britain, *Village Voice* and *Rolling Stone* in the US, there develops a distinctive sub-genre of discourse about pop – or indeed the more weighty-sounding *rock*.¹⁰ To an extent, the perceived distinction between rock and pop maps onto that between art and commerce. A framework emerges in which certain versions of popular music can be treated, not only as cynically financial corporate ventures, but as the authentic expressions of talented individuals.

Both ideas, deviance and art, leave a residue in post-punk independent music – in the linked ideas of a music scene which also implies a kind of alternative society or subculture, and a pop which is made for love not money. A number of other, more variable, themes are also implicated in indie. These have included an anti-establishment attitude (more or less politically articulate); an aspiration towards withdrawal from the broader social world and its imperatives; a high premium placed on innocence and authenticity; and a disapproval of binary gender roles – in particular, of machismo. In these ways indie unites a conception of pop as art with a revision of ‘deviance’: a qualified, self-conscious dissent which operates not only against political power or the older generation, but also against the norms enshrined (frequently as versions of ‘deviance’) by other youth cultures.

The most incisive formulation of all these subcultural features was made by Simon Reynolds in the mid-1980s. Surveying fanzines, record sleeves and teenage fashion, Reynolds saw a cult of childhood – ‘dufflecoats... outsize pullovers... bows and ribbons and ponytails, plimsolls and danty white ankle-socks, floral or polka-dot frocks’.¹¹ An *I-D* trendspotting column of 1987 listed similar signs: ‘Childlike innocence and assumed naivety permeate the Cutie scene – their clothes are asexual, their haircuts are fringes, their colours are pastel. Cuties like Penguin modern

⁹ On the pop art moment and the development of self-consciousness about pop tradition, see Jon Savage, ‘The simple things you see are all complicated’, in Hanif Kureishi and Jon Savage (eds), *The Faber Book of Pop*, London: Faber, 1995, ppxxvii-xxix. For a literary-academic approach to Dylan see Frank Kermode and Stephen Spender, ‘The Metaphor at the End of the Funnel’, and Christopher Ricks, ‘Clichés and American English’, in Elizabeth Thomson and David Gutman (eds), *The Dylan Companion*, London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990, pp155-62 and 163-72 respectively.

¹⁰ The prime academic theorist of ‘rock’ is Lawrence Grossberg: see his *Dancing In Spite of Myself*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997, part one.

¹¹ Simon Reynolds, ‘Against Health and Efficiency: Independent Music in the 1980s’, in Angela McRobbie (ed), *Zoot Suits and Second-Hand Dresses: An Anthology of Fashion and Music*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989, p251.

classics, sweets, ginger beer, vegetables and anoraks'.¹² The music itself, Reynolds reported, was wide-eyed and plaintive, rooted in folk rather than funk. The iconography of childhood was matched in the lyrics by a rhetoric of dreamy innocence: 'furtive first love, gazing across schoolyards, waiting by the gates'.¹³ And the overt sexuality which by the 1980s had become mainstream pop's main resource was countered by a desexualized conception of romance, in which the mind of the unrequited lover displaced the promiscuous body celebrated elsewhere.

Reynolds' indie systematically inverted the norms of modern leisure, pitting ethereality against carnality, celibacy against sexuality, pallid illness against tanned health, androgyny against reified gender, the authenticity of the gig or demo tape against the gloss of the pop video. And in all these ways, he proposed, it represented a sullen strike against the existing order: an attempt to counter the vulgarity of Thatcher's country with an imagined other land, a 'parallel system... bound in reaction' to the music and society it spurned.¹⁴ Indie-pop – drawing inspiration, no doubt, from its unwitting avatars, Salinger's Holden Caulfield and Plath's Esther Greenwood – was founded on refusal. In its eschewal of aggression, though, this refusal was notably different from its predecessors in rock history: not least that made by punk rock in the late 1970s. The rhetoric of riot had been replaced by the iconography of innocence: subcultural youth had become less delinquent than regressive.

Reynolds' ideal version of 1980s indie would inevitably be tempered by the variety of actual practice. But it remained the most acute summation of what had coalesced as indie culture. Steve Redhead drew similar conclusions in his 1990 survey of the independent scene, finding 'a reworking of folk ideology', opposing itself to a 'Style Culture... already... branded as conservative and conformist'. The scene's political meaning is 'the refusal of citizenship': the valorisation of innocence is a knowing snub to a disciplinary society of government schemes and identity cards (one Thatcherite threat which never did materialize in the 1990s).¹⁵ Yet by the time Redhead's book appeared, independent music was already profoundly changing. The 1980s ended with Morrissey's single 'Ouija Board, Ouija Board' famously eclipsed on *Top of the Pops* by the

¹² I-D 46 (1987), quoted in Steve Redhead, *The End-of-the-Century Party: Youth and Pop Towards 2000*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990, p82.

¹³ Reynolds, 'Against Health and Efficiency', p248. The specific bands namechecked by Reynolds include (in order of citation) A Witness, Shrubs, the Jesus and Mary Chain, Husker Du, Sonic Youth, AR Kane, Blue Aeroplanes, Primal Scream, the Mighty Lemon Drops, the Weather Prophets, the Bodines, the Soup Dragons, the Woodentops, the Pastels, BMX Bandits, Talulah Gosh, the Hobgoblins, Orange Juice and the Smiths.

¹⁴ Reynolds, 'Against Health and Efficiency', p253.

¹⁵ Redhead, *End-of-the-Century Party*, pp81, 87-8.

appearance, in the same edition in November 1989, of Manchester's new musical leadership, Happy Mondays and the Stone Roses. This as much as any was the emblematic moment when Baggy crossed over: when the new hybrid of rock and dance music, and the paraphernalia that went with it, placed indie centre-stage. The 1990s, in effect, start here.

Fool's Gold: Crossover Indie

The evident centre of the 'Madchester' canon is the Stone Roses' eponymous debut LP, released in May 1989. But in aural terms, that record hardly marked a breakthrough. Its basis was a four-piece rock line-up; its primary texture replicated the major indie sound of the 1980s, the arpeggiated jangle which the Smiths' Johnny Marr and a host of others had resurrected from the Byrds' Roger McGuinn, who had worked it up from folk music. The jangle was at once a piece of rock classicism and a gesture of rootsy, real-ale authenticity. It was also an androgynous, wilfully emasculated style, in which the thrust of the rock riff was displaced by a flowery scatter of harmonious notes.¹⁶ Lyrically, too, *The Stone Roses* mostly remained within the indie template, replaying the disembodied devotion that Reynolds had identified: 'Have you seen her, have you heard? / The way she plays: there are no words / To describe the way I feel'.¹⁷ The record's verbal terrain was elemental and abstract, made of light, water, air – and 'stone', the band's prime verbal icon.

The Stone Roses, then, came straight out of indie, and were a long time breaking with its sonic and semantic terrain. Yet in late 1989 they made one of the most celebrated breaks in the movement's history, when the 'Fool's Gold' ep replaced four-square earnestness with shuffling funk. Interviewed by John Robb at the end of the year, Ian Brown said they were moving 'in a groove direction'; Robb himself described 'Fool's Gold' as 'reacting more to the house thing than the album'.¹⁸ The Roses' allotted place in pop legend would be as the band that blended indie and dance. Ethnic connotations were involved: baggy is held to have infused the metronomic rhythms of 'white' rock with the syncopation of 'black' modes. The loping rhythm that underpins 'Fool's Gold' was not a unique breakthrough: it was already being leaned on heavily not only by Happy Mondays but by an act like Stourbridge's Wonder Stuff. But what really distinguished the Roses was mass popularity. At the end of 1989 they played to 7,000 at Alexandra Palace: an extraordinary figure eclipsed in

¹⁶ See Simon Reynolds and Joy Press, *The Sex Revolts: Gender, Rebellion and Rock'n'Roll*, London: Serpent's Tail, 1995, p184.

¹⁷ The Stone Roses, 'She Bangs The Drums', *The Stone Roses*, Silvertone LP, 1989.

¹⁸ John Robb, *The Nineties: What The F**k Was That All About?*, London: Ebury, 1999, pp73, 72.

turn by the 30,000 crowd at their Spike Island show in mid-1990. The band's impact was visible to an unusual degree, thanks to the adoption, all over the UK, of 'Madchester' fashion: flared jeans, vast t-shirts, fishing hats. At the start of the 1990s this became an alternative uniform for *NME* readers, brasher than the Start-Rite aesthetic that Reynolds had pinpointed. The style was a hybrid, as the 'Casual' fashion that had developed on the football terraces of the North-West since the late 1970s took on a loping looseness analogous to the rhythms of the Roses and Mondays. Most importantly, it was popular, appealing to (and in large part derived from) working-class consumers and becoming standard issue in British youth culture.

The Baggy crossover thus worked on different levels. If it temporarily became an unavoidable part of Britain's visual landscape, it also marked the hybridizing expansion of indie: musically, beyond its existing rhythms into black genres; socially, into the clubland and drugs that had become the centre of pop deviance during the moral panics of the late 1980s.¹⁹ Such expansion was a shift from the indie ethic of the 1980s, which Reynolds had seen as turning ever more in upon its own purity. Madchester – summarized in the title of the Mondays' single *Twenty-Four-Hour Party People* – embraced precisely the hedonism against which Reynolds had seen indie taking a puritan stand. More precisely, it was a new, grass-roots hedonism: little to do with the glossy travelogues of Duran Duran videos, more about ungainly, chemically-encouraged dancing at the Hacienda. Still, the mood had changed.²⁰ The major protagonists of Baggy were unreliable standard-bearers: both Roses and Mondays would implode, the former having taken five notorious years to complete a second LP which owed more to Led Zeppelin than the Byrds or acid house. But the moment was significant. Madchester was the site of a new synthesis of students and casuals, margins and mainstream; in this it would set an example for the rest of the 1990s.

In America, the confrontation between alternative and mainstream was already proving more dramatic. The one thing that marked 'grunge' even more than its commercial triumph was its anxiety about that phenomenon. Nirvana's Kurt Cobain himself was unusually plagued by the betrayal of the indie ideal, and 'selling out' became almost an obsession in his lyrics and public pronouncements. The cover of the 9-million selling *Nevermind* (1991) had announced the dilemma, figuring the tragic encounter of innocence with commerce in a baby swimming towards a dollar bill. By the third LP, *In Utero* (1993), Nirvana were ostentatiously

¹⁹ See Redhead, *End-of-the-Century Party*, pp1-6.

²⁰ For evidence of this in another field, see Steve Redhead, *Football With Attitude*, Manchester: Wordsmith, 1991, an attempt to register the much-mooted transit of the acid atmosphere to the terraces.

seeking a return to authenticity with the hardcore producer Steve Albini, even or especially if that meant unlistenability. Cobain's unsubtle thematization of his plight was in evidence again, from the record's opening line ('Teenage angst has paid off well') to the raucous 'Radio-Friendly Unit Shifter' ('I do not want what I have got'). The dilemmas of success were probably not the fundamental reason for Cobain's suicide in April 1994, but his suicide note referred to the unbearable hypocrisy of stardom, and to the betrayed ideals of independence.²¹ Cobain's rhetoric was blunt, and his demise catastrophic; but in his melodramatic, self-destructive way he had seen the future of the 'alternative' with some clarity.

Grunge's place in American culture is central to the invention of a Corporate Alternative lifestyle in the 1990s. But it was also indirectly responsible for other changes. In Britain, the press was considered to have under-reacted disastrously to Cobain's death, showing itself out of touch with a generation's mood: it would try not to make that mistake again. Earlier than this, grunge had already been used as a counterweight in the development of Britain's own mainstream alternative.

The Great Escape: Britpop

If grunge was conceived as America's true punk explosion, Britpop initially grew out of London's far more self-consciously inauthentic attempt to rerun the late 1970s, the New Wave of New Wave. The idea was a return to concision and confrontation, short sharp songs in the mode of Wire or the Jam. Retrospection was thus present from the start of the Britpop episode. But the unwieldily named NWONW remained a project for the weekly press and its readers, imprisoned in Camden dives and the circuit of small rock clubs around the UK. The repackaged movement that crossed over made its first appearance on the cover of *Select* in April 1993. A number of bands – among them Suede, the Auteurs, Denim, Saint Etienne – were gathered under the new label and interviewed; the whole collation was heralded by an article asserting their rediscovery of a British pop tradition.²² The notional movement was defined by its difference from grunge, which was seen as a form of US cultural imperialism: under the heading 'Who Do You Think You Are Kidding, Mr Cobain?', a caricatured

²¹ See Cobain's suicide note at eg.

<http://www.geocities.com/SunsetStrip/Venue/6582/Nirvana/suicideimage.html>, last visited 20.12.2002.

²² Veteran observers of 1990s pop will notice that the original *Select* cadre was not what would become the established Britpop canon, even two or three years later – a reminder of how cultural history is improvised and rewritten as it happens.

illustration drew on the *Dad's Army* credits to show British indie repelling the Seattle invaders.²³

Britpop's invention of tradition encompassed World War II, 1960s television comedy, 1970s sweets – and, most importantly, a range of British rock bands, whose work was the site of theft, genuflection or both. The major reference points would multiply over the years. *Select's* original Britpop was spearheaded by Suede, whose major homage was to the sexual ambiguity of glam-era David Bowie. Blur's trilogy of LPs, *Modern Life Is Rubbish* (1993), *Parklife* (1994) and *The Great Escape* (1995) toured the British sounds of Pink Floyd, the Small Faces, new wave and ska, but above all the Kinks, whose mastermind Ray Davies appeared live with Blur's Damon Albarn in 1995. Supergrass, Michael Bracewell notes, 'were doing a passable imitation of the Spencer Davis Group'²⁴; Elastica were sued for the extent of their imitation of Wire and the Stranglers. Most insistently, Oasis relished and encouraged risky parallels with the Beatles. The varied connotations of these names allowed for the cultivation of difference within the movement; but they all implied an obsession with historical reference and pastiche within a specifically British frame. Britpop was among other things a karaoke pop movement, an opportunity for contemporary musicians to pose as their heroes; and the resulting pantheon formed a composite national tradition.

Yet the fluorescent colours and comic figures of that first world map in *Select* would remain telling: Britpop was as much a stylization of Britishness as a report on it. Some of its protagonists – Suede's Brett Anderson, Pulp's Jarvis Cocker – were interested in describing seediness and squalor: Cocker, in particular, passionately muttered and yelped of provincial disappointment, chintzy furniture, woodchip walls and broken biscuits. But the dominant tone of Britpop would become an insistent chirpiness, a winking chippiness exemplified by the mid-nineties 'mockney' persona of Albarn. Supergrass's major hit, 'Alright', was one musical embodiment of the mood, with its pub piano and faux-naïf vision of youthful high jinks. But the central aural example was *Parklife* itself, a record whose state-of-the-nation meditation was spread through style after musical style with an eclecticism unusual in a Number 1 LP. Blur would be scorned by more enthusiastically lumpen bands simply for knowing the word 'genre'; but their ability to hop between modes was instructive, in tacitly implying the inauthenticity of the retro exhibits around them.

Once again, the break from the 1980s is noteworthy. Indie pop, Reynolds noted, had staked much on an authenticity that it pitted against the world of MTV and wine bars; its political refusal was matched

²³ *Select*, April 1993, pp.60-1.

²⁴ Michael Bracewell, *The Nineties: When Surface Was Depth*, London: Flamingo, 2002, p16.

aesthetically in the 'retreat to an unbudgeable, sedimental "what really counts" – Good Songs, "quality", integrity'.²⁵ Something of this was replayed in the original hopes for Britpop, not least in *Select's* mobilization of down-to-earth Britain against expansionist America. But in the event, the movement's landscape was not the organic countryside but the 'chemical world' mooted by an early Blur single. After *Parklife*, for all its retro flair, there was no credible way back to a land without fun pubs and Happy Eaters; or indeed, musically, to jangly purism.

Oasis, unlike their rivals, still staked much on authenticity. Musically, they represented old-fashioned values: loud guitars, catchy tunes, presentation that was uncomplicated almost to the point of self-parody. They were also sold via an idea of the North as the home of these virtues, and as the extension of a North-Western tradition from the Beatles through the Smiths and the Stone Roses. In this they contrasted profitably with much of Britpop, associated as it was with London, fashion and art-school irony. In some ways Oasis communed with indie heritage: their dourness, their massive privileging of layered guitars (rather than the toytown keyboards of Blur or Pulp), their presence on Creation, which had fostered bands from the Jesus and Mary Chain and Felt to My Bloody Valentine and Ride. The continuity was more simply embodied in the role of Johnny Marr, who gave Noel Gallagher the guitar on which he had written the Smiths' epic 'How Soon Is Now?'.²⁶ At the same time, Oasis broke with indie more emphatically than anyone. Their rhetoric of violence, drugs and crime refused the pacific introversion of the cutie kid. The androgynous yearning still latent in the early 1990s' 'shoegazing' movement (Ride, Lush, Chapterhouse, Slowdive) was ousted by ostentatious, uncouth masculinity. Even without Liam Gallagher's regular public demands for fights with celebrities, the simian swagger of his very movement was a long way from the shy shamble of the indie male. What the Gallaghers represented was an affirmation of *rock* from within an indie context – an incongruity which accounted for much of their initial impact. If they began as a fusion of 'indie' and 'rock' traditions – a cross between, say, Ride and the Rolling Stones²⁷ – they progressively embraced the latter and shucked off the former.²⁸ And this was most obvious in their attitude to the issue at the heart of indie's self-definition: success.

²⁵ Reynolds, 'Against Health and Efficiency', p252.

²⁶ On the beginning of the Marr / Gallagher relationship, see Paul Mathur, *Take Me There: Oasis: The Story*, London: Bloomsbury, 1996, p17.

²⁷ This distinction was made untenable, however, by Ride themselves: their third LP *Carnival of Light* (1994) was a 1960s-1970s pastiche affair, which was swiftly eclipsed by Oasis' more direct approach to retro-rock.

²⁸ The role of Paul Weller in Oasis's career (he played on their second LP, and has frequently collaborated with Noel Gallagher) is important here. Resurrected to critical and commercial

From the start, the Gallaghers were unashamed of their ambition. The point of the exercise was to be 'the biggest band in the world': qualms about this were the timid voice of old indie, which had curbed bands' ambition for too long. Noel Gallagher's interview with *Loaded* in 1995 strongly restated this:

[Why] start a band? Because you want to be number one.... When we started, there was all this apathy about bands that had had success from our scene, the *NME* indie thing or whatever you want to call it, and they had got on *Top of the Pops* and moaned about it.

If you don't want to be the biggest band in the world then pack it in because there's loads of hungry kids who want to be the biggest band in the world. Anything else is mediocre. Who wants to be just all right? Not me.²⁹

Gallagher does slip ambiguously between artistic and commercial scales of success. Elsewhere in the interview, his response to charting at no.2, behind Blur, is to fall back on the aesthetic: '[I]t's like the jury is always rigged but the people, man, the people know and they do know. And if [Blur] do get their number one, well Englebert Humperdinck kept "Strawberry Fields" off the top. Englebert and Blur, Beatles and Oasis... it won't hurt me that I didn't get a number one because I know the people know. To us it's never been about who's biggest but who's got the best song and I think people know we've got the best songs'.³⁰ That last sentence flagrantly contradicts the unabashed commercialism of the statement quoted above. But the real point of Oasis was to close the gap: to dispel the dilemma of art and commerce by seeing those supposedly 'best songs' become the biggest too. Uniquely, the plan worked. Oasis remain the only band to emerge from 'the *NME* indie thing' and conquer the market on such a devastating scale. In doing so, they seemed to render the idea of indie incoherent, or redundant.

In retrospect we can divide Britpop into three phases. The *Select* splash was the fanfare of the early period, in which the movement's identity was still partly in flux, from Suede's breakthrough in 1992 to the start of 1994. 'High Britpop', starting with 'Girls and Boys' in March 1994, saw the movement's major long-players, from *Parklife* (May 1994) through

acclaim through the 1990s, the former Jam leader provided a kind of bridge between Oasis and an older, notably male audience still affiliated to post-punk and the 'classic rock' tradition (Who, Small Faces) upheld by Weller.

²⁹ *Loaded*, October 1995, p130. Gallagher's appearance on the front of the new-lad magazine tells its own story about the boozy blokeishness courted by Oasis; in that sense this front cover is as apt an image as any of Britain's 1990s.

³⁰ *Loaded*, October 1995, p173.

to Oasis's (*What's The Story?*) *Morning Glory* and Pulp's *Different Class* (October 1995). During this period of major musical and lyrical statements, the new ease with which crossover could be effected was still a matter for excitement among those who had served their time in the indie ghetto.³¹ By 1995, the rivalry between Blur and Suede's marginally different visions of England had been displaced by the pantomime war between Blur and Oasis, whose public battle in the singles charts of August 1995 was the highest-profile event in the history of British indie. That formation had always been founded, of course, on its distance from such matters. Its success, as 'Country House' and 'Roll With It' took the top two spots in the chart two weeks running, was also logically problematic.

When Oasis triumphed at the Brit awards in February 1996, they immediately made a special appearance on *Top of the Pops*, with Noel Gallagher wielding a guitar in the colours of the Union flag. The decadence of Britpop ran from this point on, and was characterized by two main features. On one hand, the fame of the movement's stars became embarrassingly bloated. Oasis, above all, replayed the excesses of pre-punk rock legend. The Burnage landscape of the Gallaghers' youth was displaced by Rolls-Royces, swimming pools and cocaine; Noel Gallagher self-parodically called his new London house 'Supernova Heights'; Johnny Depp played guitar on their third LP. Even Jarvis Cocker, who took on the status of thinking person's Britpop star, became known as a London ligger rather than a Sheffield outsider, spending a gossip-column year at bars and premieres. At the same time, the market was flooded with lower-level Britpop bands, to the point where three or more tiers of them could be constructed. If Blur and Oasis shared the summit, the likes of Sleeper and Cast were at best second-string, and Blur copyists Thurman were somewhere near the foot of the pile. Latecomers like the Supernaturals and the Candyskins, who spread second-hand cheeriness across the media of 1996 and 1997, might have been designed to precede ad breaks on Chris Evans' *TFI Friday* – itself a notable symptom of the world after Oasis and *Loaded*.

The dynamism that had powered the movement from 'The Drowners' to 'Wonderwall' was gone: the major acts began to retreat into alternative sounds (Blur's eponymous, deliberately uncharacteristic venture into US lo-fi rock in 1997) or 'comedown', morning-after records (Pulp's *This Is Hardcore* [1998], Oasis's *Standing On The Shoulder of Giants* [2000]). Yet simply to say that Britpop came and went is inadequate. Its demise left a changed musical landscape. After the mid-1990s, the meaning

³¹ Nicholas Barber points out that this moment was also distinguished by its momentum: the unusual speed and frequency of record releases by the major players enhanced the echo of the 1960s, when the production and release of records was a much faster process. 'Brit What?', *Independent on Sunday, Life Etc*, 2 February 2003, 3.

of 'indie' was altered. A new generation was forged – Stereophonics, Travis, Coldplay, Starsailor – which Andrew Mueller, writing in 2001, dubbed simply 'Corporate Rock'. Pre-Britpop, Mueller noted, such acts 'would have been thought of as indie groups, alternative artists, of interest only to students and other consumers of the weekly music press'. But after the 1990s, 'acts which could once have hoped at best for a well-kept plot in the graveyard of alternative rock are competing for chart positions and tabloid harassment against pre-fab pop groups', thanks not least to an affluent adult rock audience which wants 'a whiff, however spurious, of underground integrity' about its purchases.³² David Cavanagh, in 2000, sees a similar landscape: 'To the consumers of today, 'indie' means Travis, Coldplay and Stereophonics, bands that play guitars and don't sound like Britney Spears. But the original meaning of indie was something quite different. It described a culture of independence that was almost a form of protest: a means of recording and releasing music that had nothing to do with the major labels'.³³ For Cavanagh, a fundamental gulf separates the indie of the 1980s and that of the late 1990s: the latter is another tool in the corporate box. Indeed, he concludes, 'in the 21st century music business at least, stories of independence are history'.³⁴

Musically, corporate indie maintains a vestige of the old definition. It is guitar pop, not dance music. But the economic basis of independence has disappeared, or dwindled to a façade. Through the 1990s, major corporations bought up independent labels: to own their rosters, but also to provide a credible commercial front. The artistic kudos of the independents became a prize by which the majors could at once assert their own dedication to non-commercial values, and capture another niche market. In this sense the record industry of the 1990s enacted the same process of corporatization visible in other fields of cultural production and distribution, like publishing and film.³⁵ But the intended effect has been hard to secure: the knowledge that most important indie labels were no longer what their name implied actually made for a devaluation of the category, to the point where even a bona fide independent would automatically be suspected of being a corporate front. By the turn of the millennium, the existence of indie was thus ambiguous. The category was seemingly more prevalent than ever, but its old meaning had ceased to signify as before. Once again the logic feared by Cobain applies: the one thing the concept could not survive was success.

³² Andrew Mueller, 'Indentikit Rock', *Independent on Sunday, Life Etc*, 14 October 2001, p7.

³³ David Cavanagh, *The Creation Records Story: My Magpie Eyes are Hungry for the Prize*, London: Virgin, 2000, ppvi-vii.

³⁴ Cavanagh, *Creation Records Story*, pviii.

³⁵ For a US-based account of corporate cultural production in the 1990s, see John Seabrook, *Nobrow: The Culture of Marketing, the Marketing of Culture*, London: Methuen, 2000.

New Indie, New Britain

This exemplary narrative of the 1990s finds parallels in other fields. A recurring feature of the decade was the apparent crossover of the supposedly alternative artist to mainstream attention – to the point where the relation between the two terms must be rethought. The visual arts provided one, publicly prominent instance, as Julian Stallabrass has aggressively argued and as Michael Bracewell notes elsewhere in this issue.³⁶ Broadcast media are also a case a point. Television comedy, for instance, was heavily populated in the 1990s by figures who had emerged as ‘alternative comics’ in the 1980s. Lenny Henry, Dawn French, Jennifer Saunders, Ruby Wax and Stephen Fry were middle of the road figures by the end of the 1990s. The trajectories of Ben Elton and Julian Clary were even more telling, in terms of party and sexual politics respectively. But a more direct analogue with the alternative pop of the 1990s was the career of David Baddiel. He progressed from the *NME*-class, student-directed comedy of the Mary Whitehouse Experience in the early 1990s to stadium comedy tours, and eventually to the definitive ironic new-lad football programme with Frank Skinner, *Fantasy Football*. Something of the nostalgia and irony of the football fanzine culture of the 1980s – a thoroughly grassroots formation, often laced with political dissent – survived here; but the result might have made the previous decades’ pioneers wonder what they’d spawned. The route from 1980s indie to 1990s Britpop could be said to parallel that from the fanzines to Skinner & Baddiel – though that would be a wounding verdict on Britpop. As though to confirm the analysis, Skinner and Baddiel wrote and recorded the England theme ‘Three Lions’ with Ian Broudie, a scouse veteran of the 1980s who had stumbled on temporary Britpop fame. The European Football Championship of 1996 was thus given the seal of the new generation, and became one of the central events in the decade’s repeated invocations of national identity.³⁷

The most iconic example of such cross-media activity was *Trainspotting*. Irvine Welsh’s novel of 1993 furthered the tendency towards demotic, uncompromisingly dialect-based social realism which the West of Scotland had produced through the 1980s, through writers like William McIlvanney and James Kelman, and local journals like the *Edinburgh Review*. This could be viewed as a resistant cultural formation, articulating an anti-Thatcherism which was nowhere more thorough and committed

³⁶ See Julian Stallabrass, *Hi Art Lite: British Art in the 1990s*, London: Verso, 1999.

³⁷ I have discussed this in another context in ‘“If This Was A War, You’d Shoot Them: Constructing the Nation for Euro 96’, in Rainer Emig (ed), *Stereotypes in Anglo-German Relations*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000, pp79-94.

than in the country where the poll tax was first road-tested.³⁸ Kelman's Booker Prize win for *How Late It Was, How Late* in 1994 was not quite the crossover event one might have expected: the writer himself was uncompromising in accepting the award, critical response was ungenerous, and the novel's sales failed to capitalize on the prize. Irvine Welsh, however, did lead the new Scottish fiction into the cultural centre of the 1990s. Unlike Kelman's, his writing was tuned to the frequencies of youth – of sex, drugs, dance music, and the sort of seemingly trivial yet fiercely contested cultural references (James Bond films, Iggy Pop records, Scottish footballers) old which were a recurring feature of the decade. In itself, Welsh's novel was already destined for cult significance; but more telling than this was its ready transition across the borders of different media, from fiction to drama and, especially, cinema. The cinematic team of Danny Boyle, John Hodge and Andrew MacDonald had already been presented as the new wave of Scottish film, on the basis of *Shallow Grave* (1994). *Trainspotting*, retaining Ewan McGregor from the earlier film, also reprised and extended its pacy, aggressive narrative style, forging a text that was formally diverse, yet somehow thoroughly recuperable by a young British audience. If the film's jumpy narrative and flights of fancy seemed to recall aspects of the French new wave, it was not intended as unassimilable, open-ended experiment: textual variety had been put to rigorously effective ends. The Boyle team was the cinematic equivalent of Britpop: consciously and deliberately in hock to a revered past (their next film, *A Life Less Ordinary*, would be an open homage to *It's A Wonderful Life* and *A Matter of Life and Death*), yet thoroughly of the moment; cashing in on a local British identity just as such local identities were seen to be rendered relative by global capital. The connection was sealed by the *Trainspotting* soundtrack, which rounded up crossover pop acts (Blur, Pulp, Elastica) and became a major seller in its own right, even running to a sequel. To add it to the CD racks was also to extend the reign of *Trainspotting* as a visual brand. Its unusual use of orange and white (with lettering that seemed, in an indeterminate retro gesture, to recall the signs inside an old Sainsbury's from the 1970s) made it one of the most distinctive designs of the decade's popular culture. The gallery of characters, addressing the camera in black and white, who appeared on the film's posters and publicity, proved the extent of its public recognition by becoming the subject of parody – as on the cover of the *NME*'s Christmas issue of 1996, where second-division Britpop star Louise Wener, who had also appeared on the soundtrack, played all the parts. In such minor details

³⁸ On Scotland in the Thatcher years see Christopher Harvie, *Scotland and Nationalism*, London: Routledge, 1994, ch. 7. For an account of the literary politics of the period see Peter Kravitz, 'Introduction' to *The Picador Anthology Book of Scottish Fiction*, London: Picador, 1997.

the potency of the *Trainspotting* brand was demonstrated. In a sense the film itself, let alone the novel, had become secondary to the brand's travels across media, the built-in drift with which two colours and a typeface could come to signify an event. That event was part of the episode in the history of popular taste that we have traced here. Was *Trainspotting* 'alternative' or 'mainstream'? It might be called either; and by virtue of that fact, neither term would seem a wholly adequate description of the cultural level in question.³⁹ Something analogous could be said of Oasis, or indeed, even after their leader's demise, Nirvana.

All of this gained significance from its more specifically political context, in the form of New Labour and its gradual ascent towards power through mid-90s. The party that Tony Blair led from 1994 became a machine for permanent campaigning, which would attempt to use any available activity for publicity: photos of Blair juggling footballs with Kevin Keegan became a typical, rather than a bizarre, media phenomenon. Culture, inevitably, was part of the plan: and New Labour's definition of culture was broad enough to include pop music. To employ pop for electoral ends was not a straightforward matter. It would risk echoing the mid-1980s, when the Red Wedge movement's creation of at least a notional link between Neil Kinnock and Billy Bragg failed to win any elections. That movement's most visible survivor a decade on was Paul Weller, now keeping a distance from politics; but his new associate Noel Gallagher proved less cautious. In fact, while various pop stars offered unsurprising messages of support to Labour, it was Creation records, the home of Oasis, that became most entangled in the project. Creation's president Alan McGee, a Glaswegian who had been central to the British indie scene since the early 1980s, had an instinctive hatred of the Conservative party. Offered the chance to help oust them from power, he threw in his lot with Labour. In September 1996 Creation sponsored the Youth Experience Rally at the Labour conference in Blackpool, for £10,000. Tony Blair, entering to the sound of Oasis' 'Don't Look Back In Anger', was presented with an Oasis platinum disc. After paying tribute to the entrepreneurial McGee as an example of new Labour in action, he introduced the minor Creation band 18 Wheeler as Wheeler 18.⁴⁰ The gaffe did not end McGee's

³⁹ Derek Paget is more politically optimistic about *Trainspotting*, presenting it as giving a voice to disenfranchised youth – and specifically as an alternative to the Jane Austen adaptations with which the film was contemporary. See his 'Speaking Out: The Transformations of *Trainspotting*', in Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan (eds), *Adaptations: From Text To Screen, Screen To Text*, London: Routledge, 1999, pp128-9, 139-40. See also Robert A. Morace, *Irvine Welsh's Trainspotting*, London: Continuum, 2001, which argues that the book retained its 'power to disturb' (p85) in the context of New Labour.

⁴⁰ See Cavanagh, *Creation Records Story*, pp504-5.

involvement with Blair's cautious assault on power. For Labour, he acknowledged, the home of Oasis represented a more appealing milieu from Red Wedge: 'Obviously, I know to a certain extent that I'm being used, but I'm willing to go along with it'.⁴¹ He continued making large donations to the party, was invited to tactical discussions at Millbank with Peter Mandelson and Margaret McDonagh, and was present at Labour's victory rally on the night of 1 May 1997.

The iconic event in this narrative, though, splashed over the next morning's papers and elsewhere ever since, was the encounter of Blair with Noel Gallagher himself, in the reception for cultural figures given at No 10 on 30 July 1997. In one sense the moment was typically of the 1990s for its echo of the 1960s – of Harold Wilson's cultivation of Gallagher's heroes the Beatles. But in its own time, the image still recorded a strange meeting. In July 1992, the Labour Party's return to Downing Street seemed about as improbable as the prime minister inviting to the place a guitarist from world of the *NME*. That both happened together was one of the decade's most unlikely – but decisive – features. It has been surprisingly easy to forget to find it unlikely.

In government, Labour still sought to use the cultural industries. Alan McGee was the most prominent among the businessmen invited to influence policy on the Creative Industries Task Force, and he took public pride in having gained a slight alteration in the government's policy on young unemployed musicians.⁴² The young government's claims to cultural renewal – to a newly enlightened attitude to creative talent and its importance to Britain – was most fully exemplified in Chris Smith's *Creative Britain* (1998), a collection of speeches from the first year in power. Smith made much of the economic benefits of creativity; indeed, the book closes with an appendix on the importance of the various arts as UK export industries. But Smith also made a point of emphasizing the value of creativity 'in and for itself, for its own worth', for the self-development of individuals, and for the good of society.⁴³ In its optimism about cultural renewal – echoed well enough by Damien Hirst's colourful splash on the front cover – *Creative Britain* is a text of its time, a product of the first year or so of government. As Martin Jacques observed early in 1998, the Labour government initially sought not only to realize the value of culture as industry, but to hegemonize its meaning:

After the election, the Government sought to popularize the notion that we were entering a new era – culturally as much as politically.

⁴¹ Cavaanagh, *Creation Records Story*, p505.

⁴² See Cavanagh, *Creation Records Story*, pp516-7, 528-36.

⁴³ Chris Smith, *Creative Britain*, London: Faber, 1998, p148.

The chosen symbols were corporate executives and cultural celebrities, including Britpop stars. A government's ability to move from the political to the cultural is a defining moment: it enables its appeal to transcend political divisions and become national, rather than partisan. Blair played this card for all it was worth.⁴⁴

Whatever the self-indulgent vagaries of his own political judgments, Jacques hits a major chord here. Stuart Hall, with Jacques and others, had sought in the 1980s to analyze Thatcherism as a hegemonic project, one that took command of signs and discourses as well as the levers of power.⁴⁵ Jacques points here to the relevance of a similar analysis of Blairism; of its bid to dictate – or to mimic – the way the nation talked and felt. The political and the cultural, it was clear after May 1997, were becoming so closely linked as to be almost inseparable.⁴⁶ 'New Labour' was hard to take seriously as a phrase, let alone a concept, by 1997, so thoroughly ridiculed had it been by the rolling media. Yet its images and idioms – paging, spin, branding, modernization, traditional values in a modern setting, toughness on the causes of a given phenomenon – simultaneously saturated society. Saturation coverage had always been central to the project. New Labour, understandably paranoid as it faced down the last four election results, sought to leave no stone unturned, no compromise unbrokered, no historic enemy unplacated. These were the politics of the Big Tent, which stayed pitched longer than initial electoral success might have dictated. Among New Labour's political foundations was the widest possible consensus, an imaginary resolution in which trades unions and the *Sun* could miraculously pull in the same direction. The full story of what all of this meant for British culture – in which the very idea of 'culture', let alone 'British', might need to be redefined – remains to be written.⁴⁷ But such an account would need to traverse the terrain indicated here: the shifting borders of the alternative and the mainstream in popular culture, even in a domain that looks as politically marginal as popular music. What the story of corporate indie offers us is not, of course, an explanation of the rise of

⁴⁴ Martin Jacques, 'Pop Blows Out Blair', *Observer*, 15 March 1998, quoted in Cavanagh, *Creation Records Story*, p516.

⁴⁵ See Martin Jacques and Stuart Hall (eds), *The Politics of Thatcherism*, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1983.

⁴⁶ Perhaps originally underestimated, this idea has turned out to be one of the more hard-wearing of the many prognoses and predictions in Fredric Jameson's 'Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', *New Left Review* 146 (July-August 1984), pp.59-92.

⁴⁷ For an early attempt see Andrew Blake, 'Retrolution: Culture and Heritage in a Young Country', in Anne Coddington and Mark Perryman (eds), *The Moderniser's Dilemma: Radical Politics in the Age of Blair*, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1998, pp143-56.

the social democratic phase of neo-liberalism – but a possible analogue for it.⁴⁸

It is suggestive to take the hint from Red Wedge and the Blair-McGee alliance – one of the definitive cultural trajectories from the 1980s to the 1990s – and consider the twenty-year trajectories of independent music and the Labour Party in parallel.⁴⁹ In effect, New Labour and corporate indie both represent historic compromises on the part of movements which had defined themselves in opposition to the dominant social logic – particularly that of the Thatcher years. (Undoubtedly, that oppositional stance is in part a retrospective construction, a hazy look back from the other side of the grand sell-out – to real indie or Real Labour.) In both movements there is a shift from a left puritanism which refuses Thatcherite excess and consumption (Morrissey, Benn) to an era in which money, marketing, spin and showbiz are accepted or indeed celebrated (Gallagher, Mandelson). In both cases the rank and file (fans, members, voters) are generally prepared to accept, even to embrace, such compromises and incongruities as part of their long-awaited victory (the chart success of independent rock, the defeat of the Conservative Party). In both cases, an ideal scale of achievement – musical or ideological purity – is displaced by a pragmatic one – chart success, marginal constituencies won – once such unimagined success becomes bewilderingly possible. What was outside thus becomes inside: Blunkett and Cook at Education and the Foreign Office; ‘Don’t Look Back In Anger’ on every jukebox. And this transition implied a re-examination and redefinition of the terms which had dominated the story: left, right, independence, mainstream. What an alternative – political or cultural, or both – might look like, what space it might occupy, and whether co-operation with the dominant culture had the same meaning: these issues were recast in the 1990s.

The instances of mainstreaming and crossover surveyed here could be extended, or analyzed more fully in their particular contexts. In the meantime, as a provisional conclusion, let us ask what they add up to. One readily available answer is ‘selling out’: the betrayal of aesthetic or political ideals in the name of mass appeal. Another is success: it may be argued that the aim of alternatives was always to capture and reshape the mainstream. In fact, both processes are arguably part of the dialectic of the 1990s. A full account would need to recognize, on one hand, the extent to which ‘alternatives’ were already compromised and conservative, and on

⁴⁸ For a survey of this historical phase see Perry Anderson, ‘Renewals’, *New Left Review* 1 (January / February 2000), esp. p.11.

⁴⁹ For a related but different analysis, placing more emphasis on cultural conservatism and less on cultural restructuring, see Jeremy Gilbert, ‘Blurred Vision: Pop, Populism and Politics’, in Coddington and Perryman (eds) *The Moderniser’s Dilemma*, pp75-90.

the other, the ways in which the mainstream has for good or ill been remade. 'Incorporation' does not capture all the nuances, not least because the dominant and incorporating culture is no longer what it was. What was forged through the 1990s was a new consensus, with new exclusions different from the old, and a tendency to homogenization and assimilation quite different from the more starkly imposed, socially polarizing doctrine of the Thatcher years. For now, in deference to the temporal event to which Blair's late nineties consciously built, and to the persistence of this formation in the 2000s, we can dub this the Millennial Consensus.

Its inventory would have to include an ostentatious generational shift, with the Prime Minister publicly enthusing about Oasis in 1997 and fathering a new baby in 2001; and a softening of public language, an apparent openness to the subjective, and in particular the rueful and wounded: from Blair's response to the death of Diana to the unending new confessions of Geri Halliwell. (What Roger Luckhurst, elsewhere in this issue, identifies as a culture of trauma is intimately related to this development.) This softening coincided with another kind of blur, as the boundaries between activities – art, entertainment, advertising, politics, sport – seemed to dissolve into a generalized flow of celebrity. Football is a case in point: the decade saw its elevation from popular national sport to omnipresent media element, fuelled by satellite money and soundtracked to the Stone Roses or Stereophonics. An analysis of the millennial consensus might proceed from the game's interaction with Madchester at the start of the decade, to its metropolitan interface with Britpop and comedy (Albarn, Baddiel) in the mid-90s, through to David Beckham's attainment of all-purpose stardom, his image increasingly removed from actual activities and skills. The objective correlative of this cultural solvency would turn out to be digital technology, the philosopher's stone of the period in its capacity to translate between hitherto incommensurable forms and substances.

Corporate indie is not necessarily central to this narrative of the 1990s. But it is important and emblematic, not least because it represents the assimilation to the Big Tent of what had been one of British culture's most dolorously recalcitrant redoubts. The ultimate bard of the millennial consensus might indeed be neither Noel Gallagher nor Bayley's nomination Elton John, but Robbie Williams. But even Williams' own path to landslide victory and consensual domination had involved a crucial diversion through Britpop, in his much-publicized revolt from the boy band Take That into rabble-rousing with Oasis at Glastonbury in 1995. 'When Liam asked him on stage', recalled the Creation employee Tim Abbot, 'that was his spiritual calling. The puppet strings were cut the day he went on stage'. Fired from Take That, Williams opined that 'Meeting Oasis completely changed my attitude to what I was doing and what I

wanted to be. It freed me from a lot of things'.⁵⁰ The cameo is telling: about Oasis's potency in mid-decade, and about their formative role in forging the formation which would outlive their own boom time. Whether the Big Tent was ultimately more successful than the Dome; whether any associated progressive gains made the new homogenization of British culture worthwhile; whether digital possibilities will ultimately increase the prospects for independent cultural work – these questions may be answered more authoritatively as the legacy of the 1990s becomes clearer. For now, we may wonder whether the era of New Democrats and New Labour, Commercial Alternative and corporate indie, was the decade of the pyrrhic victory.

⁵⁰ Abbot and Williams quoted in Mathur, *Take Me There*, pp175-6.