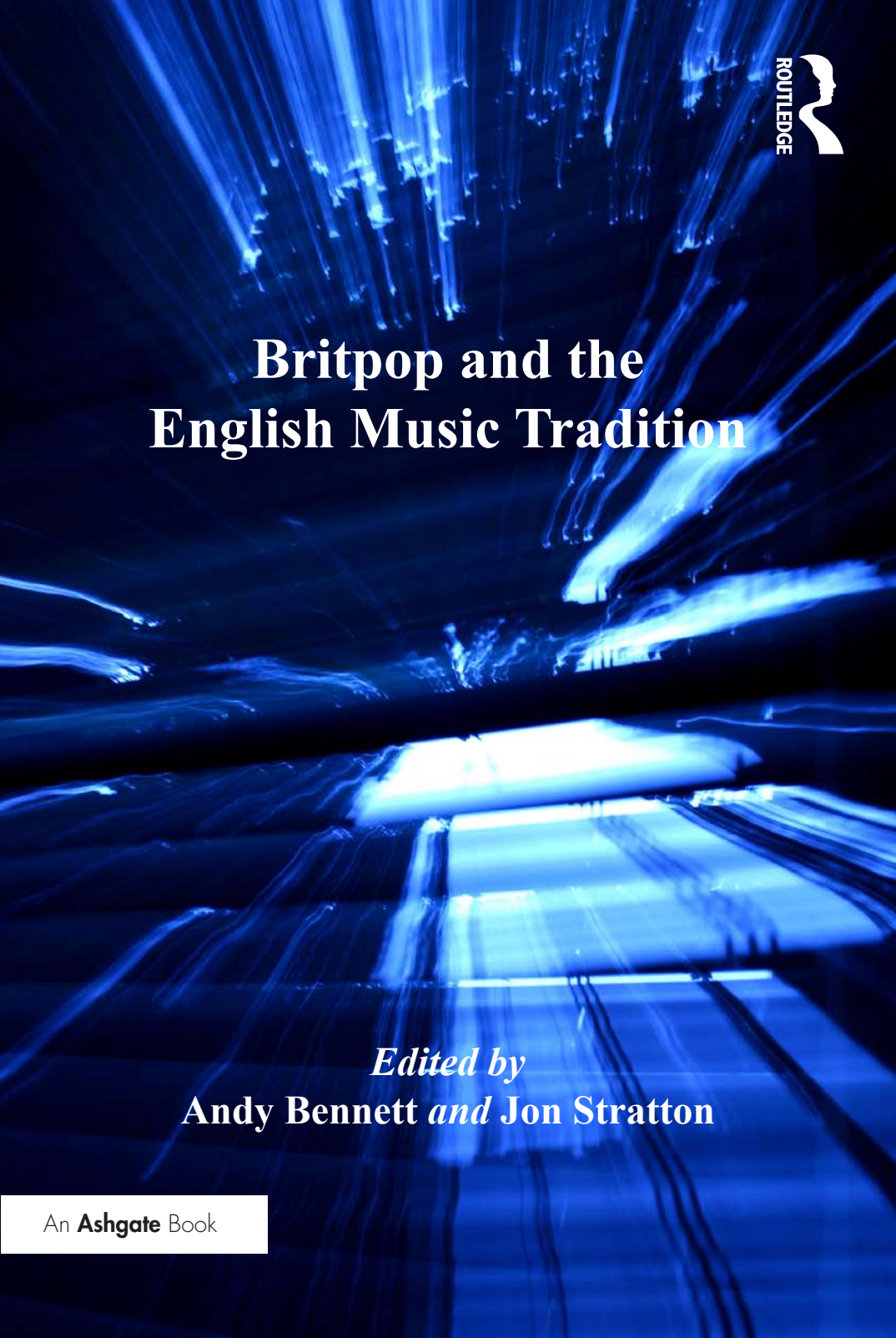
ROUTLEDGE
Britpop and the
English Music Tradition
Edited by
Andy Bennett and Jon Stratton
An Ashgate Book

BRITPOP AND THE ENGLISH MUSIC TRADITION

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Britpop and the English Music Tradition

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J. Mark Percival is a Lecturer in Media at Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh and lives in Glasgow. His doctoral thesis (*Making Music Radio*, University of Stirling, 2007) focused on the social dynamics of the relationship between record industry pluggers and music radio programmers in the UK. He has recently written about Scottish indie music production in *Popular Music History* (2009), and contributed book chapters about popular music and tartan, (in Ian Brown (ed.), *From Tartan to Tartanry: Scottish Culture, History and Myth*, Edinburgh University Press, 2010), and mediation of popular music (in Hugh Dauncey and Philippe Le Guern, eds, *Stereo: Studying Popular Music in France and Britain*, Ashgate, 2010). Mark has presented papers on local music production and on music radio at many international conferences. Since 2008 he has been chair of the UK and Ireland branch of the International Association for the Study of Popular Music (IASPM). Mark is a member of the Radio Studies Network. Alongside his academic career he has been a Mercury Music Prize judging committee member (1999 and 2000) and a DJ for BBC Radio Scotland (1988–2000), playing alternative, indie and electronica.

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Jon Stratton is Professor of Cultural Studies at Curtin University of Technology. Jon has published widely in the areas of cultural studies, Australian studies, Jewish studies, race and multiculturalism, and popular music studies. Jon's most recent books are: *Australian Rock: Essays on Popular Music* (Network Books, 2007), *Jewish Identity in Western Pop Culture: The Holocaust and Trauma through Modernity* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) and *Jews, Race and Popular Music* (Ashgate, 2009). Reflecting Jon's interest in race, multiculturalism and the plight of asylum seekers, Jon has also co-edited, with Suvendrini Perera, a special issue of *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* titled: *The Border, the Asylum Seeker and the State of Exception* (23/5, 2009). In addition, Jon has recently published articles on race and multiculturalism in Australia in *borderlands e-journal*, *Social Identities* and *Cultural Studies Review*.

Sheila Whiteley is Emeritus Professor of Popular Music at the University of Salford, Greater Manchester. As a feminist musicologist with strong research interests in issues of identity and subjectivity, she is known for her work on gender and sexuality as well as for longstanding interests in popular culture, and the status of women in the cultural industries. She is author of *The Space Between the Notes: Rock and the Counter Culture* (Routledge, 1992), *Women and Popular Music: Popular Music and Gender* (Routledge, 2000) and *Too Much Too Young: Popular Music, Age and Identity* (Routledge, 2005), and editor of *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender* (Routledge, 1996) and *Christmas, Ideology and Popular Culture* (Edinburgh University Press, 2008). She is co-editor of *Music Space and Place: Popular Music and Cultural Identity* (with Andy Bennett and Stan Hawkins, Ashgate, 2002) and *Queering the Popular Pitch* (with Jennifer Rycenga, Routledge, 2006). She is currently co-editing the OUP Handbook on *Popular Music and Queerness*, with Fred Maus, Sophie Fuller and Rachel Cowgill, and is on the *comité scientifique* for the colloquia 'Genres artistiques, genres sexués' (Paris, September 2011, co-organized by Marie Buscatto, Mary Leontsini and Hyacinthe Ravet). She was Chair of Popular Music at the University of Salford (1999–2006), Visiting Professor at the University of Aarhus, Denmark (2008) and the University of Brighton (2007–9). She has also published a novel, *Mindgames* (available from Amazon) which is based on her experience of being stalked following a conference at Brown University, USA, in 1996.

Nabeel Zuberi is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Film, Television and Media Studies. His book publications include *Sounds English: Transnational Popular Music* (University of Illinois Press, 2001) and *Media Studies in Aotearoa/ New Zealand 2* (co-edited with Luke Goode, Pearson, 2010). He is completing a monograph on the study of popular music after digitization, *Understanding Popular Music* (Sage, forthcoming). In recent years he has published articles with the journals *Perfect Beat* and *Science Fiction Studies*. His most recent writing includes 'From a whisper to James Brown's scream' for tobias c. van Veen, (ed.), *Afrofuturism: Interstellar Transmissions From Remix Culture* (Wayne State University Press, forthcoming), and 'Guantánamo here we come' for Sean Campbell and Colin Coulter (eds), *The Smiths: Music, Culture, Politics* (Manchester University Press, forthcoming). Nabeel's current research focuses on western Muslims and contemporary media. He has co-hosted The Basement on BASE 107.3 FM Auckland (basefm.co.nz) since 2004.

General Editor's Preface

The upheaval that occurred in musicology during the last two decades of the twentieth century has created a new urgency for the study of popular music alongside the development of new critical and theoretical models. A relativistic outlook has replaced the universal perspective of modernism (the international ambitions of the 12-note style); the grand narrative of the evolution and dissolution of tonality has been challenged, and emphasis has shifted to cultural context, reception and subject position. Together, these have conspired to eat away at the status of canonical composers and categories of high and low in music. A need has arisen, also, to recognize and address the emergence of crossovers, mixed and new genres, to engage in debates concerning the vexed problem of what constitutes authenticity in music and to offer a critique of musical practice as the product of free, individual expression.

Popular musicology is now a vital and exciting area of scholarship, and the *Ashgate Popular and Folk Music Series* presents some of the best research in the field. Authors are concerned with locating musical practices, values and meanings in cultural context, and draw upon methodologies and theories developed in cultural studies, semiotics, poststructuralism, psychology and sociology. The series focuses on popular musics of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It is designed to embrace the world's popular musics from Acid Jazz to Zydeco, whether high tech or low tech, commercial or non-commercial, contemporary or traditional.

Professor Derek B. Scott
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Introduction

Andy Bennett and Jon Stratton

At the height of the Britpop phenomenon, during the mid-1990s, 'Britpop' was branded by music journalists and critics alike as a critical resurgence of British popular music. Musically and lyrically, Britpop was regarded as a return to form – a brand of characteristically British, or more specifically 'English', popular music that rekindled the spirit of the mid-1960s 'British' invasion of the US by groups such as the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, the Kinks, the Who and the Small Faces. Indeed, a number of these groups, notably the Beatles, the Kinks and the Small Faces, were frequently cited as key musical influences by leading Britpop artists such as Blur and Oasis. The purportedly English qualities of Britpop acquired a currency at a number of levels. From the perspective of the British music industry, Britpop was considered an antidote to the dominance of US-originated musical styles such as rap and grunge (see also Chapters 4 and 8 in this book) whose rapid commercial success and incisive impact on youth audiences around the world had seen Britain lose momentum as a key player in the global popular music industry. Riding on the wave of the indie-guitar scene of the early 1990s, Britpop's merging of indie's guitar-based melodic pop style with a 1960s retro-aesthetic quickly found a niche, both nationally and overseas. The fact that Britpop was considered by the music industry and associated taste-makers as something 'authentically' English was further demonstrated through the speed at which groups such as Blur and Oasis found a place in the English rock/pop canon. In September 1995, one year after the release of Blur's breakthrough album *Parklife*, UK retro music magazine *Mojo* ran an extended feature on the band,[1] referring to their new album *The Great Escape* as 'the most eagerly-awaited long-player of 1995'. The same *Mojo* issue ran a feature in which Blur vocalist Damon Albarn met and interviewed a personal icon, singer-songwriter Ray Davies of the Kinks, further cementing in the popular imagination Britpop links with the Kinks and other 1960s English popular music icons.

That Britpop bands often cited regionality – both real and imagined – as an important aspect of their musical identity was another factor that facilitated opportunistic comparisons with the 1960s from the point of view of the music industry and the music press. For example, the northern roots of Oasis as compared with the London-centric sensibilities of Blur provided endless avenues for comparisons with the Beatles and the Rolling Stones (even when critical points of reference, for example the northern gritty aesthetic of Oasis as compared with

[1] David Cavanagh, 'Blur in the Studio'.

the Art School posturings of Blur, were distinctly problematized when imposed onto the Beatles and the Rolling Stones where such neat distinctions were difficult to apply). However, region and regionality went further in the Britpop discourse. Songs such as Pulp's 'Common People', described in John Dower's 2003 film document *Live Forever* as the defining song of the Britpop sound, transformed kitchen-sink melodrama into a 'warts and all' pop celebration of English working-class life.[2]

Also critical to a contemporary understanding of the Britpop phenomenon is the way in which it was effectively hijacked – or allowed itself to be hijacked – by mainstream politics in the mid-1990s. As future prime minister Tony Blair's New Labour campaign gathered momentum, Britpop and its associations with a young, 'cool' British public presented itself as a crucial and seemingly willing partner in the promotion of a new cultural political discourse – 'Cool Britannia'.[3] The foundations for the Cool Britannia rhetoric, and the role of Britpop within it, had been established through the British popular press that, as early as 1994, had been intimating that the emergence of Britpop defined a new cultural sensibility in the UK, conflating in the process the terms British and English in a way that has continued to problematize Britpop. Thus as Cliff Jones, writer for leading popular culture magazine *The Face*, said of Blur in 1994 in the wake of the success of the group's *Parklife* album:

> By rebelling against th[e] gradual dumbing down of a nation, by openly championing a switched-on, sophisticated Britpop image [Blur have] defined a New Englishness. It's an attitude based not on a nostalgic Carry On Mr Kipling Britain, but a Britain that you will recognise as the one you live in. A place where dressing well and having a good haircut matter.[4]

Despite such bold statements, however, a salient criticism, and one that has been revisited on Britpop many times since, was its overly nostalgic representation of a nation. As Cloonan observes,[5] the Britain and/or England portrayed in much of the Britpop material is ethnically white and appears to be set in an imagined past. Little reference is paid to the ravages of de-industrialization and unemployment or the social unrest created through racism and inequality. Both musically and culturally, it was claimed, Britpop seemed content to airbrush out of existence significant eras of social and cultural change in Britain and England.

The political economy of Britpop was also sharply questioned. Although it was championed in some quarters for allegedly reviving the musical fortunes

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[2] Andy Bennett, '"Village Greens and Terraced Streets": Britpop and Representations of "Britishness"'.

[3] Martin Cloonan, 'State of the Nation: "Englishness", Pop, and Politics in the mid-1990s'; see also Chapter 6 in this book.

[4] Cliff Jones, 'Looking for a New England', p. 42.

[5] In 'State of the Nation: "Englishness"'.

of a nation, Britpop itself seemed to be a purely 'English' affair. Little or no reference to Scottish, Welsh or Irish bands was or has since been made in relation to Britpop. Indeed, as Mark Percival explains in greater detail in Chapter 8, groups from these countries generally exhibited little interested in being associated with Britpop. In this respect, as in others then, Britpop appeared to be a reaffirmation of long-established status quo. Thus the bands who attracted the attention of the London-based British music press and were readily associated with the Britpop trend tended to be those English bands who were London-based or who were prepared to travel to London for gigs.

The legacy of Britpop continues to impress itself on English popular music. The purpose of this book is to revisit and re-evaluate Britpop as a musical and cultural phenomenon that was both shaped by and has contributed to the shaping of English musical and social institutions. As such, the book is both a historical study and one that brings the Britpop legacy right up to date, with chapters in the latter half of the book considering the impact of Britpop upon the way contemporary English popular music artists are positioned – or position themselves – in the English cultural landscape.

The first section of the book, 'History and Context', maps the musical and cultural influences on Britpop from the mid-nineteenth century to the early 1980s. Dave Laing provides an outline of music hall, discussing its origins and most important artists; he also provides an outline of the debates over the politics of music hall. Discussing the way music hall morphed into variety, Laing emphasizes the importance of the new technology of the microphone. He also discusses the revival of music hall in the 1960s and 1970s, and the importance of BBC television's *The Good Old Days* to that revival. Laing shows some of the continuities in the expression of Englishness between music hall and Britpop. Music hall has been a constant resort for English artists, and Laing shows its centrality to the culture of working-class life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Next, Jon Stratton argues that music hall was the basis of the tradition that was at first swamped by American musical forms but was then reasserted, often in new combinations with American music. Skiffle was one example of an American musical form that was taken up and reworked in the service of English culture. By the mid-1960s, the Beatles and the Kinks were making music that acknowledged the music hall tradition. Even the Rolling Stones, the quintessential English rhythm and blues group, were including elements drawn from music hall and other areas of English culture. Britpop has been considered irremediably male.

In Chapter 4, Sheila Whiteley considers the influences that produced this trend and examines the ways that groups with women in dominant roles, most importantly Echobelly, Elastica and Sleeper, bought into the laddism of Britpop or attempted to carve out a role distinct from the dominant ideology. As Whiteley observes, these groups looked to punk and New Wave to find a ground from which to explore the gender orthodoxy of male-dominated Britpop. Then Andy Bennett considers the ways that groups in the 1970s form a missing link between the assertions of Englishness in the 1960s and the Britpop of the 1990s. To this

end Bennett considers groups such as Slade and Cockney Rebel who are usually absent in critical discussions of Englishness. Indeed, as Bennett remarks, the 1970s, before punk, are often noted in histories of Britpop but rarely given the attention they deserve. Bennett considers how these groups worked with an everyday Englishness, often expressed in accent and in a critical consideration of elements of English culture such as the educational system. Madness, with their use of ska and reggae rhythms, pioneered the incorporation of these Jamaican forms into a celebration of white, English working-class life suggesting a complex acknowledgement of Britain's racialized society.

Section 2 examines the Britpop phenomenon itself, from its connections with New Labour through the discourses of genre, style and sexuality associated with Britpop, to the problematic conflation of the terms 'British' and 'English' in the cultural and commercial rhetoric of Britpop. Rupa Huq focuses on the relationship between New Labour and Britpop. Huq considers how New Labour's rhetoric of Cool Britannia drew on Harold Wilson's positioning of Labour in the 1960s as the party to lead Britain into the future and how this nostalgic revisioning of the past was echoed in the ways that Britpop groups looked to the groups of the 1960s for inspiration and validation. As Huq argues, while New Labour wanted to use Britpop for its own purposes, most especially to woo the youth vote, the Britpop groups were quite apolitical. There was, as she notes, no Britpop equivalent of Red Wedge, the 1980s grouping of musicians in support of Labour. At the same time, while new musical forms such as jungle and bhangra were evolving among racialized, marginalized groups, the members of Britpop groups were overwhelmingly white and male. In the end, Huq suggests, 'Britpop can be characterized as a post-ideological soundtrack to post-political times'.

Derek Scott provides a close musical analysis comparing the sounds of the 1960s groups with the sounds of the Britpop groups. He argues that those people who claim that, for example, Oasis sound like the Beatles, have not paid close attention to the music each group was making. He suggests that Britpop 'was made possible … by the emergence of a rock canon and, consequently, the idea of classic rock'. At the same time, as Scott goes on to detail, the relationship between Oasis and the Beatles, while present, is superficial. Scott's point is that each group is, ultimately, a product of its time. Mark Percival is concerned with that vexed problem of whether Britpop, as a term and as a musical style, covered the whole of Britain, or just England. Percival excludes Northern Ireland from his discussion because of the complexities associated with that region. He considers how Welsh and Scottish groups identified with indie and rejected Britpop as a sell-out from indie values. This took place at the same time that political power was being devolved from Westminster. The Welsh National Assembly and the Scottish Parliament were established after referendums in 1998. At the same time, Percival argues that Welsh and Scottish groups did not perform Welshness or Scottishness. Rather, they asserted their difference through a rejection of the lifestyle associated with Britpop groups and an assertion of values that were claimed to be typically Welsh and Scottish. In addition, in Wales, there has been much debate over whether

groups should sing in Welsh. Percival offers a discussion of the different ways that the Stereophonics, Manic Street Preachers and Super Furry Animals have identified their Welshness, and the practical ways that the last group has managed their shift from singing in Welsh to making albums in English.

Finally, in this section, Stan Hawkins looks at the ways that masculinity gets played out in the laddism that was so associated with the Britpop groups. Hawkins is particularly interested in vocal performances. He provides four detailed analyses, of James Dean Bradfield from Manic Street Preachers, Noel Gallagher from Oasis, Damon Albarn from Blur, and Jarvis Cocker from Pulp. Noting Hawkins's use of Manic Street Preachers, whom Percival identifies as a Welsh group antithetical in some ways to Britpop, this is a good moment for us, as editors, to explain that we have deliberately not tried to homogenize the contributions to this collection. While the chapters all cover different aspects of the Britpop phenomenon, and in this sense complement each other, we have allowed them also to express different positions on what Britpop is and which groups might be considered Britpop artists. Hawkins tells us that 'Britpop signalled a distinct reaction to the new trends of masculinity that emerged in the 1980s and the set of liberal politics the New Male upheld'. Through his close analyses of the four singers, Hawkins argues that 'all communicate the normative rules of gendered practice through their performances'. He goes on to consider how the assertion of Britpop, laddist masculinity functions in terms of an anxiety about the performance of heterosexuality brought about by the New Male unsettling of heteronormativity.

Section 3 examines the English music–cultural landscape in a post-Britpop context, considering how the legacy of Britpop has shaped the music and politics of contemporary English guitar bands and more recent English-originated music genres such as grime and dubstep. Ian Collinson's concern is with the new generation of guitar groups in the early 2000s. He chooses three, all of which have achieved great popularity in Britain, for particularly close examination – Kaiser Chiefs, Arctic Monkeys and Bloc Party. He argues that these new guitar groups owe more to the groups of the 1970s than the 1960s. At the same time, there has been little change in the composition of these groups, that is, 'this new wave continues the gender, ethnic and racial exclusivity of Britpop'. In this regard, as Collinson argues, Bloc Party stands out as a racially mixed group. For Collinson, Bloc Party is different in other ways as well. While Kaiser Chiefs and Arctic Monkeys evidence a nostalgia for the 1970s, Bloc Party, Collinson argues, offers a new engagement with 'ideas of Englishness'. Nostalgia is a theme that runs through this collection. The 1960s groups nostalgic for a lost empire and a time before American-driven consumerism; the laddist Britpop groups nostalgic for the 1960s when, apparently, gender roles were clearer and men knew how to be men; and more recently, groups in the 2000s nostalgic for what they think was the simpler nationalism of Britain in the 1970s, a time, perhaps, before devolution and when, only in 1973, Britain finally voted to join what was then the Common Market. Nostalgia, as Collinson quotes Ruth Adams remarking, is 'a constant presence in British culture'. It is a prism through which Britons understand their

present and their past. Collinson argues that the generation of guitar groups he is discussing are all concerned with the question of Englishness and that they all, even Bloc Party, which at least identifies some of Britain's social problems in the 2000s, fail to describe what a new Englishness might look like.

Nabeel Zuberi's chapter makes a stimulating comparison with Collinson's. Where Collinson identifies the loss of imagination of the white, male guitar groups in a renewed English future, Zuberi examines what he calls 'some of the black humours in dance music during the last decade'. Zuberi focuses on artists like Dizzee Rascal, Sway and M.I.A. – here is where we find the Asian- and Afro-Caribbean-originated Britons. In this music that explores new soundscapes using new technologies, we find both the expression of anger at Britain's racialized subordination of minority groups and the innovation that generates new musical forms like grime and dubstep that are, inevitably, politically engaged. Zuberi explores the ways that Dizzee Rascal asserts his Englishness that, as a black Briton, he feels he is being denied. He also discusses M.I.A., showing how her popularity has developed virally across the internet, utilizing new digital technologies of reproduction and distribution. The contrast between the white guitar groups that Collinson discusses and the brown and black artists that are Zuberi's focus offers an indictment of a British culture that continues to marginalize people of colour.

Britpop was, and is, often understood as a reassertion of the British popular music tradition in the face of the popularity of grunge. However, Britpop, as the chapters in this book suggest, was simultaneously involved with the assertion of a white, male, heterosexual Englishness. From this point of view, Britpop was a conservative reaction to the changes that were transforming Britain in the 1990s. Among these, this collection identifies the crisis in national identity associated with devolution and the European Community; the political crisis associated with the demise of Thatcherite conservatism and its replacement by New Labour's Cool Britannia in the landslide general election of 1997; the crisis in British whiteness as second- and third-generation people of colour asserted their Britishness and their place in English culture; the crisis in masculinity as the acceptance of the New Male signalled also an unsettling of heteronormativity. Collinson's conclusion that the post-Britpop groups he is discussing can offer no new vision of Englishness, or Britishness, is disturbing. As we have seen, Britpop evolved as a reassertion of a British tradition of popular music that goes back to the beat groups of the 1960s. Britpop's vision was regressive, a reinstatement of traditional race and gender concerns. At the same time, as Percival explains, the aesthetics of Britpop were rejected by Welsh and Scottish groups who remained staunchly indie in their attitudes. Britpop was really Eng-pop.

We also need to remember that Britpop was just one form of music among many in England in the 1990s. From at least the establishment of ska and reggae as indigenous English musical forms in the 1960s and 1970s, popular music across Britain has been a melting pot of diverse sounds. Unlike the United States, where there has been a long tradition of musical segregation, since at least the Equals and the Foundations in the latter half of the 1960s, Britain has had popular

mixed-race groups that meld together a wide variety of musical genres. Where the ska influence on the Equals' recordings was subtle, the changes in British musical sensibilities meant that, in 1994, the same year that Oasis released *Definitely Maybe* and Blur released their third album *Parklife*, Pato Banton could have a number 1 hit with a reggaefied version of Eddy Grant's 'Baby Come Back', a 1967 number 1 for the Equals. Bloc Party may have, as Collinson suggests, no musical vision for the present, or the future, but their mixed-race make-up and their dance-genre influences point to a breaking-out of the white, male (and heterosexual) straitjacket that has limited the ability of post-Britpop guitar groups to come to terms with the fundamental changes that have been taking place in British and, especially, English, life. At the same time, Zuberi's analysis of the musical creativity and political engagement of those racialized and marginalized in Britain suggests other possibilities. Grime-influenced artists who have achieved chart success such as Dizzee Rascal and M.I.A. signal the ways that white Britons are adapting to a new multicultural and plural musical mix. In addition, some grime artists have started working with white guitar groups who might have been identified as Britpop but are now more commonly called indie, forming a new hybrid genre which Statik, a grime producer who has been a pioneer in this development, has christened grindie.

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