

Spring 2023

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Recommended Citation

Halligan, Benjamin. 2023. "'90s 'It Girls': Britpop at the Postfeminist Intermezzo." *Journal of Feminist Scholarship* 22 (Spring): 34-57. 10.23860/jfs.2023.22.03.

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Cover Page Footnote

N/a

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Abstract: In considering the Britpop genre of music and its moment of popularity in the mid/late-1990s, the few female-fronted Britpop groups created space for more compelling articulations of existential matters than were to be found in standard Britpop fare. This article argues these articulations are most appropriately read as arising from a moment of feminist thought in transition: a premature "victory," under the sign of postfeminism, in which the struggles of Second Wave feminists could be seen to have delivered equality. This moment results in an encroaching and contested sense of entry into maturity, and a loss of youth. The groups examined in this article—Elastica, Echobelly and particularly Sleeper—articulate something of the lived condition of postfeminism and a sense of its concerns and uncertainties (emotional, ethical, existential) in this short-lived period. Additionally, the article tracks the development in the movement from the "wild child," "It Girl" of the early 1990s through the figure of the ladette (which found a resonance in female-fronted Britpop groups), and thereafter to the emergence of a sexualized celebrity feminism, under the sign of Third Wave feminism.

Keywords: Britpop, feminism, postfeminism, pop music, indie rock, wild child, It Girl, ladette, The Word, Louise Wener

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Remembering Britpop

The ending of Britpop was so abrupt that it is difficult to imagine how that mid-1990s genre of British "indie" music might have evolved, given just a few more years before the turn of the millennium.¹ Most Britpop groups, many with only one album to their names, disbanded around 1998, shortly after being dropped by their record labels. This article will explore one area in which evolution was discernible, however. I argue that female-fronted Britpop groups sought to advance the concerns of Britpop—with an attempt to mature and nuance the genre—by capitalizing on a space that Britpop created for dissenting voices to express a range of complex emotional responses to a series of conflicting concerns. To do this, I examine elements of the music associated with this strain, particularly in terms of the themes and concerns articulated (put crudely, their "messages"). Additionally, I look at the wider media context in which this evolution occurred, to contextualize how such "new types" of women represented something arresting, and different, in the British media landscape. The capture of an "It Girl" status (i.e., the special and charismatic women at the centre of attention, possessor of a difficult-to-define or ineffable, "x-factor"-like "it" quality) by the "ladette" type from the "wild child" type (the previous model of the "It Girl") was enabled by both a postfeminist sensibility and Britpop culture. To fully consider Britpop, which seemed to exist as image, style, attitude, and music, requires an expanded scope.

Two complications arise across this history. First, Britpop feminism has been effectively founded on a body of ideas, termed "postfeminism" at the time, that now appear privileged and naïve and have been

superseded and mostly forgotten, or remain a matter of historic debate. This is the context for the rise of the ladette, with whom I associate the image and presentation of female Britpop singers and the concerns of much of their music. The ladette figure was understood to be a female appropriation of the more hedonistic elements of the young male counterpart: the “lad” (a term which also has working class and even erotic connotations in English). The ladette was a young woman whose loudness, fondness for drink, proactive and guilt-free attitude to sex, boyishness of appearance, and even verbal rudeness, usurped previous models of young femininity. I utilize the term “intermezzo” to denote the brief period of postfeminism as a way to make a distinction between the overlaps of Second and Third Wave feminism. I do so because discussions of postfeminism in the late 1990s contained the hope for a continuation of radical, separatist Second Wave feminism, which was quite logically (but confusingly, from today’s perspective) during Third Wave feminism. I argue that Third Wave feminism represents the very opposite of the achievements of Britpop feminism and, in its overlaps with “erotic capital” (discussed below), favors the very opposite of the figure of the ladette. However, Third Wave feminism contains a substantial body of critical scholarship with pop music culture as a major critique, and Britpop feminism is long overdue for critical engagement too. In seeking to clarify definitions of postfeminism, Rosalind Gill (2007) suggests looking to the imaginings of the contemporary female as found in popular culture, which is the approach adopted in this article. The second complication is that the nuances of the youth culture around Britpop are specifically British and draw on ideas of class, locale (and slang), humour, received notions of attractiveness, happy amateurism, and punk-like anti-establishment sensibilities—all of which can be difficult to grasp for readers outside British culture. This is particularly complicated because little critical work has been published about Britpop. Since much of this article refers to subcultural matters that still have little or no documentation, I incorporate some voices that are not typically found in academic writing—voices of those who held tangential connections to the scenes and the times.

However, the maturity brought to Britpop through female-fronted bands is apparent in comparison to the ways in which other Britpop bands were unable to remain tenable across disorientating shifts from working class concerns (or, at least, aspirations to as much), to “new laddism” (with a problematic payload of sexism, if not outright misogyny), to a degeneration in which the groups seemed overwhelmed and wrong-footed by their fame and privileged positions, and all that it afforded, or worse. Terry Christian, the presenter of the anarchic Channel 4 arts magazine programme *The Word*, recalled the experience of the abovementioned disorientation and degeneration in a way that also illustrates the dangers for women in this culture of popular music.²

Likewise, the overnight eradication of a unifying opponent, against whom many such groups found their dissenting characteristics—with the Conservative Party very substantially defeated by Tony Blair’s New Labour in the May 1997 General Election, and with New Labour seen to parallel Britpop—is held to be a further transition. This eradication robbed the scene of its credibility-enhancing angry opposition to the staid political and social climate, and any vestige of a distinguished anti-Thatcher pedigree. These two contexts—the cauterizing entry into the upper echelons of privilege and the decline and fall of John Major’s Conservative party—are not however directly within the scope of this article. In accounts of Britpop, particularly for John Harris (2003), but also Owen Hatherley (2011), Rhian E. Jones (2013), Andy Bennett and Jon Stratton (2016) and David Stubbs (2016), that sense that a working-class cultural renaissance is interrogated. Britpop made for a rapidly victorious front against the fusty Conservative government, and with the youthful Blair—a guitarist in a group himself when at Oxford University—as a Britpop figure.³

Britpop commonly referred to “indie” guitar-centric, rock/punk/pop music (i.e., conforming to typical musical structures for rock music), with distinctive or outspoken lead singers. I consider the female-fronted groups that fall within this category: Echobelly, Elastica, Salad and, in a more sustained fashion, Sleeper.⁴ Indeed, it is instructively difficult to think of any other female-fronted Britpop band who gained

sufficient traction and stay even to wind up on the B-lists to which female-fronted Britpop groups seem, a priori, to have been assigned.⁵ Despite the operation of a fairly expanded definition of Britpop, John Dower's theatrically-released 2002 BBC documentary *Live Forever: The Rise and Fall of Britpop* was mostly talking heads and had only one interview from a female artist, Wener, who initially talked about Blur, and then about Blur's fans. Glimpses of other female-fronted bands, such as Elastica, vie unsuccessfully for screen time against strikingly silent Britpop-associated fashion models. Unsurprisingly then, the baseline narrative assumptions—Britpop anticipating and even part-engendering the routing of the Conservative Party while fighting a rearguard action against encroaching North American musical culture (mostly grunge)—also comes across as masculinistic-chauvinistic: antagonistic aggressions, superiority of technique, reassertions of heteronormativity. Other female-fronted groups associated with Britpop at that time, such as Moloko (1994-2003), Interstella (1990-1997, and intermittently thereafter), Stereolab (1990-2009, 2019-present), and St Etienne (1990-present), were predominantly dance-orientated with roots in late 1980s British dance music—particularly rave—and not really considered to be “new” by the mid-1990s. Thus, the slogan “Another Female Fronted Band,” seen on a t-shirt that was sporadically worn by Wener for photoshoots during Sleeper's early days, turned out to anticipate something that did not really occur.

With Britpop's break from the association of indie music and non-heteronormative feyness—as exemplified by Morrissey of The Smiths, from the heritage of Glam Rock and David Bowie, and especially through Suede (Mill 2016)—and with its commercial success (or music industry favor), a reacquaintance with unreconstructed gendered roles could be seen, along with an unapologetic “Northern-ness,” as a return to no-nonsense, anthemic rock ‘n’ roll. This typically played itself out in terms of the swagger and the loudness. The “gobbiness” (outspokenness and being the first to speak, and then in an opinionated and jokingly rebarbative fashion) of the male lead singer opened up an array of hedonistic possibilities for him, as with Blur's pivotal 1994 single “Girls and Boys” (Halligan 2016, 423-27). Swagger is something particular to the male Britpop singer; it is emblematic of an excessive or ill-founded confidence which, when related to the working-class persona, is evidence of a vigour and vitality in this newly emergent music. The most useful definitions of swagger are illustrated in a fondly-remembered satirical cartoon from the comic *Viz* concerning an imaginary Manchester school for aspirant pop performers. The faux advert features a picture of Ian Brown (of The Stone Roses) and offers to impart the “MancWalk2000:” “Are you walking like a right southern twat? Quick hurried steps of an effeminate gait? Shoulders not rocking from side to side?” The remedial course will impart how to “AGGRESSIVELY approach paparazzi. WALK through Manchester Arndale [shopping] Centre. BE a right nob at music awards ceremonies” and boasts “Our instructions have over twenty years' experience walking around the streets of Manchester like right cocky cunts.”⁶ The offer is one of a renewed masculinity, apparent in a walk that is part simian and part basic dance move—as per the walking dance associated with Bez, the maracas player of the group The Happy Mondays. But more generally the Britpop male seemed to aspire to be the centre of attention of an on-going party—indeed, to be the party himself. Matthew Collings's *Blimey*—a 1997 survey of British art of this moment, which he also labels “Britpop”—is quite accurate in this regard; he writes that the young artists, in being seen to fuse life and art, necessarily “rehabilitated [the] Bohemianism” (1998, 100) of previous decades, particularly as associated with Soho: “Britpoppers are no strangers to the Colony Room. They go there to ironically relive the myth of Francis Bacon” (96). For Britpoppers, in the sense of musicians rather than Young British Artists, The Good Mixer pub in Camden then succeeded the in-crowd of The Colony Room Club (if not exceeded its seediness), as antechamber to an evolving art scene. These hedonistic aspirations, on the part of the Britpop males, were apparently achieved too; for instance, Ian F. Svenonius (2006) noted, only ostensibly satirically, the Britpop male (unnamed, but ostensibly Damon Albarn of Blur or Jarvis Cocker of Pulp) as *the* desirable European nationality and type for his essay “A Warning to Swedish Girls” (149-57).

A compilation of television clips of Pulp, included on the 2002 DVD *Hits* (aka *Pulp: Anthology*) provides some evidence of this, in terms of an Italian teenager in a television audience for a Pulp performance reprising the Beatles-style hysteria of a romantic meltdown in the presence of a confused Cocker.

However, the very idea of hedonistic aspirations suggests something of the upwardly mobile nature of the assumed audience of Britpop—a surer vector for a consideration of its class-orientation than journalistic discussions of the socio-economic classes and backgrounds of its dramatis personæ. Aspiration was not something that figured in the universe of punk, to look to Britpop's immediate template (in terms of white musicians and guitar-based quartets). This conceptual shift from “no future” to “great expectations” was also apparent in a reconfiguration of the use of the urban landscape in Britpop promo videos: the capital's civic spaces were mastered and occupied, so that the city no longer oppressed but enlivened. The groups that danced around in public spaces now articulated their territorial claims over these environs and even the skyline—for Blur's “For Tomorrow” (1993), for example: floating in the Thames, swinging from the back of a double-decker bus, playing football among the Trafalgar Square pigeons and so on. This was in stark contrast to the imagining of the city as oppressive and grim, and the very condition of modern alienation, as typical across many genres of British music in the 1980s and early 1990s. An inheritance seems to now be available to those tooled up to stake a claim—and such access to it would be via, or for, the young and educated. Pulp's “Common People” (1995) considers directly the experience of different social classes mixing in higher education, Sleeper's “Lie Detector” (from 1996's *The It Girl*) namedrops Ingrid Bergman, Dostoevsky and Einstein—if not exactly obscure in terms of cultural capital, then certainly outlandish in terms of their inclusion in a pop song—and *Elastica* even features a track called “2:1.”⁷ This tendency to the milieu of the well-educated suggests not so much that a group has “something to say” but that Britpop groups found a position from which to say something. And, by extension, that the saying was not a matter of crafting aesthetically pleasing sounds—to say something “correctly”—but that the saying could occur, emboldened, from this position. The emboldening is typically found in the sound mixing and vocal delivery: at times, singing cuts across the musical backing, even dwarfing it in the mix, and with imperfections or human inflections (and strong regional accents) included, as if marks of an impetuous attitude towards professional delivery.

Such outspokenness or “gobbiness” would then be aligned with Third Wave feminism (where a party-orientated attitude, coupled with a tendency to loudness, was taken to characterise “ladettes”). This very sonic presentness of the singer was particularly notable in terms of the minority female voice since, like its male counterparts, it too came across as unapologetic. But what was the status of a new, third wave of feminism in the early/mid 1990s? Third Wave feminism had not yet fully formed, and was still a matter of debate, and some confusion. This period was an intermezzo, as it were, between understood phases of feminisms.⁸ Or, at least, Third Wave feminism had not yet found the identity afforded to it since the mid-2000s. Indeed, the “ladette” of this moment was later considered to be contributing factor to the full formation of Third Wave feminism. And when an identification was achieved, Third Wave feminism was routinely taken to be the strategy of a levelling-up empowerment (and with the differing conceptions and manifestations of empowerment then making for tensions between Second and Third Wave feminists)—as per the outspoken “gobbiness” of The Spice Girls, whose six singles of 1996-97 established such an attitude of empowerment, branded “Girl Power.” When Catherine Hakim boldly identified “erotic capital” as the intrinsic power of contemporary woman, writing in 2011, she could well have been referring to the example of The Spice Girls of those intermezzo years—from the petulant, sexualised aspirations of “Wannabe” (1996) to the brassy weaponization of sexuality to realise ambition, of “Who Do You Think You Are” (1997).

With changes in the nature of the consumption of popular music from around 2000 onwards (with the live experience coming to predominate over purchasing and collecting physical releases of music), this template of sexualised and glittery Third Wave feminism was well suited for the superstar diva engaging in

a “full and public ‘coming out’ as a feminist” (Fairclough-Isaacs 2015, 285); this also created new challenges, in the context of arena concerts, for the superstar to achieve the kind of intimacy and sense of familiarity that had been possible in indie music of the 1990s (see Halligan 2015).

Contemporary feminist scholarship on popular music has therefore tended to a re-evaluation of female-fronted groups that can be associated with punk and post-punk, including Riot Grrrl and various '90s indie currents (as with Marcus 2010, Arnold 2014, and Goldman 2019) and those who were “hiding in plain sight” in the mainstream (as with McKay 2017) as well as, often in the context of the paradigms of Celebrity Studies, moving to considerations of the diva or icon (as with Fairclough, Halligan, Rambarran and Persley 2023). In this the music is typically only one of a number of concerns across the full scope of mediality or transmediality (as with Smit 2011, or Deflem 2017, and the critical music biographies of Lucy O'Brien), particularly with respect to questions arising from intersectionality (as with Brooks and Martin 2019), so that scoping criticism of contemporary Third Wave feminist pop stars from figures such as bell hooks becomes a major concern (as with Hobson 2019). Across this period, however, the unapologetically angry/outsspoken/feminist indie female singer-songwriter remained a minor but discernible presence, as with Ani DiFranco, PJ Harvey, Cat Power or Annie Hardy. In this timeline, the ladette also seems an intermezzo: someone whose femininity remained despite, or in spite of, a “descent” to levels of hedonistic male behaviours, and despite a boyishness of look and at times an asexual dress sense.

The Postfeminist Moment

Either side of the intermezzo, at least in terms of media stereotypes, are the superfeminine variants of the “It Girl”: glitzy exponents of erotic capital after, and the now-forgotten “wild child” before. The wild child would, in or for the public eye at least, transgress upper class mores—dancing on restaurant tables, attending nightclubs in nighties, or being seen to be drunk and disorderly (Tara Palmer-Tomkinson, Emily Lloyd), sporting outrageous dresses (Elizabeth Hurley’s 1991 Dorchester Hotel shoot for John Stoddart, or in Versace in 1994) or shocks of peroxide blonde or platinum hair (Wendy James, of Transvision Vamp), or, some tabloids claimed, eloping with older men while under the age of heterosexual consent (Emma Ridley, Mandy Smith, Amanda de Cadenet). Some fell into modelling while others were deployed as television presenters or media personalities, at a time of the expansion of youth television, particularly anarchic “post-pub” fare transmitted late into weekend nights, as with de Cadenet, Dani Behr (for *The Word*) and Tamara Beckwith.⁹ A husky or throaty voice—suggesting consecutive late nights talking above loud music and chain-smoking, or just ill as too flimsily dressed for cold weather—was part of the wild child presenter persona. Unlike the immediate predecessor model of the “Sloane Ranger” (those well-brought-up “flat-sharing SW7 and SW10 girls under 20 [who do] the old things, but with a new flair,” and soon destined for very good marriages, as spoofed by Ann Barr and Peter York 1983, 20), the wild child seemingly had little appetite or need for permanent employment, steady relationships, and family goals. Her behaviour endangered reputation in terms, at least for their parents’ generation, of fitting into the mould of the *Country Life* magazine frontispiece “Girl in Pearls”: the debutant soon to be married off, perhaps for opportunist consolidation of family holdings. Sophie Dahl’s recollection of de Cadenet as wild child is one of the few extant accounts:

A pouty blond Catholic school girl, going out with this one or that one, always in a Chanel miniskirt, high as the sky, with an air of irrepressible naughtiness spilling off the [tabloid newspaper] page. She was only thirteen [i.e. circa 1985/6] when all of this salacious attention began, though to a

minor degree she courted it, in so much as we court dangerous things when we are young and don't know any better. (Quoted in de Cadenet 2005, unnumbered; "Rare Birds" entry)

Terry Christian also reflected on first encountering de Cadenet as a possible co-presenter for *The Word*:

I'd already heard four things that made me recoil in horror: posh, Duran Duran, Brother Beyond and Emma Ridley. What were those people trying to do to what I felt was my show? ... The reason [the producer] signed her up immediately however, was because she was great tabloid fodder—just seventeen years of age, posh, pushy, ambitious, diva like, blonde and with big boobs. (2007, 87-88)

A recurring joke later in the show was to liken her to a blow-up doll (220). But, as noted below, the attitudes of *The Word's* producers would be aggressively countered by the performances of Riot Grrrl groups.

As per Richard Martin's (1998a) discussion of Hurley's plunging décolletage in Versace's customised little black dress of 1994, this sudden and rude manifestation of a "rash and fervid sexuality" (98), via the work of the Italian designer, may well have shocked the shockable (the "British gentility" who were "confronted with the spectacular media moment of the perturbed exemplar of middle-class respectability," 99). But, as confined to such a carefully calibrated media event (the premier of Mike Newell's 1994 comedy of upper middle-class manners, *Four Weddings and A Funeral*), the shock was essentially circumscribed in its "contentions with bourgeois values" (1998a, 97).¹⁰ The splash was big, but seemingly not wide enough. Hurley, herself a former punk (see Bowyer 2003)—and the Versace dress included that essential punk accessorization, the safety pin (albeit embossed, swollen and golden)—at this point, I would argue, could be said to represent the limits of a form of mainstream cultural regeneration. Glamour and poise, breeding and wildness, framing upfront sexuality in this way, only worked to stimulate the tabloids and, dallying for a few furtive seconds longer before turning over to the next page, their readers. Bookended thus—between wild child and Girl Power—the ladette was an exceptional and unexpected moment, and one that would deliver, through the spaces for articulation that Britpop made available, that wider measure of cultural renewal.



Photos (from Left to Right): Tamara Beckwith and Tara Palmer-Tomkinson at London Fashion Week, February 2001 (Mirrorpix/Alamy); Elizabeth Hurley in Versace at the charity premiere of *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, May 1994 (PA Images/Alamy); Amanda de Cadenet (left) on *The Word*, November 1991 (Mirrorpix/Alamy).

The comparison drawn between The Spice Girls and female-fronted Britpop groups suggests a basic category error: “indie” music ought not to be so readily compared to the mainstream of pop music.¹¹ At the time entirely separate Top Forty charts existed to index the two, and their demographics were understood to be quite different. And yet the critical discourses of Third Wave feminism tended to merge such categories, once concerns that were understood to exist on the margins (for Second Wave feminism), as centred on individual strategies of living and lifestyles, shifted to a cultural war to be waged in the mainstream (for Third Wave feminism). A brief review of the perceptions of this “shifting ... terrain” (Rivers 2017, 3) at the point of the postfeminist intermezzo follows, as the context for a consideration of female-fronted Britpop groups as intrinsic to this intermezzo.

“Youth Music Culture” is afforded attention as a major component of an early engagement with postfeminism, in *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism* (Heywood and Drake 1997). Here, the progressive gender politics associated with 1970s punk are considered, which are understood to have developed into the music associated with Riot Grrrl in the 1990s. A bell hooks-informed critique of the gender politics of more familiar and mainstream rock, and subgenres of rap, concludes this collection (Niesel 1997). But, by 2004, this latter consideration of mainstream culture would prove to be central to *Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration* (Gillis, Howie and Munford [2004] 2007). Video gaming, fashion/lifestyle magazines, fantasy television series and romcoms, and Top 40 pop music are all presented as legitimate material for scrutiny. The shift then is not so much thinking about Bikini Kill in relation to The Slits, but Girls Aloud in relation to The Spice Girls (and with Girls Aloud, self-identifying as “girl’s girls” therefore bereft of “even the ‘nod’ to a feminist inheritance imparted by the Spice Girls”; Munford 2007, 267). For Rebecca Munford, there is a fatal potential arising from the undesired presence of “postfeminism” within “Third Wave feminism.” In Munford’s reading, of 2004, the Third Wave is placed as a legitimate continuation of the Second Wave. And this continuation is evidenced in the dissenting nature of Riot Grrrl. However, a sexed-up and “girly” outgrowth of feminist empowerment is detected too, as with The Spice Girls and Girls Aloud, and across various other media. This outgrowth, then ascendent in the mainstream, “opens up a space for patriarchal recuperation as girl power emerges as the site of that dangerous and deceptive slippage between third wave feminism and post-feminism” (2007, 276). For Munford, the tantalising promise of a Third Wave of feminism, as enriched by the radical heritage of the Second Wave, and reenergised by the coming generation of young feminist writers and activists, may be thwarted by the depoliticalized and so essentially apathetic postfeminist outgrowth.¹² This is not just a familial tension within feminist thought and strategy; it is, rather, the usurping of the entire project of feminism, with Girl Power read as an eminently manageable and marketable fake feminism, poised to metastasize and destroy historical feminism per se. And this process is identified as postfeminism, perniciously predicated on “the precarious boundary between the ‘(re)fashioning’ of feminism proposed by the third wave Girlies and the ‘fashionable’ (post-) feminism propounded by the Spice Girls...” (2007, 274).

Riot Grrrl was talismanic to some feminist academics in this contested heritage of feminism: Riot Grrrl as the next, unapologetic wave of feminist consciousness, often generatively defined by frictions with the disapproving nature of some of the late phase of Second Wave feminism,¹³ and which had lent the Grrrls the tools of critique, prompted them to speak—or yell or scream—out, and crystalised the idea of righteous anger as underwriting the speaking up, and performance, and public persona (2010, 122-23). This was all a considerable distance from the allure and celebrations of Girl Power. Two decades on, the terminology, and dynamic, have been reversed. The fears of an apolitical, usurping postfeminism wound up as entirely associated with Third Wave feminism (and with the term postfeminism falling out of critical use). And it

was Third Wave feminism that came to denote the degeneration in some quarters: a depoliticised, un-sisterly, self-empowering outgrowth of Second Wave feminism. The aspirations for Second to Third wave continuity gave way to a generational discontinuity: a split between the two waves and their associates. Tensions between these two were particularly voluble in relation to trans rights and, as I have argued elsewhere in relation to *The Vagina Monologues*, can be taken as explaining the blindspots around a range of feminist cultural artefacts (see Halligan 2014). But Third Wave feminism, nevertheless, represents a striving for gain. The issue with the term “postfeminist” was that it effectively assumed that the civil coordinates for equality had been agreed and operationalised, led by initiatives around women in the workplace, legal protections, the breaking of glass ceilings, etc. Postfeminism then, particularly from the vantage point of intersectional feminism, is achieved privilege. More specifically: that a Baby Boom-generation of (Caucasian) women had fortuitously come of age at a moment of historical enlightenment, and so could claim material rewards and freedoms comparable to their male counterparts. This then abandons the collective struggles of the 1970s, and an assumed antisex philosophy, in favour of a new sensibility of modernisation, coupled with a pro-sex individualism. Thus the postfeminism mindset is one that assumes that the bounty of privilege is readily available. And this mindset coincides with the upward mobility and possibilities mentioned above, in terms of the identification of a female fraction of Britpop—which even evidences its own formative journey through, or prehistory of, outright feminist sloganeering (as with Echobelly’s “Father, Ruler, King, Computer” from *Everybody’s Got One*) and Riot Grrrl (as with Sleeper’s shouty debut “Alice in Vain,” from the *Alice* EP of 1993). I have no desire to be critical in terms of what would then be considered as a failure to question privilege (“positionality”), or place the attaining of privilege as a goal for the still-oppressed. But female Britpop music seems to have occurred at a utopian moment—striving for equality could be overtaken by an engagement with the new work of achieved equality. What is it, then, that was said from this relatively exalted position? What new existential concerns arose? What can be learnt of the mindset of the postfeminist intermezzo from Britpop? What new type of “It Girl”—existing at this juncture—emerged?



Louise Wener of Sleeper, backstage at The Event, Brighton, May 1994 (James Boardman/Alamy)

Four Britpop 7"s

A striking commonality, across high profile singles that fall into the scope of this discussion, is an impasse over relationship failures. Rather than heading to a punchline or denouement of sorts, with the closure of a particular narrative, the groups in question seem to have preferred irresolution. The situation is scoped, observations are made, and the course of action is left uncertain.



Sonya Madan of Echobelly, performing at V97 in Temple Newsam, Leeds, August 1997. (Owen Humphreys/Alamy).

Echobelly's single "Close . . . But" (1994) suggests a relationship that is too intimate, and a couple too concentrated on each other—"moving in a circle," as if two mutually dependent drug addicts; and "we sellotape the telephone" perhaps referring to blocking off any intruding outside voices. The promo video was shot in the corridor of a prison, with the singer (Sonya Madan) peering into each cell, with her band members cast as prisoners. Yet, surprisingly, the chorus reprises an "I'm not that close / I'm not that close to you": physical closeness is no guarantor of emotional closeness. No solution to this contradictory emotional state of affairs is offered.



Elastica publicity photo, circa 1995. (Alamy)

Elastica's single "Stutter" (1993) contains the lyric "[h]ave you found a new mate / and is she really great?" which occurs twice, the latter phrase jarringly audible for a song in which most of the lyrics are difficult to discern. The second delivery accents the "great," as if the singer is mimicking and mocking something said to her by her male partner, apparently enthusiastically describing another girl, and where "mate" could be taken ambiguously as friend or lover or, even more problematically in relation to the jealousy and self-doubt expressed by the singer, a casual or potential mix of the two. In the context of the song—in which the singer wonders whether it is just "too much wine" that has prevented the male addressee from being able to "stumble up my street" (that is: alcohol-induced erectile dysfunction), or whether the "something you lack / when I'm flat on my back" is sexual desire—this "great" can be taken as tinged with disdain. At issue is self-doubt, which is translated into aggression for the imagined other woman, and doubt for the partner that the song addresses, who seems not to give the singer the assurance she asks for in lieu of sex: to "tell me you're mine, love." After all, "great" is just a lazily functional term; its user cannot have felt the need or motivation to apply more thought when talking to his dissatisfied partner. In the video, the singer (Justine Frischmann) is seen sitting on the end of a messy bed and, for the second delivery of "great" (a Mockney-type "grr-ate," forcing in an extra syllable), leans forward, semi-threateningly, which blurs the focus of the 8mm camera that is being used to film her. The expression on her face captures these conflicting emotions. But the song remains grounded at the point of this low-level, sexless antagonism. No way out is indicated.

Sleeper's single "What Do I Do Now?" (1995) narrates similar doubts, also *in medias res*, but at one remove: now the uncertain female comes to realise that her partner is bored of their relationship. Such a realisation is immobilising: she pretends to ignore the signs, and is scared to sleep "that she'll wake up alone," but is nonetheless unable to suppress rehearsing the idea of the relationship entering its death throes, concluding that "I'll miss you / every day / of your life." An existential crisis ensues: "[w]hat do I do now? / are we going under? / what did I do wrong? / I thought we had it sorted." "Sorted" carried a specific

meaning in the mid-90s: a Mancunian term for “everything being sorted out,” in the sense of thoroughly arranged and planned for, whether this referred to someone who was “sorted” (who had their life under control, or an enviable lifestyle), or in relation to possessing a personal drug stash in time for a night out (as per Pulp’s 1995 single “Sorted for E’s and Wizz”). Now the singer is no longer buoyed along by feeling “sorted,” and certainties have crumbled. Self-blame ensues: was she “too familiar,” was it broaching the subject of children, or contradictory moods (“tore up all your photos . . . spent the whole of Sunday / sticking you together”)? This space in which self-interrogation occurs is found in the video too: the singer (Wener) alone with her thoughts in domestic spaces, and with rain pouring down outside.

Likewise, in Salad’s “On A Leash” (1994), the singer rips her partner’s “picture off the wall,” perhaps after being left by him, and levels a series of accusations at this partner who is found more than wanting. In the video, the singer (Marijke van der Vlugt) repeatedly cups her hands around the camera, achieving something akin to a point-of-view shot as the viewer/imaginary partner receives an accusatory dressing down, as if he has chanced upon his wronged and embittered ex in a public place (the video is shot in an underpass or a London underground station).

Despite such maudlin sentiments, all four songs are strikingly, even disconcertingly, upbeat. The sing-song lilt of “Close . . . But,” the power-pop and punk-like guitar of “Stutter,” the propulsive and thick synthesiser hook of “What Do I Do Now?,” and the rocky catharsis of “On A Leash,” all energise the experiences of these songs. None of them would be out of place at an indie disco; in fact they would all be essential for any Britpop playlist aimed at filling a dancefloor. These songs do not, then, sound like suffering. Or, rather, they do not accept suffering as the standard lot of the spurned female singer, as per the introspective or confessional strain of female pop/folk associated with 1970s singer-songwriters such as Carole King and Joni Mitchell, or even Country and Western laments of the same period. The shared concerns across these Britpop singles are illustrative of the way in which something of an energisation and celebration of such emotional uncertainty seems to occur. To voice a comparable sense of woe about emotional failings and possible infidelity on the part of a girlfriend by a male Britpop singer during this mid-90s prime would have been ontologically problematic: the cuckolded frontman would be robbed of requisite swagger, un-sorted, and undermined as the alpha-like “front man.” This assumption of confidence then can be seen to be a marker of the male limits of Britpop, at the point of its zenith of popularity, across a myriad singles, and the kernel of a way through such a limit, from the quarter of female Britpop, in the (in total) under thirteen and a half minutes of music discussed in these four 7” singles.

Louise Wener

Sleeper supported REM at the Milton Keynes Bowl on 30 July 1995. During REM’s set, singer Michael Stipe invited Wener back onto the stage to wish her a happy birthday, and lead the substantial crowd in a rendition of “Happy Birthday.” When he asked her, perhaps inappropriately, how old she was (which would have been 29), Wener dodged the question, joking “sweet 16.” But this is, nonetheless, an interesting alignment: “making it” or finally “arriving” only at the point at which youth—especially for that most youthful of music genres, Britpop—seems over. The effective shutting-down of Britpop in 1998, as mentioned above, then ended that which might have been a “phase 2” of the project. In this respect, the shutting-down might be considered a premature retirement hoisted upon female singers: rudely “dumped” once “over the hill,” in favour of younger and pliable models—at times, literally models. The beginnings of transcending this abovementioned theme of emotional impasse via a maturity of content, as aligned to a maturity (in the sense of age) of the singers/performers, is the concern of the remainder of this article.

Sleeper's second album, *The It Girl* (1996) presented a number of emotional, even ethical, dilemmas and entanglements. If one defining element of indie music is that the lyrics are presented as worthy of consideration and thought (and indeed printed lyrics were included in album inlays), then it is appropriate to move to a brief textual analysis of those lyrics in order to consider these dilemmas and entanglements, and indeed to gauge the emotional landscape and concerns of the postfeminist intermezzo. "Nice Guy Eddie" (a 1996 single, written by Wener) was concerned with falling for an unlikely "old but kind" man, able to afford to spend money on the song's subject; he finances her "year-round tan" and well-appointed meals of "veal, Parmesan and a case of warm Chianti," for which the subject reciprocates with "I picked up that bra you fancied," and by spending "the whole night / making love on the sofa." It is easy to project the idea of a female university graduate, still young enough to be short of disposable cash but old enough to have developed a taste for some luxuries, finding herself in such a scenario and finding that this involvement, which "all started as a scam," escalates into her surprise confession or realisation of "I think I loved you." The shopping facilities in London's Liverpool Lime Street train station in the mid-1990s seemed almost bespoke in these respects (or in terms of arming the late-returning male commuter with gifts for a neglected wife or female partner): faux-boutique shops selling boxes of chocolates, lingerie, bouquets of flowers, and semi-prepared and distinctly middle-class comfort food. Other songs on *The It Girl* strike a tenuous balance between a distaste for or distrust of the coming condition of mature adulthood ("Dress Like Your Mother," which matches the lyrical barbs with a furious, punk-like delivery) and the ending of youthful freedoms, and a heart-felt desire to fall into some kind of loved-up utopic state from where the lifestyle concerns of prolonging one's youth can finally be vanquished. "Sale of the Century" (a 1996 single) contrasts a vertiginous falling into the Thames ("where the river bends") with a falling into, and then becoming fully emerged in, a relationship which, as per "Nice Guy Eddie," has blossomed in an unexpectedly overpowering way. Lyrics chart the slipping—"holding on to us," "I hope we fall in," "just climb in," "on the way down"—and one could add the splashy sounds of Andy Maclure's open hi-hat, taking the listener to each chorus or, less interestingly, the accompanying video in which the band perform in a few inches of water. The emotional character of the album is in transition: poised between twenties and thirties—across that proto-mid-life crisis at which life should have been adequately arranged (or "sorted"), with youthful impulses tamed or dissipated, and adult expectations anticipated or even cautiously welcomed. The result, in lyrical terms at least, is a pervading pensiveness. "Shrink Wrapped" contains—paradoxically for a band called Sleeper—more insomnia (5am is noted) next to a slumbering partner, and a doubting of the good faith of his words ("I'm not sure / if you meant what you said / but that's OK / 'cos it still / sounded good / when you said it anyway"). Even the tracking of a casual pick-up, presented as the subject of "Factor 41" ("these little love attacks / are making me feel queasy / can't get my heart rate down"), is unable to dodge a sense of the same old ritual behind a conceit of romance: "in fact you've got it all / but now I'm bored / of being sycophantic / so get your knickers down." But this result, in sonic terms, is again more celebratory than mopey. The songs are arguably structured by this swing of emotions. The breathless (in the sense of sounding short of breath) choruses of "Shrink Wrapped" blithely wrongfoot the exploratory verses which cautiously fit words to a beat that sounds almost lacking in confidence. "Factor 41" contrasts catty, conversational delivery for verses with lulling, seductive coo-ing for the chorus. Elsewhere, synthesisers or drums drive the songs forward, despite the pause-for-thought sentiments expressed, as do Jon Stewart's voluminous guitar sounds which sporadically emerge into the mix to wrest control and galvanise and enrich the melody.



Louise Wener of Sleeper, performing at the V Festival in Chelmsford, August 1996. (Mel Longhurst/Alamy)

One could even consider the demeanour of Wener, in respect to such everyday and domestic concerns, which was not glamourized or blinged-up street wear such as cargo pants and strappy tops (a la All Saints at this time, or Dolce & Gabbana's designs for Kylie Minogue in the early 2000s). Rather, at this point, Wener was more typically seen in the kind of comfy casuals appropriate for, say, watching a football match on a television in a pub with friends, or a nonchalant or non-scheduled detour to a nightclub on a Friday evening: chunky trainers, tight jeans, and t-shirt, at times mid-riff baring, or well-worn (perhaps second-hand) leather sports jackets. This dressing-down was true of Madan too, whereas Frischmann seemed to have lazily sported all-event black blouses, but these two fully embraced a "tomboy" appearance.¹⁴ In live performances, Madan and Wener danced in a way that was in part reminiscent of gesture-heavy, inviting-audience-participation performances of presenters of children's television programmes, albeit sexed-up, and at times similar to the mimed delivery of teenage playground taunts. But both then mitigated any ironic performing style, or even sneer that could arise from as much, with full-throated, heart-on-sleeve and even anthemic choruses—in Madan's case delivered via a near operatic voice, in Wener's case (when not playing guitar, although sometimes also when playing) via an excited pogo-ing. Madan often sang above a raucous and typically quite heavy guitar soundscape, but locked into a Johnny Marr-like groove (as per the Smiths 1984 b-side "How Soon Is Now?") nevertheless, and so remained part of the overall sonic totality of Echobelly live. Her "playful girlishness" (in Whiteley's description; 2016, 60) often matched the sweetness of the melodies; Echobelly's darker elements need to be winkled out from the lyrics, with the jauntiness and bounce of their music suggesting an accommodation of the problematic lyrical concerns. Wener finds more distinction from the music: a sonic background for tales of suburban comeuppance.¹⁵ In this respect, a space for enactment seems to have been created, or for roles or front woman "types." While Wener live was happy to deliver grunge-like rock-outs, as per a hoarse performance of "Alice in Vain" at the Glastonbury Music Festival in 1995, she would also play-act an ingénue, complete with head tilts, shy glances away, Bambi eyes, and Princess Diana-like fluttering eyelids, as per a

performance of “Sale of the Century” for *TFI Friday* in 1996 (fluttering especially, as a counterpoint, across the passive-aggressive come-on “I hope you fall in”).¹⁶ Such a public acting out of a role, along with an acting out of its emotional impact, and specificity in relation to being a woman in the public eye in the 1990s, it can be recalled, was a distinctive trope of Young British Artists too, particularly Tracey Emin, reflecting on her own everywoman experiences of emotional and physical abuse, and self-excoriation. For Cliff Lauson (2011), this was predominantly a “craft of storytelling” (15), and considered between confessional and diaristic modes. But this is also the subjective discourse typical of identity politics. For mixed media work of Emin’s type, which is sometimes presented as recreated or actual artefacts of a life that has been lived (for example, “My Bed” from 1998, but also her appliqué blankets adorned with insults, graffiti and presumably fragments of speech),¹⁷ the (back-)storytelling pulls all the concepts into a narrative whole. Likewise, Wener’s acting thus sutures together all elements of the songs which can often be (unlike the groove of Echobelly or the punky propulsion of *Elastica*) discursive and fragmented; Maclure’s drumming is often choppy, accented, and incorporates pauses, and Stewart’s guitar often cuts into the music, adding a new voice to it.

Wener’s ingénue passive-aggressiveness, Madan’s “playful girlishness,” and Frischmann’s hurt and sneery aggression can be counterposed to the gobbiness and swagger discussed above. These “sorted,” proletarian-aping male traits, in the light of the intelligence, performances and prickly presences of Wener, Madan and Frischmann, seem tenuous and insubstantial. Female-fronted Britpop groups, in this context, deepened and matured the articulations of the genre by declining to shy away from emotional conundrums in favour of the often-pat answers and received wisdom of their male counterparts. For a while, at least, the fond accolade of the *Viz* satire was theirs: the “right cocky cunts” were now women. And this cockiness was then, in Sleeper’s work, pushed forward into sets of adult concerns.

My final sartorial note is that Wener, Madan, and Frischmann all offset bobs with fringes—tamed, or otherwise—to varying degrees. But Sleeper identified this type: the “It Girl,” then elevated to the name of their second album. The original “It Girl”—the silent film star Clara Bow, who also sported a bob—was understood to possess a certain, and perhaps ineffable, quality: that Zeitgeist-calibrated “it” charisma which exerted a centrifugal force of attraction on those around her. This was not, then, the standard checklist of beauty or intelligence or wealth, but something germane to the strivings of the everywoman. In the silent 1927 film *It* (directed by Clarence G. Badger and Josef Von Sternberg), Bow plays a working-class shop assistant who, nonetheless, successfully romances her wealthy employer; the success of the film positioned Bow as the preeminent sex symbol of the “Roaring Twenties.”

The term “It Girl” is heard in Sleeper’s “Lie Detector,” which describes male insecurity in the face of female confidence (so that, for him, “I love you / but I’m not sure I trust you”)—a confidence that also engenders the distrust of “a thousand housewives”: “she’s got green eyes / and she’s lovely / reminds me of the It Girl / with her lips.” That operative, carefully selected and incisive word—“lovely”—denotes precisely the consistency of the “it”-ness of the Cool Britannia 1990s with the Roaring Twenties template: an intrinsic, everyday beauty which, simply DNA-determined (green eyes), melded with a vibrancy of character, and overrides breeding or presentation or class. The delivery is one woman (Wener) about another (the unnamed character): “lovely” as a term of warmth and acknowledgement of holistic quality (lovely in person and appearance, rather than just, to deploy another colloquialism of the time, “fit”), as if commending a single female friend to one’s single brother. The narrative continues: the imagining of attaching this “lovely” female to a polygraph, presumably to interrogate her on the matter of fidelity, with further confusion for the wretched and undeserving male (the diminutive-phallic “needles on his polygraph test” then “go ’round in circles / like his brain”). She is replaced by a nominally conventional woman, sans “it”: this time “she’s got long hair” (rather than a bob), registers as “ugly” and dresses in an unflattering manner (and so is presumably controllable). And yet—for the irony of the song’s punchline—this pliable replacement

girlfriend does seem to have been secretly unfaithful, under the guise of her drab appearance. Thus the emotionally stunted male is not only merely functioning as a "lie detector" but a faulty lie detector at that.

The term "It Girl" does not occur again in the lyrics of the album, but several songs suggest an "it" quality as dispersed across a number of pen portraits of females. The album, which continues to figure among most lists of a Britpop discography, thus makes a case for such a quality as intrinsic—something aligned with the brashness and pervasiveness of ladettes, and dealigned with the particularity of the wild child,¹⁸ and quite different from those who work on ever further capitalisations of their beauty and are then held to be exemplars of beauty and empowerment (for Third Wave feminist pop). For Sleeper, anyone can possess or cultivate "it," which flows from confidence and knowing and acting upon what one likes, as per "Lie Detector": wearing suits, buying flowers for a boyfriend, smoking cigarettes, baking cakes. The obverse, as per Sleeper's first big hit, and signature song, "Inbetweeners" (1995), is accommodating oneself to a comfortable but essentially loveless relationship. Or, as per the single "She's a Good Girl" (1997): a tension between the unnamed female made into a requisite "good" ("they've got a machine / making you someone for everyone") versus a found sense of "good"—the latter as the only way to touch the human element of this person: "If you make her happy / make her happy with her / happy with herself." The live performance of the song is uncharacteristically angry for Sleeper, with Wener's lyrics delivered almost as threats, as if a dialogue confronting and deconstructing the unnamed and presumably male manufacturers of the ideal of woman. The 1997 album *Pleased to Meet You*, in its vinyl release, contrasts a cover picture of pre-teen Wener (seemingly a school photo: National Health glasses, smiling under tousled hair, beige background) with the contemporary Wener on the flipside (porcelain skin, sculpted eyebrows, almost scowling, black background)—a "before" and "after" "It-ification" of an unremarkable looking girl from the London/Essex suburb of Gants Hill. The transition was made clear in the reappearance of this image, with commentary ("I wasn't the coolest of twelve-year-olds. If I had been, I wouldn't have grown up to be a pop star"), on the backcover of Wener's 2010 autobiography.¹⁹ But I would be inclined to argue that *Pleased to Meet You*, in the ordering of these images (front/back) reversed "It-ification." Here we can discover the everyday Gants Hill Wener in or over the starry, model-like one, and with the album itself no longer assembling characters and types around negative correlations ("Inbetweeners"'s "He's not . . . / She's not . . . / It makes no sense . . . / He's nothing special / She's not too smart / . . . / He doesn't listen / She doesn't laugh") but aspiring to shift to the positive. It is this shift that suggests a fruition of a more progressive undercurrent to Britpop (and that *Pleased to Meet You* met with its rich soundscapes), but one that, nevertheless, was cut short.²⁰

Via this exploration of "it," in respect of championing self-determination, "it" would seem to suggest the potential of a postfeminist counterbalance to the "new laddism." The figure of the ladette may be identified as a new type of female character, existing after, and so the beneficiary to, the struggles of feminism. This is not to say that such a mode of existence is necessarily smooth; the ordering of tracks on *The It Girl* (in its original UK release sequence) suggests the choppy wax and wane, and the emotional toll, that ensues: the terminal male paranoia of "Lie Detector," followed by a funereal organ overturn/intro to "Sale of the Century" which counterpoints the song's possibilities of romantic immersion, and thereafter the existential crisis of "What Do I Do Now?" This is also not to say that Britpop's It Girls (who I read as ladettes-by-proxy; shared characteristics rather than a direct identification, and coupled too with Wener's commentary on the "it girl") necessarily avoided the objectification that, arguably, was a pass into the media of the time in the first place. As Amy Raphael (1996) notes of Madan: "But as a woman, she has to make tough decisions about the way she plays the game—as an 'exotic Asian babe' who can get what she wants by flashing sexy smiles or as an intelligent singer-songwriter whose talent gets her places" (35).²¹

The requests for visual allure that female Britpop singers accommodated would have been unthinkable for Riot Grrrls. And it was the anarchic Channel 4 arts magazine programme *The Word* that unwittingly accommodated these tensions, and brought together Riot Grrrls, the wild child, ladettes and

female-fronted Britpop bands (since performers included L7, Hole, Huggy Bear, Elastica and Sleeper), sometimes to explosive effect. The chaotic performance of “Her Jazz” by British Riot Grrrl group Huggy Bear on *The Word* on 14 February 1993—with lyrics shouted directly at the studio audience across near constant feedback, one singer in a shapeless dress and clown-style clogs, and confusion as to who was in the band and who was an audience interloper (and with the group then allegedly ejected from the show for heckling the presenter after a report on models that followed their performance)—exemplified this. The performance of “Pretend We’re Dead” by US grunge/Riot Grrrl group L7, on 22 November 1992, concluded with singer Donita Sparks stripping from the waist down while another band member falls onto and collapses the drum kit. The presenter of the show, Terry Christian, nervously corpsing and uncharacteristically lost for words (an audience member heckles “Come on, Terry—get it together!”), eventually comments that “[they] don’t qualify for the Best British Bum—that’s a competition coming up err a bit later . . . on err . . . oh.” In L7’s performance, *Viz*’s “right cocky cunt” of a musician is explicitly and literally realised. Some other female-fronted groups of this time also blocked or subverted objectification: for example, the singers of Skunk Anansie (shaven-headed and typically grimacing) and Shampoo (who caricatured girliness to the point of subversion).²² While all these directions can be taken as problematically mixing the truly radical with a canny accommodation of the demeaning requirements of the time (especially with *The Word* as a show that thrived on scandal), the overall effect was one that dissolved the earlier template of wild child “it,” not least since this type of wildness was seen to be insufficiently wild in this light, in favour of ladette “it.” My consideration of Wener is in these respects: her work struck this balance both in her pen-portraits of It Girls, and also in, with respect to her presentation as part of the wider Britpop scene, common characteristics. But ladette “it” seems to have occurred, as noted, at the point of a premature curtailment of an engagement with the tools and strategies of Second Wave feminist critique—the concomitant postfeminist mindset—and this could also be said to have left the women of this moment exposed. For Wener, writing in her autobiography some fifteen years later, this accommodation of the demeaning requirements of the time was under a perhaps ineffective protest, and is encountered after further mea culpas about the excesses that fame had allowed:

. . . that coterie of frank, gutsy women fronting guitar bands has been watered down with giggly “girl power.” What happened to that battle? That slice of rock and roll sexual equality that we came for? It started with an attempt to level the playing field, but ended in something altogether tamer and more dilute . . . Justine [Frischmann] aping Christine Keeler on the cover of *Select*, Sonya Echobelly falling out of her shirt in [style magazine] *i-D*, Cerys Catatonia pouting half naked on the cover of a lads’ mag [presumably *FHM*, May 1999: “Catatonia’s Cerys as you’ve never seen her before!”], and how the hell did I end up being photographed in a wet-look PVC catsuit carrying a gun? I look ridiculous. Like sexy liquorice. (Wener 2010, 287)

The answer to Wener’s question could be via the conspiratorial notion that Britpop per se, with its conservative music forms and themes, whiteness, anti-intellectualism and obdurate (“lad”) males, was a reassertion of an embattled masculinity that had been assailed by early 1990s feminism. Kari Kallioniemi advanced this reading (2016)—for Britpop as a “unifying force during a time of increasing societal and pop atomization” (194), and notes Luke Haines (2009) in agreement with this line—as did Debbie Smith, of Echobelly, at the time (quoted in Raphael 1996, 55-56), and Miki Berenyi, who found her experience of her group Lush being associated with Britpop one of being surrounded by unreconstructed male “dickheads” (quoted in Newton, 2015). The *Viz* spoof is predicated on such an idea too. In this respect, the access to Britpop for female-fronted bands was via a conformity to the associated media’s sexual politics that now, two decades on, seem deplorable. For Rhian E. Jones (2013), accommodation with the conservative

“Britpop hegemony” then delivered “women with just enough agency to assert their right to appear on the cover of *Loaded*” (43). Jones is perhaps referring to models on “lad’s mag” lifestyle magazine covers rather than female Britpop singers, but the description holds true. The 7 December 1996 issue of *NME* featured Wener in a pink turtleneck on its cover, with the headline “The Life and Loves of a Bolshy-Devil” carefully positioned so as not to obscure the jut of her chest. *Vox*, of February 1997, featured Wener on its cover too, with a promise of “Wener on sex, blokes” And, while *Select* of October 1997 notes “The Future is Female” next to a cover shot of Wener, the promise is also made of “a 20-page fem-centric spectacular starring . . . [model and presenter] Jayne Middlemiss, Princess Di’s Therapist [etc].” Against this must be offset the access that allowed for, as I have argued, more compelling voices and sets of ideas to emerge—and ones that, considered in relation to postfeminism, now offer an insight into a certain condition, for a certain strata, at a certain time, before a reorientation in popular culture to ideas associated with Third Wave feminism.

The proliferation of glamorous female pop voices that then followed throws a particular light on the female Britpop voice. The often domestic and warmly romantic concerns, and the everyday social situations in which a feminist sensibility is seen to come to the fore, speak to the postfeminist intermezzo: the scenario in which gender equality is bedding down, and rolling out through the minutiae of daily interactions, and into the suburbs, and the local emotional turbulence and equanimity that then follows. The profound difference between this and “Girl Power”-style Third Wave feminism is one of scale: no longer micro- but defiantly macro-, no longer individual but tending to the universal, no longer observational but with a penchant for sloganeering. Indeed, Third Wave feminism has been fought along the lines of equality of media representation and, for that, shock troop models rather than arch domestic romantics were needed. That “it” quality, as an intrinsic and holistic and democratic, rather than a media-created, monetarised and photoshopped attractiveness, was seemingly superfluous for pop feminism at the dawn of the twenty-first century.

Notes

1. “Indie” would denote signed to an independent record label without the backing of a major international entertainment conglomerate. But these smaller labels were then bought by major labels and used to test run new groups, screening out some and elevating others with minimal outlay and overhead. Britpop was a notably successful instance of this operation. One facet of indie music, sometimes said to be a tendency rather than unique property, is it presents itself as worthy of a measure of consideration and thought (in respect to lyrics, for example) because it tends to provoke and confront to gain a mindful response. This article adopts this approach with respect to songs brought under close scrutiny. For example, in Kevin Holm-Hudson’s discussion of concept albums (the zenith of popular music as object for contemplation) he cites music critic Jon Landau, claiming that “[t]he criterion of art in rock is the capacity of the musician to create a personal, almost private, universe and to express it fully” (2008, 8).

2. Content warning: Christian recalls his bored and passive spectatorship at what might have been (with no further clarification offered) a gang rape of incapacitated women, in 1994 or 1995. His recollection is included here in respect to the toxic aspects of this quarter of popular culture at this moment, which has received scant attention:

One night, after another episode of *The Word*, I was in a hotel suite in London with a fairly well known northern band. I know them quite well and they’re famous for their excesses. Young girls wearing nothing but their knickers were wandering around, while fat lines of cocaine were chopped up on every surface ... In the toilets, the band’s lead singer, off his box on a cocktail of drugs, is attempting to have sex with a girl while four or five members of the band and road crew joke that he’s having sloppy sixths as they’ve all just “rinsed her.” One of the band, who invited me over, tells me to help myself to a bottle of Grolsch from the minibar. I turn around to help myself, and when I turn back, he’s roughly fucking one of the girls from behind on the

bed, her knickers round her knees, whilst cajoling one of her friends to crawl underneath and lick her clitoris.

The whole thing is surreal, but then it's the ultimate expression of their fame, and the reasons so many people crave the aphrodisiac of celebrity. It's the power to realize all your imaginings, and this, it seems, is the limit of most people's imagination: a free-for-all, drunken, drugged-up orgy in a series of posh hotel suites. It wasn't a new sight to me as I sat there, drunk and detached, swigging my beer, which is warm because the door to the fridge-sized minibar has been open for hours. (Christian 2007, 345-346)

In this way, for Christian at least, the "limit" to "people's imagination" seems to evidence a state of willed disorientation—from drug use or, perhaps more pointedly, from a situation in which enemies have been supposedly vanquished and freedom ensues. Christian, with his warm beer, suggests that he is not so naïve as to buy into such myths. Such readings, and reactions, around the "ultimate expression of their fame" and "the aphrodisiac of celebrity" would not survive the critique that flowed from #MeToo activism in recent years; see Boyle (2019).

3. While the idea of such a working-class cultural insurgency is difficult to evidence or maintain, as these authors argue, I myself remember this time period in such a way. Although from North Yorkshire, and familiar with a lairy Northern personae, I was office temping in London in the mid-1990s. My white, blue-collar colleagues in their early twenties were both flabbergasted and mesmerised by the brash antics of Northern Britpop groups, which they followed keenly in the media. Nathan Wiseman-Trowse's study of British popular music sets up a class-based geographic divide for the 1990s: middle class and Southern preferences for intelligent or challenging indie music, such as shoegaze, against Northern preferences for working class hedonism, as with rave: "Dreampop and Madchester" (2008, 146-67).

4. The time periods of the bands and debut albums are in corresponding order: Echobelly (1992-2004, 2009-present), *Everyone's Got One* (1994); Elastica (1992-2001), *Elastica* (1995); Salad (1992-98, 2017-present), *Drink Me* (1995); and Sleeper (1993-98, 2017-present), *Smart* (1995).

Owen Hatherley, in his study of the group Pulp, also lumps Echobelly, Elastica, and Sleeper together, albeit with Blur and Menswear, as a Britpop strata of "estuary-accented would-be social anatomists," "from the London Commuter Belt" (2011, 5). Rhian E. Jones, in her attacks on Sleeper (2013, 43-59), likewise seems irked by the social subject matter of the group's music, but more generally sees Britpop as a retrogressive culture compared to the diversity of British pop music prior, and as partly enabled through an unholy alliance of the *New Music Express*, "lad's mag" *Loaded* and the right-wing tabloid *The Sun* (4-5). Britpop's ascendancy and then institutionalization allowed for "sexism, chauvinism, xenophobia and ignorance," with postmodern irony offered as mitigating cover (41). Hatherley's questioning of the good faith of these groups, and the Northern Britpop character, derives from the way in which this relatively conservative music eclipsed "the explosive, multiracial, working class rhythmic psychedelia" of Jungle of this time (2011, 6), and that Britpop was effectively the State-prescribed cultural diet of his own teenage years. In the light of Derek B. Scott's observation that "Britpop was made possible in the 1990s by the emergence of a rock canon and, consequently, the idea of classic rock," which Scott evidences with reference to the 1993 validation of the first university degree in Popular Music, in the University of Salford (2016, 110). The white privilege that Hatherley notes offers further definition.

Luke Haines of The Auteurs (1991-1999) would later term Britpop "The Heritage Rock Revolution" (a song on his 2006 solo album *Off My Rocker at the Art School Bop*)—a music tendency which jostles, on this album, with predatory pederastic pop figures such as Jonathan King ("The Walton Hop") and Gary Glitter ("Bad Reputation"). All of these are examples of the opportunism of music industry moguls. (Haines does not mention Jimmy Savile in this respect, whose crimes were only made public in 2012, but Savile appears later on the album, in the song "Leeds United," as a suspect in the hunt for the serial killer Peter Sutcliffe, dubbed the Yorkshire Ripper, who was particularly active from 1975 to 1980). Haines's own take on Britpop (2009) is equally cynical: the female groups are particularly disciplined regarding the building of their public image in their ascent to the top. The effects of such internal and external pressures may not have been apparent at the time but Louise Wener, announcing the folding of her group Sleeper in 1998, commented "I'm going to be busy with the Listerine, washing the taste of corporate cock world out of my mouth" (quoted in the *New Musical Express*, 1998).

5. A possible exception would be Catatonia, but the Welsh identity of the group, not least in the singing of Cerys Matthews, suggests a character not entirely appropriately served by the term "Britpop." A Welsh equivalent, "Cool Cymru," would incorporate groups such as Super Furry Animals, who also released a Welsh-language album, *Mwng*,

in 2000. For the same reasons, I have also excluded the Scottish group Bis from this consideration. In *Britpop and the English Music Tradition*, J. Mark Percival argues that “Eng-pop” might be a more appropriate descriptor—a position that Derek B. Scott also articulates, not least since Englishness per se lacks the clear signifiers of Celtic cultures (2016, 105).

6. I have not been able to ascertain in which issue of *Viz* this first appeared. It has since gone on to be elevated to the status of tea mug decoration; <https://www.moretvicar.com/collection/viz-magazine-shop/product/manc-walk-mug?cc=viz-social>

7. But, as per Sheila Whiteley’s dissection of the song, the concern is with heroin addiction rather than an upper second university degree classification (2016, 63).

8. On this “intermezzo,” see Amanda D. Lotz ([2004] 2007, 73) or, for the “shifting ... terrain” of feminist ideas at this juncture, see Nicola Rivers (2017, 3). Key studies of postfeminism include Tania Modleski (1991), Sarah Projansky (2001) and Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff (2011). Justine Ashby localises postfeminism in a British context, and reads a number of films in the context of a postfeminism that looks to the “girl power” of The Spice Girls, and seems to have found an echo in the influx of female members of parliament that occurred with Blair’s coming to office, dubbed “Blair’s Babes” (2005, 128).

9. The programmes include ITV’s *Rivron* (1989) and Channel 4’s *The Big Breakfast* (1992-2002), *Naked City* (1993-1994), *Eurotrash* (1993-1997), *TFI Friday* (initial run of 1996-2000) and *The Word* (1990-1995). *The Word*’s female-presented successor, *The Girlie Show* (1996-1997) is frequently cited as “ladette television”— which could also be said of *Something for the Weekend* (1999-2000).

10. On the lasting media impact of Hurley’s Versace dress, see, for example, Urmee Kahn (2008) and Claire Cohen (2014), both writing for the conservative broadsheet British newspaper *The Daily Telegraph*. Richard Martin argues elsewhere that Gianni Versace “conceive[d] of fashion not as an enterprise in apparel, but as a larger cultural energy” (1998b, 7) and part of that energy was harnessed through his headline-grabbing tendency to “risk vulgarity” (9).

11. This error however was seemingly fairly typically made. The “Future is Female” cover feature of the October 1997 edition of *Select* (“... *Select* traces the rise and fall of post-PC piss-artistry, invites the cream of the new fem zeitgeist to bang the nail in their coffin, and leaves the last word to Britain’s leading female rock icon, Louise Wener”; Glick 1997, 66) opens with quotes from fanzines devoted to the Riot Grrrls and Spice Girls. But, to be more precise, the essential difference in categories is the indie rock bands under discussion here wrote and composed their own music.

12. Rebecca Munford explores this position with reference to the writing of Germaine Greer and Susan Faludi (2007, 267).

13. For Bikini Kill’s Kathleen Hanna on Susan Faludi, and recalling an argument she once had with Andrea Dworkin, see Marcus (2010, 41-42).

14. On Wener, see, for example, the images in the “tour book” of the double vinyl issue of *The It Girl* (Indolent Records, SLEEPLP012T). Sleeper did not have a dedicated stylist, and even found their own clothes for some video shoots. Frischmann’s former partner, and co-band member, Brett Anderson, recalled her in 1987 as alluring in her confidence, despite an unconventional appearance, as sporting “long unwashed dark hair cut in a severe fringe. She would always wear scruffy clothes like faded, vintage Mickey Mouse T-shirts or big clumpy biker’s boots, but somehow they just managed to make her look more elegant and moneyed . . . she had brown, discoloured teeth and what I thought at first was a speech impediment ... so urbane and worldly that I’m surprised I never found her daunting . . . her confidence never stepped over into arrogance as she possessed a clumsy, disarming kind of charm that seduced everyone she met” (2019, 110-111). Anderson is equally critical of his own appearance at the time.

15. I draw here on the experience of contemporary (rather than mid-1990s) performances: 2017 band reunion

concerts I attended for Echobelly (21 November, The Slade Rooms, Wolverhampton) and Sleeper (19 August in The Ritz, Manchester, 2 December in the Shepherds Bush Empire, London, and then 16 March 2018 in the Wardrobe, Leeds; my thanks to Jon Stewart for his kind invitations). At the time of writing, Elastica have not reformed.

16. These are available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ob7PITyZey> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XLPkalic6XA> respectively.

17. For example: “Hotel International” (1993), with addresses, dates, names, and “you’re good in bed,” “No Chance (WHAT A YEAR)” (1999), “they were the ugly cunts,” “at the age of 13 why should I trust anyone,” and “Pysco Slut” (1999), “I didn’t know I had to ask to share your life,” “you know how much I love you.”

18. An ahistorical transition, realigning the privileged wild child to the It Girl, did occur in parts of the popular press, where the “it” just seems to have been a matter of inheritance (financial, physiological), as with those associated with the Mahiki Club in Mayfair in the late 2000s (described as “*Tatler* meets *The Sun*” and “Kensington meets Essex;” Bell 2017), such as Kate and Pippa Middleton, or the female figures in the Channel 4 reality television series *Made in Chelsea* (2011-present). Tara Palmer-Tomkinson’s 2010 novel *Inheritance* offered such a definition: “Notorious party-loving ‘It Girl’ Lyric Charlton has it all—the lineage, the looks and the lifestyle. A moneyed upbringing at the heart of one of the upper class’s most well-connected families, a finishing school education and an address book bursting with the world’s most powerful and high-profile people has crowned her the glamorous poster girl for the aristocratic glitterati” (2010, backcover blurb).

19. See Jon Stewart and Benjamin Halligan (2019) for further comment on the autobiography; and see John Harris on the origins of the photograph (1997, 87).

20. It is striking that two substantial studies of women and rock from only a couple of years later—both of which note the need to address this neglected area of study—essentially sideline female-fronted Britpop, preferring to trace Riot Grrrl to non-mainstream North American rock acts. Whiteley’s *Women and Popular Music: Sexuality, Identity and Subjectivity*, while positioning The Spice Girls as a development from Bananarama and even “the more militant riot grrrls” in terms of “popular feminism” (2000, 216), makes virtually no mention of the groups discussed in this article. (They would come under her scrutiny some years later, albeit for an edited collection on Britpop; Whiteley 2016). Mavis Bayton, for *Frock Rock: Women Performing Popular Music* (1998), despite arguing for female rock as engendering lines of flight/escape, so that women are “able to resist gender socialization and successfully break into a male enclave” (189) makes only occasional passing references. In *Never Mind the Bollocks: Women Rewrite Rock* ([1995] 1996), Amy Raphael, on the other hand, devotes an interview chapter to Echobelly. In this context, Wener’s own autobiography (2010) offers an otherwise untold story that is quite different to the tone of prose that has emerged from the media industry around “classic rock”-style retellings of the excesses of Britpop, over more than two decades.

21. *Asian Babes* was a British “top shelf” (pornographic) magazine, published between 1992 and 2012.

22. Jones discusses Shampoo and Kenickie, whose *At The Club* was released in 1997, as the non-compromised female quarter of 1990s British popular music (2013, 57–62).

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