

Cool Britannia

[Jack Davies](#) goes back to the 90's to examine the legacy of a very British cultural revolution

Sunday 26 February 2017

Imagine, for a second, a reality where time travel actually exists, Doctor Who's TARDIS transformed from fanciful fiction to scientific fact. Then imagine heading back 20 years to mid-1990s Britain, and finding oneself in a society overwhelmed by optimism; the idea that politicians weren't exclusively arseholes; that the UK could be at the forefront of its own cultural industry without the spectres of Hollywood and monotonous talent shows; that being British and proud of it didn't necessarily translate to being perceived as an EDL-loving skinhead, football hooligan, or downright racist.



Image: Mark Hillary

Far-fetched to us now, I know: politicians have of late achieved new zeniths of dystopian treachery and distrust within the public, US cinema and The X-Factor loom large in our film and music industries, and far-right hate groups such as Britain First have laid their claims to "Britishness" being white and anti-Muslim – wholly intolerant in other words.

But 20 years ago, things were different. The UK experienced a cultural and societal renaissance like none it had seen since the frenetic times following the end of World War Two: a phenomenon typified by groundbreaking British films and TV, political change, and perhaps most notably, a radical new music scene. All of these simultaneously occurring events came together under the umbrella of what would become known as 'Cool Britannia': a movement that redefined what it was to be British, transforming, if only briefly, our national identity in the eyes of the world to something that was tremendously in-vogue.

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Music, specifically the Britpop genre, was the force responsible for laying the foundations for this era of change. At the beginning of the 90s, contemporary music found itself dominated by the almost exclusively American genre of grunge, the most prominent example of which were the Kurt Cobain-led Nirvana. In fact, in 1993, the alternative music scene in Britain and beyond was predominantly a vehicle for such music, with overwhelmingly pessimistic songs like Nirvana's own 'I Hate Myself and Want to Die' exhibiting the prevailing mood.

However, the foundations for Britpop and a change of musical guard, so to speak, were laid the year before in 1992, with musical historians citing the heavily Bowie-influenced Suede's 'The Drowners', and Essex icons Blur's 'Popszene' as the first examples of what popular British music would become in the near future.

Britpop would only really stake its claim as the salient force of popular music though in 1994, a year which would be remembered for its centrality in reshaping the musical landscape. This, tragically, but perhaps symbolically, coincided with the suicide of grunge icon Cobain, a very literal example of musical transition, because what followed was a supremely successful influx of what The Guardian's Dorian Lynskey describes as British music charged with "communal celebration", overcoming the popular UK charts and alternative charts across the world. Indeed, the overall message within the prevalent music of the day transformed seemingly overnight from sarcastic glamorisations of suicide to optimistic expressions of the desire for immortality as heard in Oasis' 'Live Forever'. The revolution continued: Blur released their seminal and critically-acclaimed Parklife, and Oasis' debut album Definitely Maybe upon its release became the biggest selling debut album of all-time.

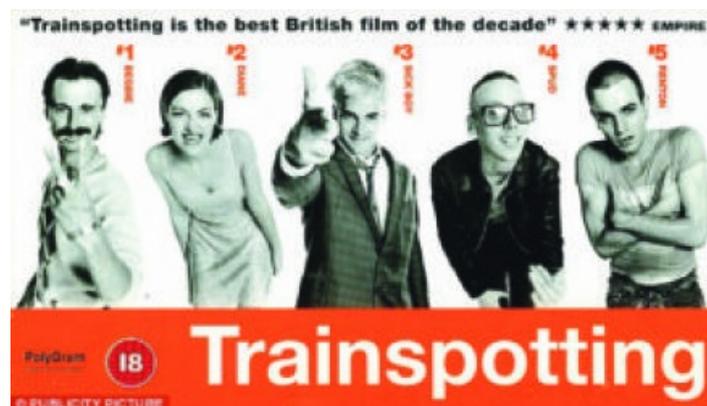


Image: Publicity Picture

Such home-grown British music would continue from strength to strength, the Britpop scene reaching fever pitch with the so-called 'Battle of Britpop' in 1995, when Oasis and Blur released their new singles ('Roll With It' and 'Country House' respectively) on the same day in a much-hyped race for the number one spot. Markedly, it demonstrates how far the UK music scene had travelled, that two British indie bands could release singles under the assumption that one would claim the top spot (it did, incidentally, with Blur outselling their Mancunian counterparts by around 50 000 copies). This independent music found itself, for the first time, able to compete commercially with the glossy pop imported from the USA and displace foreign stars like Michael Jackson and Celine Dion who ruled the UK charts.

To this point, however, this supposed revolution of British culture had been centred in the music industry. In fact, the geographic origin of this music didn't appear in reference to it until the aforementioned chart war when the press labelled this new wave of independent music 'Britpop', making the nationality of the artists intrinsic to the genre. And while the 'Battle of Britpop' may have represented its zenith as a genre in the summer of 1995, the notion of 'Cool Britannia', of the UK's then-zeitgeist being self-sufficient and immediately relevant, and the over-arching mood of societal optimism was only just beginning.

It was in the arts world where it first became apparent that maybe this creative renaissance was not exclusive to music. It was particularly evident within the work of celebrated and oft-controversial modern artists such as Damien Hirst and Tracey Emin, the former winning the Turner Prize of 1995 for his piece *Mother and Child, Divided*, a collection of two two-piece sculptures, one a precisely-halved adult cow preserved in formaldehyde, the other its calf.

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Such deliberately contentious and provocative artwork would become a hallmark of the 90s art scene in Britain, or ‘Britart’. Another notable work was the Turner Prizenominated *My Bed* by Tracey Emin, the artist’s actual bed soiled and strewn with used condoms, cigarette ash and empty alcohol containers. It sent many more traditional art critics into a vitriolic frenzy, noting that anyone could exhibit an unmade bed, only for Emin to sardonically retort: “well they didn’t, did they?”

This anarchistic, tongue-in-cheek spirit was at the very heart of ‘Cool Britannia’, and such attitude made celebrities of British artists in a manner not seen since the pop art movement in the 1960s that brought to prominence the likes of David Hockney and the American Andy Warhol. Principally, like with Pop-Art, we saw the merging of different cultural mediums in Britain. Damien Hirst started directing music videos for Blur, and in 1994, electronic dance duo The KLF recorded themselves burning £1m of their own money, gaining a Turner Prize nomination in the process.

Meanwhile, excitement and optimism flourished. Oasis’ highly-anticipated second album (*What’s the Story*) *Morning Glory?* was released amidst a fanfare of critical acclaim. It would become the biggest-selling album of the 90s in the UK, and the secondbiggest selling studio album overall. In October of 1995, the British economy showed signs of rapid recovery after a longer and deeper recession than anyone had expected. And a young, virile politician by the name of Tony Blair began gaining momentum as leader of the Labour Party. But more on him later... Things in Britain were perfectly poised for a year of celebration in 1996, and ‘Cool Britannia’ hit its defiant peak. It was this year that UK cinema joined the party, most successfully with *The English Patient*, a film centred on British officers in the Italian campaign of World War Two. It would go on to conquer the US too, winning a whopping nine Academy Awards including the gong for Best Picture. It’s worth noting that this wasn’t the only slice of British culture to override the States, with Oasis’ Liam Gallagher and actress wife Patsy Kensit appearing on the cover of *Vanity Fair* in an entire issue dedicated to ‘Cool Britannia’.



Image: President of Russia

The really iconic Brit-flick of 1996, though, came courtesy of Renton, Sick Boy, Begbie and Spud in Danny Boyle’s superbly gritty, emotional, and often cripplingly funny adaptation of the Irvine Welsh novel, *Trainspotting*. Following the trials, tribulations and ultimately betrayals of heroin-addicted friends in

economically-deprived Edinburgh, the film exuded youthful vibrancy and coolness, with a brilliant, contemporary, soundtrack to accompany it. It recently got a long-awaited sequel treatment in T2, but the true mastery lies in the original, making stars of actors like Ewan McGregor and Robert Carlyle, and going on to be ranked by the British Film Institute as the 10th greatest UK film of all time.

The small-screen, too, adapted its own distinctive style, with the up-to-the-minute, celebratory vibe of 'Cool Britannia' perhaps best encapsulated in Chris Evans' and Danny Baker's brainchild, TFI Friday. The weekly, live-broadcast entertainment show featured some of the most recognisable celebrities in the world as guests and always strived to book the most current, interesting artists of the time from the world of music – all of this while maintaining the chaotic, vibrant ethos that typified 'Cool Britannia'.

This brand of chaos was perhaps most famously exhibited in the year's Brit Awards ceremony. Hosted by Evans, the entire show ricocheted from one intriguing controversy to the next. In terms of accolades, Oasis stole the show with three, including Best British Group. It appeared as though they would dominate in the controversy stakes, too. The Gallagher brothers took the stage in a typically swaggering fashion, clearly inebriated and coked up to the eyeballs, performed a rendition of rivals Blur's 'Parklife', changing the main refrain to "Shite-life", and then refused to leave the podium until someone came to remove them (Liam hilariously commented "you're gonna have to send more than ginger-bollocks to throw Oasis off the stage" when presenter Chris Evans tried to usher them off).



Image: Andy Hay

It was Pulp's lead-man Jarvis Cocker, though, who won the unofficial award for anarchist of the night. During Michael Jackson's bizarre performance of 'Earth Song', where the late singer appeared dressed as the messiah surrounded by singing children (the less said about the connotations of this, the better...), Cocker mounted the stage and bared his arse at MJ – a very literal "fuck you" to the glitzy, American, convoluted pop on display.

The ceremony sits even more as a perfect time capsule of 90s optimism given the political edge it carried; Noel Gallagher addressed the nation's youth in one acceptance speech, giving a glowing recommendation of Tony Blair and New Labour as a force that could provide real political change. Yet again, here was an example of different areas of British society merging together, and celebrating the potential for a new, and better, future.

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In the fashion world, British models stood at the forefront. Naomi Campbell was a Brit representative amongst the chic, more buxom models of the day (Cindy Crawford, Claudia Schiffer, et al). It was, however, a young Kate Moss who became an undisputed superstar of the modelling industry, fronting

iconic campaigns for Calvin Klein with her instantly recognisable, waif-like figure, standing out entirely from everyone else in the business and creating a modelling trend for years to come.

In regards to sport, the psyche of the nation was a celebratory one too, as England welcomed Europe's finest footballers as hosts of Euro '96. The team bowed out in typical England fashion, on penalties to eventual winners Germany in the semi-final. But for the first time since '66, the nation again found itself at the centre of the sporting world. And all of this against a backdrop of Skinner, Baddiel, and The Lightning Seeds' 'Three Lions', celebrating being an England fan even in spite of the (very many) low points.

The attitude of 'Cool Britannia' ran through even our sports stars, the national team pictured extensively bladdered in a Hong Kong nightclub amid a euphoric party atmosphere – the only problem was, this was two weeks before the tournament started. Still, Paul "Gazza" Gascoigne, after scoring an exquisite goal against Scotland in the early stages of the competition, recreated in his celebration an infamous tabloid photo of him performing "The Dentist's Chair" – he had been pictured at the nightclub having tequila, vodka, gin and rum poured directly from the bottle into his mouth. This insolent "up-yours", inexplicably cool stance of the nation's music stars was evident everywhere, even in professional athletes, it seems.



Image: Paul Gascoigne: Kitbag

Integrally, "Britishness" lays at the very core of 'Cool Britannia', this uncoordinated movement of British culture that seemed to happen, albeit accidentally, at exactly the same time. The Union Flag was a heavily used symbol throughout it all – Noel Gallagher's famous guitar, fans at Euro '96, even in the nation's more manufactured popstars, with Geri Halliwell's Union Flag dress a famous example.

It's all too easy to be cynical about it now; while at the time, Tony Blair's landslide victory in the 1997 General Election was proclaimed to be a new hope for Britain, his detractors are now numerous, following unpopular war campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. Looking back, you would be forgiven for regarding the admittedly hilarious, but at times unsavoury, antics of the likes of Tracey Emin, Gazza, and the Gallagher brothers with a disapproving frown. But what happened in Britain in the mid-90s was undeniably momentous, a resurgence and rebranding of British culture in the eyes of ourselves and the world.

There certainly is, even now, an appetite for such times, and a longing desire to return and a lamentation of its loss: there is a *Trainspotting* film breaking records in the cinema again; Oasis documentary *Supersonic* was received with universal critical acclaim; TFI Friday recently made a return to our TV screens. It seems that, in a world which is now so unsure of itself, there is a very real desire to return to the optimistic, exuberant and altogether carefree days of 'Cool Britannia'. Don't look back in anger? Certainly not. **M**



One comment

BWR

2 Mar '17 at 11:52 am

Excellently-written article. Fantastic procrastination, good job.

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