From the East End to Albion: British Self-Perception in Literature and Music
Caroline E. Lees
Department of English
Independent Study for Honors
Expected Date of Graduation: May 15, 2010
Date Submitted: May 6, 2010
“If you’ve lost your faith in love and music, the end won’t be long.../
I’ve tried so hard to keep myself from falling back into my bad old ways/It chars my heart
to always hear you calling, calling for the good old days”
—The Libertines, *The Good Old Days*

**Introduction**

Two Bethnal Green hooligans walk into a bookstore. What do they buy? The likely response is nothing, but if the two men are British musicians Pete Doherty and Carl Barat, the answer could be any number of canonical English texts by authors like Blake and Orwell. Barat and Doherty's band, The Libertines, kickstarted a movement in British music that has inspired dozens of other musicians in recent years. These bands’ personal, instrumentally imperfect love songs to England combine literary allusion and everyday anecdotes to concoct a unique image of class and culture in the U.K. They create a chronicle of English history that moves from a past based on the idealized, pastoral vision of England known as “Albion” through a polarizing war era and a dreary present, culminating in a frighteningly dystopian future. These indie musicians echo a growing trend in Britain; twenty-first century Britons are deeply concerned with perceived cultural degradation as a result of their nation’s changing place in the world. This music presents a surprisingly conservative vision of a historically based and class-defined “Englishness,” focusing on the production of personally meaningful art to oppose mass culture and define Britain against encroaching globalization.

As the millennium dawned in England, many artists and critics viewed the music scene as dismal and disposable. Mired in leftover Spice Girls clones, American radio rock, and dreary

---

1 For the sake of clarity, song titles will be italicized rather than placed in quotations. They will also appear parenthetically in this format.
2 “Indie” often denotes a band signed to an independent record label. Though many of the bands addressed in this paper meet that criteria, the term is also used here to describe musicians who have especially close contact with fans or reject radio-friendly norms, regardless of label affiliation.
Britpop³ that saw bands like Westlife, Coldplay, and Travis dominating the airwaves, British music enthusiasts and publications found little in the way of innovative, praiseworthy music. Bands seemed more interested in selling out stadiums full of preteen fans than making art; the Britpop movement represented the homogenization of culture that many Britons fear, creating music that was the lowest common denominator of styles to attract a wide audience. Music journalist Anthony Thornton writes in *Bound Together*⁴ of his early days at the *NME*:⁵ “music was sliding into the meaningless aor [album oriented rock] with the gentle grace of someone slipping into a coma” (14). The influx of music from the United States was judged most harshly; Thornton describes American nu-metal musician Fred Durst as “a portly baseball-cap-wearing misogynist arsehole” (14). Music publications were folding, the Yanks were invading, in the eyes of the indie press and artists like Doherty and Barat “there simply wasn’t a British music scene” (Thornton and Sargent 284).

In 2002, *Up the Bracket* changed everything.

With their debut, The Libertines gave British music a much-needed jolt of indie innovation after a decade of bland imports like Britney Spears and Creed. Their reintroduction of under-produced, lyrically anecdotal garage rock made them darlings of the influential *NME*. *Up the Bracket* garnered rave reviews and a reverent following from the magazine and its readers.

---

³ The 90’s “Britpop” movement included stadium-filling bands like Blur and Oasis. Coldplay, Travis, and Keane carry the somewhat drab mantle of the genre in the twenty-first century. Most Britpop is characterized by less anecdotal lyrics than *NME* indie, slicker production, and a tendency toward mass marketing. The *NME* often mockingly references Britpop’s depressing lyrical focus.

⁴ *Bound Together* is Thornton’s chronicle of The Libertines, based upon his years following them on tour and in the studio. The book is accented with Roger Sargent’s vast collection of concert and behind-the-scenes photography.

⁵ The *NME*, formally *New Musical Express*, is one of Britain’s most popular music magazines, focused on indie rock. Its weekly publication makes it the best source for tracking new musical trends, but it is also known for being particularly fickle. “The” is usually included before its title when Britons speak about it.
that lingers even now, years after the dissolution of the band. From the iconic scream that opens the title track to the roughly produced, Clash-inspired guitars, to Doherty and Barat’s mumbled, allusive lyrics, the album was a galvanizing departure from everything else happening in British music. Doherty and Barat were aware of their musical innovation; in 1999 Doherty wrote, “One wonders if the Britpop era will be looked back on with any affection. I sincerely doubt it” (Books of Albion⁶ ⁷). The Libertines are easily the most lauded band of their generation, and their rise to fame affected the success of other indie musicians. A wave of indie bands like Franz Ferdinand, Bloc Party, Arctic Monkeys, and The Rakes broke as the midpoint of the decade neared, shifting the foundations of Britain’s music scene.

The subgenre formed by these musicians, perhaps best described as “NME indie” after the magazine that helped most of the bands break (and, ever fickle, replaced them with a different hot new band in the next week’s issue), is dominated by groups of young men with penchants for loquacious lyrics and spiky guitars. While The Libertines garner considerable media attention for their literary vision of English life, the work of their heirs receives much less in-depth analysis.⁷ Little consideration has been given to the way that all these bands interact with one another to form an even more layered vision of Englishness than The Libertines’ alone. Doherty and Barat are an obvious touchstone for the exploration of the genre, but understanding them in tandem with the network of bands that appeared in their wake reveals a nuanced and sometimes anachronistic portrait of English society through the eyes of educated, artistic working class young musicians and their fans.

---

⁶ The Books of Albion are Doherty’s collected journals from roughly 1999-2007, scanned at high quality and published in 2007 in their original form.
⁷ See Thornton and Sargent for the most comprehensive, well-researched, and emotionally engaged discussion of The Libertines and their music.
Several factors unite the NME indie bands as a distinct group. Many are London natives, the rest migrate toward the city and its proliferation of intimate concert venues and club nights, which provide the perfect platform for the kind of low-tech, fan-centric shows they favor. All of them craft literate lyrics that rely on a combination of references from British literature and snippets of daily life, finding further inspiration in the social concerns addressed by older bands like The Smiths and The Clash who explored “Britain’s outsider past” in their music during the seventies and eighties (Thornton and Sargent 11). NME indie musicians are educated. They’re also young and committed to their own ideologies; they often choose and reshape small portions of larger works to suit their idiosyncratic message—a tactic that will become particularly apparent in their treatment of Blake. Though well read and culturally aware, many are working class and display distinct regional pride by maintaining local dialects in their vocals. Their breakthroughs are characterized by rabid praise from the indie press and a striking level of fan dedication and interaction that extends to the free release of music online and impromptu, ramshackle “guerilla gigs” held in pubs and private homes. All these traits combine to reject homogenous culture and staunchly defend an imagined Britain and its artistic output against the influence of globalization.

It’s also important to note that many of these musicians know each other and have collaborated artistically, so the literary works they choose become part of a collective consciousness for the NME indie scene. The Libertines and offshoot bands Babyshambles and Dirty Pretty Things share members, material, and the occasional reunion gig. Carl Barat and Jamie Reynolds of Klaxons sporadically join forces as part of a live-only “supergroup” called

---

8 I spent several months exploring this culture, reading the NME each week, talking to British fans, and attending myriad gigs at every tiny London venue I could find to better understand why these bands and their fans are so devoted to their educated and comprehensive understanding of life in Britain.
The Chavs. Praise from Pete Doherty gave Scottish band The View their big break, while Alex Kapranos of Franz Ferdinand passed on Bloc Party’s demo to record executives. 9 These bands, interlocked by fanbases, influences, venues, and personal friendships, form an intellectual, socially aware subgenre of British indie that reflects with remarkable depth on the state of modern Britain and the outlook of its citizens, embracing the nation as a beloved and troubled place to call home.

“We’ll die in the class we were born, but it’s a class of our own, my love” — The Libertines, *Time for Heroes*

“You marry for love and find you've let yourself in for a seven day a week job with no pay. And you don't find it out until it's too late.”— *Love on the Dole* (1941 film based on the novel)

**Class**

A concern with class, a social element central to *NME* indie’s perception of British culture, spans the entire chronology established by the genre, making it an ideal starting point for exploring this musical world. While the bands demonstrate a distinctly upper-class level of education in their literary references,10 their music connects strongly with working class values, concerns, and identity. Art that sympathizes with the lower classes most often calls for the dissolution of class structure, particularly the oppressive upper echelons. British literature and music, however, seem unusually class nonspecific; the nation’s arts “resonat[e] with notions of British identity that enjoy[…] a wide cultural currency” across all classes (Hilliard 9). These bands express the uniquely English admiration for a social structure that keeps them in place;

---

9 See Appendix A (electronic) for more on these bands and their connections, as well as the expanded lyrics to key songs.
10 Hilliard notes, “rock and art often [go] together: many bands were formed in the art colleges;” *NME* indie’s interest in literary allusion betrays an educated sensibility for high art despite working class roots (279).
class has long been “an important, though never exclusive, part of [British] identities” (August 245). NME indie bands scorn “cold blooded luxury” in favor of the “cheery vagabondage” that characterizes their social position (Babyshambles, *Def Left Hand*). In this way they also reject globalization; they refuse to subscribe to the American dream of upward mobility that many Brits see as a threat to comfortably fixed British social structure and class identity (Storry and Childs 179). For this reason, NME indie bands condemn “selling out” for major label record deals and stadium tours as a betrayal of class identity in favor of bland corporate success associated with Americanized social climbing. These musicians associate the working class and monarchy alike with an insular vision of England based on the positive perception of what Giles and Middleton identify as “benevolent social order” (111). Economic historian Alastair Reid notes that Britons are still attached to the stabilizing notion that “the country…continued to be ruled by the landed aristocracy…until the First World War” (4). Identification with a particular class offers a connection to specific, historically-rooted British self-image, dependent upon the “love of stratification and hierarchy” that Storry and Childs see in contemporary English culture (180).

The Libertines address working class life with the most transparent concern for politics and perceived degenerative social change; though they embrace their social position, they comment frequently on the corruption of their class. In *Hooray for the 21st Century* they ask,

---

11 “Vagabondage also suggests the rambling “tramp” figure, a classic trope of British working class culture (Giles and Middleton 22).

12 Mike Storry and Peter Childs’s *British Cultural Identities* was my central source for an overview of life in contemporary Britain, including helpful statistics on population and public opinion.

13 See Arctic Monkeys tracks *Fake Tales of San Francisco* and *Who the Fuck Are Arctic Monkeys?* for the most pointed commentary on musical sellouts.

14 *Writing Englishness* is Judy Giles and Tim Middleton’s diverse compilation of British writing from 1910 to 1950, an invaluable tool for understanding Britons’ responses to the war era.
“what became of the love we knew...what became of the working class?” In answer they list a litany of sneaker brands favored by chav youth: “Nike, Reebok, Adidas,” followed by, ironically, “Hooray for the 21st century.” Chav culture, a working-class subgroup influenced by American rap trends and known for “drinking and anti-social behavior,” becomes a particular worry for NME indie artists and the general populace as it changes the face of working-class Britons (Gross 1). The traditional working class is concerned with the disintegration of its identity in modern England. In Love on the Dole, The Libertines ask listeners to “strike a light/raise your glasses/drink a toast to the boring classes,” criticizing the modern middle classes of bland corporate employees as well. Dole is also unique in that it discusses distinctly English class divisions based on geography; the North-South divide is strong in the nation, with the North most commonly associated with the working-class and characterized by a “more entrenched nature of deprivation” (Giles and Middleton 8; Green 179). The Walter Greenwood novel that the song takes its title from tells the story of post-WWI economic depression in the North. Though they’re from London, The Libertines identify with this working class world by proclaiming, “all night long we were singing Northern songs.” Similar images of class pride pervade the band’s work. “We’ll die in the class we were born/But it’s a class of our own, my love,” they proclaim in Time for Heroes. They value a class system that can provide pride a stable identity, particularly a working class identity that ties them to an older, more traditional “Englishness.”

The strong sense of working-class membership that The Libertines express is paralleled in the lyrics of many NME indie bands. Cockney troubadour Jamie T picks up the threads of

---

15 See David Gross’s “To Chav and Chav Not,” for a more detailed discussion of Britain’s negative feelings on chav culture and the infamous, class-breaching adoption of the once-stodgy clothing brand Burberry by young chavs.
class conflict and change in *Sheila*, a song that mixes harsh images of modern London with a posh-accented voice reading “The Cockney Amorist,” a 1958 poem by John Betjeman—described by Joseph Bennett as “the most ‘English’ of poets”—that nostalgically examines older working class pastimes and areas of London (435). “Her lingo went from the Cockney to the Gringo,” Jamie says of the eponymous woman; she is replacing the traits of the traditional English lower class that bands like The Libertines idealize with those of another culture. The rest of the song incorporates references to detrimental cultural change. For example, the title character drinks “Stella,” a beer popular with chavs. Intercut with Betjeman’s “conservative…old-fashioned” poem about longing for the past, the song takes on a more complex meaning as a piece about the loss of Englishness in the working class (Bennett 435). “I’ll walk the streets of London/ Which once seemed all our own...No more the Hackney Empire/Shall find us in its stalls,” the titular amorist tells a woman who has left him. He concludes with, “For these and all the other things/were part of you and me...what I can’t make out/is why since you have left me/I’m somehow still about.” *Sheila*’s use of Betjeman’s lines, filled with “nostalgia, pathos, [and] reverence for the established social order” reveals something important about the outlook of these musicians (Bennett 438). They perceive themselves as cultural relics, last holdouts against the globalized, degraded society described in Jamie T’s lyrics that has taken the pride out of belonging to the English working class.

Working class Cockney culture and its language in particular are romanticized by Jamie T and The Libertines, who have been described by journalists as “Dickensian orphans” (Ledger

---

16 Find the full poem in Appendix B.
17 The *NME* even dressed them as characters from Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* for a holiday photo shoot in December 2003, found in scans at Albion Arks, The Libertines fan forum.
and Luckhurst 25-49\textsuperscript{18}; NME). Jamie T creates further levels of class meaning by having Betjeman’s poem with a Cockney speaker voiced in a distinctly upper class “RP” accent. The “RP [received pronunciation]” accent\textsuperscript{19}—often used by British public figures and considered the worldwide stereotype of British speech—separates itself purposefully from working class accents like Cockney and functions in NME indie as a symbol of the homogenization and weakening of British class culture (Storry and Childs 180). The importance of language and its centrality to identity and personal worth is a sentiment identified by Stuart Peterfreund as early as Blake; Hilliard also notes the rise of “dialect, slang, and technical terms from specific industries” in “working class fiction” of twentieth century Britain, a literary parallel to NME indie (99; 123). The genre’s concern with maintaining Britain’s linguistic idiosyncrasies is connected to an interest in artistic expression and anti-corporate individuality that fosters working class allegiance. The consciousness of linguistic diversity in Sheila also represents a resurgence in class identification and pride in modern Britain. Storry and Childs note that “in recent years…young upper middle-class people in London have begun to adopt fake cockney accents” (180). In an instance where the music and wider reality cross paths, British public figures, including the monarchy, are for the first time rejecting “posh,” homogenous “RP” pronunciations in favor of distinctly English regional speech patterns in an attempt to identify more closely with average Britons (Storry and Childs 180-181).

Since the war era, embracing class stratification has been a way to connect with the proud history of Britain as an imperial power and a unique society in response to a rising global effect on culture (Giles and Middleton 23-25). The fading of the traditional British class system

\textsuperscript{18} Ledger and Luckhurst’s chapter on “Outcast London” excellently synopsizes the stereotypes and realities of the London district where Cockney culture originated.

\textsuperscript{19} The British Library offers a concise overview of the RP accent here: http://www.bl.uk/learning/langlit/sounds/case-studies/received-pronunciation/.
coincides with the world wars and the interwar period, a time that the bands also point to as a moment of massive cultural loss due to international influence. More recently, the working class that once supported England economically and defended it at war has developed a subgroup of Americanized hoodlums; America’s relatively class-porous society becomes a threat to Britain’s class-centric one. “I try to get to my taxi/A man in a track suit [favored by chavs] attacks me...” Kaiser Chiefs complain in I Predict a Riot, a track that comments on rising social problems in England with further anecdotes like “a friend of a friend, he got beaten/he looked the wrong way at a policeman.” The rise of an Americanized subculture (chavs) in the working class coincides with the destabilization of traditional authority figures like police officers; both instances represent a collapse of the bottom of the class hierarchy that leads upward to the ultimate symbol of English stability, the monarchy. Historian Andrew August identifies “a widespread fondness for the monarchy” among working class people during the early twentieth century, a time idealized by NME indie bands as a cultural peak for Britain (227). Chaotic social conflict as seen in Kaiser Chiefs is a symptom of modern failure to remain inside class boundaries and loyal to one’s cultural history.

In contrast to gloomy criticisms of class disintegration, Arctic Monkeys take a fond look at the youngest sector of the lower class, singing in dialect about late teenage life in their native Sheffield on debut album Whatever People Say I Am, That’s What I’m Not. They poke fun at images of tawdry modern life, “lairy [pushy] girls hung out the window of a limousine/Of course it’s fancy dress [costume] /And they’re all looking quite full on in bunny ears and devil horns and hats [describing a bachelorette party]” (The View from the Afternoon). In songs filled with

---
20 Critics might argue that NME musicians, with their propensity for drug use, are also socially detrimental. However, a distinction exists between their largely harmless actions and the frequent aggressive, vandalistic, or gang-like behavior of chavs.
slang, they tell of adventures like “a chase last night/from men with truncheons dressed in hats/We didn’t do that much wrong/Still ran away though for the laughs” (Riot Van). Arctic Monkeys find joy in their everyday lives, even as they conflict with figures of authority and the upper classes. The youthful energy in their up-tempo tracks reflects what they consider the true, vibrant spirit of working class England. Their decision to write slang-heavy lyrics also enhances the class-conscious pride reflected in their music, maintaining ties to their regional and economic backgrounds. Shifts in language become a way for them to track their nation’s divergence from its traditional past. Turner’s mixture of clever poetic syntax with working class language also reflects the “democratization” of culture, identified by Christopher Hilliard as an increasing trend after the midpoint of the twentieth century, that allows these bands to value both high literary art and the “low culture” of indie music (5).

The Libertines and Bloc Party also pick up on the theme of “cheery vagabondage” in a way that idealizes working class life (Babyshambles, Deft Left Hand). Like the British youth reconnecting with the working class through affected “mockney” accents, NME indie bands idealize poverty as a “true” English experience. These musicians perceive something giddily exciting and beautiful about life on a shoestring; The Libertines even idyllically dubbed their crumbling East London apartment the “Albion Rooms” (Thornton and Sargent 8-12). Bloc Party asserts that “years of crime and the bread line/ have not at all dimmed your shine,” and The Libertines admit, “Me, I’m just a dilly boy, a fresh flower-pressed Piccadilly boy” (an allusion to their brief alleged stint as “rentboys [male prostitutes],” later comically related for many a journalist to prove their working class roots) (Ion Square; Dilly Boys). Like Arctic Monkeys and

---

21 See Storry and Childs for a detailed look at regional accents (179-181). Explorations of detrimental future linguistic change will be discussed through Orwell and Burgess in the “Future” section.
the “Cockney Amorist,” they revel in working-class London life. They take pride in coming from gritty neighborhoods and struggling through poverty and undesirable jobs because these experiences let them identify with an England that has not been reshaped by corporate and international culture. Finsbury Park, Bethnal Green, and Brick Lane are the places they prefer over posh Belgravia and Buckingham Palace or modern, commercial Oxford Circus.

The View, Arctic Monkeys, and Doherty consider class in direct relation to Britain’s music culture, professing pride in working class and regional roots because they believe these traits produce the best musicians. Doherty foresaw the movement in British indie toward working class allegiance early. Just as The Libertines were forming, he wrote that 90’s band Pulp “excelled with the ‘Common People’ [a satirical track about the upper classes] performance at Glastonbury…with their capacity to gather the attention of all who watched” (The Books of Albion 7). NME indie roundly criticizes bands that mask their cultural past in favor of mainstreaming. “Get off the bandwagon and put down the handbook,” Arctic Monkeys tell posing “super cool band[s]” with “their trilbies and their glasses of white wine...weekend rockstars” in Fake Tales of San Francisco. The song challenges bands that try to distance themselves from their British roots.22 “Yeah, I’d love to tell you all my problem,” Turner says coolly before condemning an Americanized band as “fucking wank.” The Monkeys further voice their commitment to the indie scene that becomes an image of hope in a nation where identity is dissolving by speaking out against record execs who want them to go mainstream: “we’ll stick to the guns/Don’t care if it’s marketing suicidal” (Who the Fuck Are Arctic Monkeys?).

The View consider the upper classes and flatly decree, “Posh [rich] boys can’t play...you have nothing to say/No one is coming to your show” (Posh Boys). Lead singer Kyle Falconer

22 We’ll see art-rock satirists Art Brut return to this theme in Moving to L.A.
makes this scathing assertion in a Scottish dialect even more incomprehensible than Turner’s Sheffield slang, going on to criticize “wasted little DJs” who are more interested in hair cuts than meaningful music (Wasted Little DJ’s). Artists like Turner and Falconer comment on music culture in their native, working class accents, employing slang to further identify with their roots and connect their art to intense national pride. They are proud of the influence that their particular cultural position has on their music, seeing “inter-class solidarity” as a defining feature of British life (Giles and Middleton 73). These artists “glamorize [their] plebian roots” as an assurance that they are part of the same class as their listeners: not rock gods but buskers [street musicians] in Tottenham Court Road Station (Hilliard 280). NME indie is interested in preserving British culture; it is not solely the high culture of the upper classes. This is music for The Libertines’ “class of our own,” produced by bands that are proudly working class. Their investment in an insular music culture parallels their support of a strong class system for Britain. Both offer an identity that maintains a specifically British sense of self and an interest in its history and artistic output.

“In Arcady, your life trips along”— Pete Doherty, Arcady
“I will not cease from Mental Fight/Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand/Till we have built Jerusalem/In England’s green & pleasant land”— William Blake, “Hymn” from Milton

The Past

NME indie establishes a link to Britain’s history by using literature like the works of William Blake as a portal to the “idealized rural landscape” identified by Giles and Middleton as a “commonly recurring trope” in the English consciousness (22). The “historic sense” of these artists constitutes an “awareness, sympathetic rather than superior, of the ‘differentness’ of the

23 Giles and Middleton explore both the historical reality of class structure and its pastoral reimagining in the 1990s in Writing Englishness.
past” (Miller 117). It is an admiration for such “differentness”—even an escapist desire for it—that inspires the musicians’ fascination with an imagined history of England. The Libertines in particular prize their vision, an innocent, pre-industrial construction of Britain that they identify by England’s traditional nickname, “Albion.” Their debut album juxtaposes this idyll with modern life. Thornton describes their Albion as not “simply Britain or a nostalgic idea of Britain [but] an idealised version of Britain;” the need for a distinct concept of patriotic “Englishness” is central to NME indie’s “historic” vision (17). Nicholas Williams describes Blake’s work as “a harsh imagining and reimagining of the ideological world;” this is true of NME indie as well (5). The Edenic, inaccessible Albion is complicated with past and present images of London, the troubled city that these musicians value as home.

It is essential to recognize that The Libertines draw meanings from Blake that differ from the poet’s intentions. While Blake considers the retreat into an idyll childish, The Libertines see their escapist creation of what Doherty calls “something very English” as desirable and admirable (Books of Albion 8). Mike Goode catalogues the ways that Blake’s works are “readily available to multiple and contradictory interpretations” (769). The Libertines mold Blake to suit their own need for an pastoral vision of England, drawing on images of the pastoral like those in the “Hymn” from Milton and minimizing the eerie side of Blake’s nature, his “fearful symmetry” and “darkening green” (Goode 769, 771; Blake, “The Tyger” 24; “The Ecchoing Green” 8). They find the most inspiration for their Arcadian “shepherd’s song[s]” in Blake’s rare

---

24 The “historic sense” is identified by Miller as a common 18th century theme in her discussion of Blake’s contemporary, Thomas Chatterton. More on Chatterton as an NME indie inspiration will appear in subsequent sections. Ted Underwood also explores the “historic sense” in British Romantic poets in “Romantic Historicism and the Afterlife,” revealing a continuation of the trend after Blake and Chatterton.

25 Goode identifies Blake’s aphorisms in unexpected modern contexts like the film Party Monster and Donald Trump’s gaudy dining room.
mentions of England’s mythical idyllic past, creating a world in which they “sail the good ship Albion to Arcadia,” toward the poet’s “ancient time” of “mountains green” and “pleasant pastures” (Pete Doherty, *Arcady*; Thornton and Sargent 51; Blake, “Hymn” from *Milton* 240). *NME* indie bands venture beyond simple allusions to Blake; they create their own perfect, pastoral ideal with inspiration from his work. Libertines track *The Good Old Days* commences with a reference to an imagined English past filled with legendary figures, proclaiming, “If Queen Boadicea is long dead and gone/ Still her spirit in her children's children's children lives on.” References to Boadicea reflect that their English idyll includes a fierce nationalism; she was a legendary queen who led ancient Britain’s native Iceni tribe against invading Romans. Echoing mythical images like Blake's “Albion's ancient Druid rocky shore,” and its “lovely beaming daughters,” The Libertines invest great value in an imagined past for their homeland, filled with beautiful landscapes and admirable heroes (*Jerusalem* 172).

“The English imagination is forever green… England had acquired the name Albion ‘from the white roses with which it abounds,’” Ackroyd concludes a discussion of the English fascination with gardening (413, 418). Doherty's song *Arcady* presents this gently bucolic side of the Albion ideal; it is a tripping tune about a place where “your life skips along/ Pure and simple as a shepherd's song [with]…maids upon…a molten green.” The image of shepherds closely parallels Blake's rare visions of the pastoral; his hymn from *Milton* lauds “the holy Lamb of God on England's pleasant pastures seen...England's green and pleasant land” (240). It is notable that Doherty chooses rural scenery for his Arcadian escape; most negative associations in

---

26 Peter Ackroyd’s *Albion*, a detailed look at Britain’s cultural and artistic past, self-perception, and the development of the Albion myth, helped me envision the imagined history that these bands want to preserve.
his music relate to modern city life, like his run-in with thugs on “Cally [Caledonian, in north London] Road” in the track *Up the Bracket*.

That said, *Arcady*, like Blake’s conflicted hymn with its mingled images of “Jerusalem builded here/Among these dark Satanic Mills,” is not a straightforward portrayal of an agrarian Albion idyll (*Milton* 240). “See how twisted it becomes,” Doherty warns, touching on Blake’s notion that “natural wonders can be emblems of the good, yet they can also be flowers of evil or components of a strikingly contemporary wasteland landscape” (Lefcowitz 123). Alongside his pastoral images, Doherty complains of “nothing but cool self regard in your eyes” and brings in the images of bondage/love common in Blake (“catgut binds my ankles to your bedstead/but that ain't love”).

“Dance and game” in *Arcady* fade to “things I may never name,” echoing the clinging relationships in Blake’s troubled “The Mental Traveller” and “Visions of the Daughters of Albion.” “Daughters” in particular has thematic parallels with Doherty’s work in its illustrations of doomed lovers Oothoon and Theotormon bound. Though he wants desperately to idealize some facet of his homeland, Doherty’s doubts linger in the dark undertones of his descriptions of the Arcadian dream.

The Libertines derive inspiration not only from Blake’s elusive pastoral vision, but also from the prominent anti-pastoral themes of his work; Blake’s Albion is frequently “sick to death” (Peterfreund 113). His anti-pastoral “exposes pastorally comforting images...as self deceiving constructs” via the disturbing images of city life that are also a frequent component of *NME* indie

---

27 Also identified in “London” in Ferber (313).
28 See Nicholas M. Williams, “Strategies for Change,” for more on the restrictive and mundane in “The Mental Traveller” (4-5, 19).
The Good Old Days echoes, “It's not about tenements and needles/All the evils in their eyes and the backs of their minds...Arcadia's dream has fallen through.” Appropriating the squalor of Blake's London along with the beauty of his Arcadia, Doherty and Barat complicate their vision of England with the “evils” and mental entrapments of urban modernity. Though their songs are quick-witted snapshots of an enjoyable life as “boys in the band,” they are also meditations on what their nation might have been once and what they hope, perhaps vainly, it might be in the future (The Libertines, Boys in the Band). London becomes a particular focus for NME indie musicians as an opposing force for the pastoral; their portrayals of the city often echo the “utterly appalling tableau of holocaust and cacophony” that Peterfreund identifies in Blake’s London (99). The bands juxtapose an idealized pre-industrial past with the troubles of industrial England, often relating oppressive city life, as Blake did, to limitation of the mind-- the “reasonings like vast serpents” that curb the “minute articulations” of free thought (Jerusalem 257). Ecocritic Terry Gifford argues that Blake’s anti-pastoral visions represent not just a disruption of nature but also “the self imprisonment of selective perception” (221). The Libertines connect the rise of “tenements” to “evils...in the backs of their minds;” the loss of pastoral England begins in the loss of ability to imagine the idyll (The Good Old Days). While Blake does not prescribe false pastoral escapes as a path to creativity, he and The Libertines share a fear of creative limitation in the face of urban society.

In response to the fear of creative and intellectual diminishment and the inaccessibility of Arcadian escapes, The Libertines find hope, as Blake does, in artistic endeavors that oppose the “ecologically disastrous” 18th and 21st century cities; this theme will continue far beyond their

---

29 Blake’s London is characterized by sound, an interesting parallel to the musical portrayals of the city in NME indie. The “hapless soldier’s sigh, harlot’s curse, and infant’s cry” are discussed at length by Michael Ferber in “‘London’ and Its Politics.”
interpretations of Blake (Peterfreund 99). Two hundred years after Blake writes of “London’s darkness,” Doherty notes its “tower blocks…tenements so unlovely and kitsch…twisted by the bitter rhythm of the wrong education” (Peterfreund 99; Doherty “Bowhemia”). Peterfreund notes that this “urban landscape filled with ‘woven tears & sighs’…bespeaks all-but-total alienation of language and the means of artisanal or artistic production…let alone self-expression” (102-103).

NME indie musicians focus the re-attainment of British artistic innovation and self-definition in the repressed modern world on London’s thriving music scene. In Jerusalem, Blake writes, “Nations are Destroy’d/ or Flourish, in proportion as Their Poetry Painting and Music/ are Destroy’d or Flourish!” (146). Modern musical hub Camden and Blake’s printing shop are similar centers for hopeful artistic creation within the stifling city. Anne Janowitz notes Blake’s “urban poetic:” the ability to recognize the “regions of Humanity” and artistic inspiration hidden within London’s squalor (246-8). Doherty too reflects on his contradictory love of the city as a gateway to Albion; his observation, “London has been reminding me why I love her so, am lost in her so…Hackney hideouts and forgotten pathways into Arcady” mirrors the freedom and artistic inspiration of Blake’s “opening streets” (French Dog Blues [online fan forum]; Janowitz 247). The Libertines warn, “If you've lost your faith in love and music/ the end won't be long… (The Good Old Days). By maintaining “faith” in Blake and other British authors, NME indie musicians affirm the value of their cultural history and of their own art, even as they question the possibility of progress or recovery. Ackroyd writes in Albion, “it is not a question of nationalism…but rather of the sentiment that in the relics of the past there is some inkling of what England is ‘really like’” (37). The idyll appropriated (or perhaps misappropriated) from Blake’s rare pastoral visions becomes something tangible for these artists; they gain from it a sense that

---

30 Williams describes Jerusalem as “Blake’s most positive utopian vision” (171).
Art could provide pathways to an inaccessible and preferable England separate from the “bad old ways” of modern life (*The Good Old Days*).

However, *NME* indie also expresses hints of doubt in the power of art; several Libertines songs elaborate on the complexities of using artistic production as the access point for an idyll that rejects the “pre-existent utterances, repetitions, and conventions” of modernity (Peterfreund 103). *The Ha-Ha Wall* picks up the narrative of despair in modern life and escape through art by recommending, “If you get tired of hanging around/Pick up a guitar.” But the same song claims that you could “be strung out all day.” This need for substance-based distraction brings the sense of optimism found in the idyll back into question. In English gardens, a ha-ha is a wide ditch that separates the area near a house from the surrounding grounds and livestock; Tom Stoppard describes it in *Arcadia* as “something that keeps cows off the lawn” (20). Perhaps The Libertines reference the ha-ha, a moat-like landscape feature often associated with wealthy country houses, to show a separation between the home and the wilder countryside that they value, a symbol of the rift between contemporary Britons and the Albion-esque facets of their nation. Ferber identifies a similar concern with entrapment in Blake, noting “no dawn, no spring…no genuine cycle of renewal or rebirth. Only the dismal circles of hell” in the poem “London” (312). Perhaps modern Britons are too enclosed in their dreary lives to return to the agrarian, individualistic ideals of the past. Bound up in material concerns and urban life, they are trapped “hanging around,” looking for cheap modern escapes instead of striving for something more meaningful. As a symbol of enclosure, the ha-ha also relates to Blake’s notion of “mind forged manacles;” the landscaping element becomes a creation of man that causes self-imposed separation from an idyllic, creative world (“London”). 
Doherty's track *Albion* is the culmination of the battle between idealized past and troubled present. Though he refers to England by a mythical name with connotations of grandeur, much of his imagery is grim. “Down in Albion, they're black and blue/ But we don't talk about that” he murmurs as the song begins, going on to describe “violence in dole queues/ a pale thin girl with eyes forlorn.” In lines that echo Blake's images of workers “captive in the mill of the stranger, sold for scanty hire” and London’s gloomy “blackening church” and “dark Satanic mills,” Doherty mentions “a five mile queue outside the disused power station” (*Jerusalem* 258; “London” 26-27). Though he finds Blake's “marks of woe” in his home, Doherty's song maintains a sense of national love and pride that also appears in Blake’s “urban poetic” vision (Blake, “London” 26-27; Janowitz 256). “Come away, won't you come away?/We can go anywhere in Albion,” he concludes. England is a place that must be escaped as well as an escape from social concerns; Doherty refuses to abandon his nation, suggesting his continued faith in its worth.

Audiences seem to feel the same way; I saw Doherty twice while in England and *Albion* was consistently a crowd favorite. At each concert, he pauses before listing off cities that listeners can "come away" to and the audience shouts suggestions, naming the places with which they identify. He then reels off a choice few, and crowd reaction reflects a strong love of home, wherever home may be. In East London’s Rhythm Factory, dodgy neighborhood Bethnal Green got the most riotous applause, while at Proud Galleries in North London, Camden Town was the wild favorite. Janowitz suggests that London’s appeal lies in “the idea that [it] is really a series of villages…in which selves are identified as belonging to their neighborhood and to the

---

31 This line has been interpreted two ways by fans. Some suggest that it is an echo of the “dole queues” seen earlier in the song, a symbol for oppressive economic woes. The alternate reading is more positive. The “power station” could be the repurposed Wapping power plant, now a modern art museum. This suggests an optimistic vision of Britons as extremely interested in art.
metropolis;” writers, musicians, and fans see a London beyond squalor, a comforting place in which they can construct an identity connected to a specific piece of their nation (256-257).

Other bands take up the threads of Blake as well, most commonly with the melancholic tone that Ackroyd identifies as particular to all Britons, not just NME indie musicians, when they look to the past (54-63). Bloc Party's *Ion Square* references Blake himself rather than his work. Lead singer Kele Okereke recalls a romance that “began...barefoot in Bishopsgate/Trying to find Blake's grave.” In this nostalgic moment, the band picks up the theme of fascination with English art and history that runs throughout NME indie, also tapping into the desperate search for an unattainable past that Doherty references so frequently. Trying to find a memorial for the author that inspires them, they seek a remnant of their nation’s valuable artistic culture. Significantly, they appear “barefoot,” a state often associated with the pastoral and frequently seen in Blake’s art. The rest of *Ion Square* celebrates the simpler life of Doherty's Arcadian dream. “I've found my dancing shoes but they don't fit/ all the bright lights do is bore me” the band laments, before begging to “stay in/let the sofa be our car.” Along with their search for England’s cultural past, they seek an insular retreat from the modern city life portrayed as the antithesis of the natural beauty of Albion.32 In *Waiting for the 7:18*, the band complains that “the Northern Line [one of London’s oldest tube lines] is the loudest/Sitting in silence in bars after work;” they then express a desire to escape London with a "drive to Brighton on the weekend." Unlike The Libertines, Okereke has utterly lost faith in the vibrant city culture from which his and so many other bands arise; he desires only escape, whether mental or physical. I visited Bishopsgate and the site of Blake's grave in London; it was a place of mossy quiet, an enclave of crumbling gravestones and gnarled trees hidden from the nearby bustle of Liverpool Street that seems the perfect

32 See Ferber for a discussion of the cyclical renewal of society favored by Blake and his contemporaries that also seems to influence NME indie (326).
juxtaposition of idyll and reality to suit this music. Albion as these bands understand it is the “pure and simple” vision of English life that they cannot find yet value above all else (Arcady).

“Sin is the only real color-element left in modern life.”— Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

“Wouldn’t it be nice to be Dorian Gray, just for the day?”-- The Libertines, *Narcissist*

**Libertinism and Art**

While many *NME* indie bands look to an Albion idyll when imagining the past, a wide variety of literature influences their understandings of an ideal English life. References to Oscar Wilde, most frequently *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, as well as eighteenth century poet Thomas Chatterton, reveal a fascination with decadence, libertinism, and art as more tangible, personal escapes from the drudgery of modern society than the waveringly distant Arcadian dream. Ackroyd sees artistic expression as a particularly valuable window into the history of England and Britons’ views of Englishness because the nation’s people write, paint, and sing so passionately about their home. Art functions for Britons as a reflection of their national character; *NME* indie bands compound this artistic focus by using previous English works to inspire their own distinctly British creative output (Ackroyd xxi-xxii). Art and decadence are central to a second utopian vision that inspires these artists; Richard C. Lewis identifies the tendency in Wilde to imagine a decadent or aesthetic utopia arising through “the creation of a modern counterculture,” an idea that *NME* indie musicians find compelling (529). *NME* indie bands sometimes prize the excess and art of a libertine lifestyle as gateways to meaningful experiences in a modern culture they consider largely soulless and increasingly removed from English identity. However, the narratives of degeneration associated with Wildean libertinism also shape their cultural outlook.
After Blake, *NME* indie musicians turn to Wilde for further lessons on the value of creativity. Wilde’s aesthete Lord Henry expounds a life led “fully and completely;” he and these bands subscribe to the notion that “every impulse we strive to strangle broods in the mind and poisons us” (13). The lessons that The Libertines and their contemporaries take from *Dorian Gray* are ones of impulsivity, aestheticism, and fierce individuality; journalists praise them for “breathtaking live performances, teetering on the edge of disaster” that “click... straight into the greatest parts of Britain’s outsider past” (Thornton and Sargent 11). They adopt the Wildean utopian vision, identified by Carolyn Lesjak, of a society that values art and “privileges pleasure and the imagination over utility” (180). Lesjak reads Wildean hedonism or decadence as an assertion “that pleasure is something to be worked at and worked for” (179-180). *NME* indie bands make hedonism their work rather than regulated corporate employment.

Wilde’s decadence is frequently interpreted as “disorderly, jaded, self-indulgent passivity”—a complete negation of *NME* indie’s dream of Arcadian reconstruction (Haley 215). Haley, however, argues that Wilde “regarded his personal and literary styles as models of growth,” so an alternate understanding of the *NME* indie fascination with hedonism is hopeful (215). Even temporary intellectual freedoms are worthwhile pursuits. As Basil Hallward attempts to preserve Dorian in the perfect portrait, Albion is an ideal portrait of the English past that should be revived or at least preserved in the minds of its people. Artistic imagination is a crucial part of British self-perception; Ackroyd subtitles his study of Albion “the origin of the English imagination.” While most of these bands do not believe that the idyll can truly be (re)instated, their imitation of its freedoms through art is a hopeful gesture. Maybe it *would* be nice to be

---

33 Some also find inspiration in the same places Wilde did. Babyshambles track *A’m rebours* shares its title with the hyper-aesthetic Huysmans novel that inspired the portion of *Dorian Gray* in which Dorian becomes obsessed with acquiring beautiful art objects (Wilde 92-102).
Dorian Gray “just for the day” if that meant momentary access to the Albion idyll through hedonism and art, creating personally enriching experiences that that could be held against the dull repetition of “professionally trendy” modern life (Narcissist). Wilde prefaces Dorian Gray with, “Those who find beautiful meanings in beautiful things are the cultivated. For these there is hope” (vii). NME indie bands see their artistic creation as the proverbial carnation in Doherty’s “bomber jacket buttonhole”—a glimpse of beauty against the drab backdrop of contemporary society (Books of Albion 13). 34

Lord Henry’s proclamation of “a new Hedonism” becomes the inspiration for these bands as they seek the transient transcendence of art and pleasure (Wilde 16-17). NME indie musicians, with their explicit references to drug use and, in the case of The Libertines, the strange doomed romance of Barat and Doherty’s partnership, are the perfect embodiments of Wilde’s idealized hedonism. The Libertines might want to be Dorian Gray because they find hope in the expansive imagination of musical creation and the freedoms of libertinism, even though their manifestations in reality are not always hopeful. By combining Wilde’s image of decadent art as freeing self-expression with Blake’s notion of art as a pathway to the infinite, NME indie bands negate the common notion that artistic production is “indifferen[t] to the future” (Haley 215). Doherty, in an anecdote famous among Libertines fans for its centrality to their vision of artistic production, recalls a conversation with Barat during the earliest, most impoverished years of the band that illustrates the violent power of artistic labor to create personal meaning: “…Carl had that look in his eye… ‘there’s nothing in this world for us,’ he’d say, ‘let’s shoot each other…’ [Doherty responds:] ‘No Carl, it’ll be grand, let’s keep going…”

34 This quote is taken from an essay Doherty wrote in early 1999 on the fusion of high and low art, a theme central to NME indie.
[Barat:] ‘Yeah let’s keep going forever Peter, til the very end.’ Yeah til the end” (Albion Arks35 2003). Doherty convinces Barat to struggle onward through a world he considers disconnected and spiritless for the sake of their music; art becomes the source of hope in a problematic reality.

The hedonistic and the infinite intersect in Bloc Party as they do in Blake and The Libertines. In Ion Square, which links the search for a connection to Blake with the desire for insular individuality, sex is a path to greater mental escapes: “I love my mind/when I’m fucking you/slowed down to a crawl/years of crime and the bread lines/have not at all dimmed your shine.” Like artistic creation, sex becomes a personal avenue to imaginative expansion and clarity in the face of dulling modernity. Lord Henry asserts, “Sin is the only real color-element left in modern life;” Richard Dellamora notes that decadence in this tradition appears in an “opposition to the organization of modern urban, industrial, and commercial society” that NME indie also critiques (Wilde 29; 529).

The genre’s powerful undercurrent of libertine and aesthetic values stems from a wider societal reaction against the dull, corporate life associated with “the spread of mass culture” that Britons have long imagined could “fatally undermine the ‘true spirit’ of England” (Giles and Middleton 24). This trend surfaces again in both Blake’s Los, who labors toward a personal vision that opposes the influence of myriad, crushing forces of “Death Eternal,” and Wilde’s “rebellious” valuation of personal pleasure over social duty in Dorian Gray (Milton 125; Haley 216). English cultural scholars have expressed a fear of the loss of national individualism since the war era (Giles and Middleton 24-25). Wilde notes this characteristic independence

35 Albion Arks is the online message board for Libertines fans, to which Doherty often contributes.
in Englishness, though the observation is tinged with his acerbic wit. Dorian Gray’s Lord Henry and Basil Hallward discuss the nature of a “true Englishman” in tandem with intellectual independence: “If one puts forward an idea to a true Englishman...he never dreams of considering whether the idea is right or wrong. The only thing he considers of any importance is whether one believes it oneself” (7). Englishness is strongly associated with individuality, so NME indie reacts sharply against the social control of nine to five employment and commercial entertainment. Haley identifies similar concerns for Wilde and his fellow decadents, noting their reluctance to “conform, work, and progress. The decadents and their art did not fit in, they did not function organically within society’s natural evolution” (215). Both the Arcadian dream and the retreat into the individual pleasures of hedonism and aestheticism reject the socio-economic change that NME indie musicians see as cultural and creative restriction.

Lesjak associates the Wildean utopia with “pleasure...opposed to abstract [commercial or uninspired] labor;” The Rakes focus firmly upon the daily grind of this “abstract labor” in modern English society (180). Their name itself, like “The Libertines,” signifies the value system they ascribe to, yet the majority of their writings reflect white-collar entrapment and its rejection, not revelry. Fan consensus is that the song The World Was A Mess But His Hair Was Perfect draws literary inspiration from Scottish “punk” author Martin Millar’s Lux the Poet. In Millar’s novel, the hedonistic title character rambles the streets of Brixton during a race riot, unaware of the politics of the event because he is too concerned with his poetry and the state of his absurdly overstyled hair (6-7). Lux’s hazy separation from reality is mirrored in the lyrics of The World Was A Mess: “And you go on and on and on/Talking shite through the night/Just trying to stop

---

36 Nick Frankel notes an increasing “desire to inhabit English cultural traditions,” including changes in language, in Wilde’s work after 1879 (121).
37 More on The Rakes and their criticisms of cubicle culture will appear in the segment on the “Present.”
our arguments falling to pieces... Where are we going and where’s Steve gone?/ This whole night’s just falling to pieces/ The world was a mess but his hair was perfect.” Lux is the perfect libertine-aesthete hero for these bands as they seek personal escapes from corporate culture: a shallow modern-day Dorian Gray whose interests are his hair, poetry, cocaine, and his girlfriend (in that order). Lux has no need for politics or economics because he can escape into the personal concerns of beauty and art.

Though there is an obvious satirical element to Millar’s novel and The Rakes’ music, Lux is also an intensely likable figure who sees art and hedonism with the same escapist optimism that NME indie bands do. His narrative is, however, one of failure rather than escape. After a harrowing night adrift in Brixton, Lux dies, his pursuits of artistic success and the woman he loves both utter failures. Though he finds constant hope and inspiration in aesthetic pleasures, they have no real redeeming power; they are not Blake's path to the infinite or a doorway to Arcady. The novel ends with his death beneath a truck upturned by the riot, figuratively crushed by the social problems of his nation. Like Bloc Party, The Rakes find modern city life bleak. Unlike Bloc Party, they offer no method of escape; for them there is no redeeming “drive to Brighton on the weekend.” In The Light from Your Mac, they admit defeat and echo the desire for isolation seen in Ion Square-- “We never leave London, New York, or LA...Fuck it, let’s hibernate.”

The Libertines take up this hopeless urban narrative in Wilde-inspired Narcissist. Opening with a sneer toward the “professionally trendy” residents of London’s twenty-something enclave Clapham, they add “there’s life after work and it can be such fun.” The bridge then shows the future of modern youth with the kind of aimless lives that The Rakes chronicle: “the beauty of life goes by/ you’re going to be so old/ you’re going to look so old... Wouldn’t it be
nice to be Dorian Gray?” “How sad it is! I shall grow old, and horrible, and dreadful,” Dorian
complains in Wilde’s novel (19). Wilde and The Libertines dwell on images of extended,
beautiful youth, yet in both there is a sense that youth might not warrant preservation. In an
alternate version of Narcissist entitled Hooray for the 21st Century, Barat and Doherty ask,
“What became of the love we knew?/What became of the working class?...Scratchcards [instant
lottery tickets], Tipples [drinking], [club drug] Ecstasy/ Hooray for the twenty first
century…wouldn’t it be nice to be Dorian Gray, just for the day?” Their juxtaposition of cheap
elements of modern life with Wilde’s focus on beauty via the Dorian Gray reference renders
their “hooray” ironic. There is nothing to cheer about their nation in its current state. What
reason is there to keep living the “professionally trendy” lifestyle that Doherty and Barat
criticize? Dorian and Lord Henry attempt to preserve the Victorian equivalent with disastrous
results. Though it expounds the joys of aestheticism, The Picture of Dorian Gray is also the story
of corruption festering under outward beauty. “Wouldn’t it be nice to be Dorian Gray?” could be
meant with the same sneering irony of “hooray.” Though The Libertines want to believe in the
beautiful surface of England constructed through imagined pasts and aesthetic escapes, they
cannot forget the problems festering underneath like Dorian’s faults in his portrait.

Wilde wrote to a friend in 1894, “[Dorian Gray has] much of me in it. Basil Hallward is
what I think I am: Lord Henry is what the world thinks me: Dorian is what I would like to be—in
other ages, perhaps” (Holland and Hart-Davis 585). This identification with such different
characters clarifies the contradictory turn toward hopelessness that Wilde and NME indie
sometimes take when they deny meaning in art beyond aestheticism. Wilde prefaces Dorian
Gray with: “They are the elect to whom beautiful things mean only Beauty...Those who go
beneath the surface do so at their peril” (vii). NME indie’s images of modern day libertinism have
similar hints of meaninglessness; aesthetic transcendence is blended with rambling tales of daily debauchery and “bohemian squalor” that owe much to the English trope of the romanticized tramp (Giles and Middleton 22; Ruddick 130). “We’ve got matchstick and cable TV/half of less than 50p/ We all clambered over the balcony/Banging on the window waking Steve,” The Libertines sing in giddily up-tempo *Death on the Stairs*, an allusion to their early years in a flat so dodgy that the entrance was a window (Thornton and Sargent 5-25). What they value in these lines seems everyday rather than transcendent, Wilde’s pleasurable but depthless “surface” instead of Blake’s artistic infinity.

Blake finds meaning in sexual and artistic freedom, but *NME* indie bands seem less certain that there is anything in indulgence beyond simple pleasure. They are torn between Blake’s Albion and Wilde’s hedonistic utopia. The Libertines expound “The rapture of vertigo/ And letting go” but add, “Me myself I was never sure/ Was it the liquor/ Or was it my soul?” (*Vertigo*). Arctic Monkeys echo, “Last night what we talked about made so much sense/Now the haze has ascended/It don’t make no sense anymore” (*The View From the Afternoon*). There is an uncertainty in both the music and the works that inspire it; can decadence really provide complete purpose? While art can bring “solace in melodies,” it might have nothing more meaningful to offer, and debauched chemical or sexual escapes are only temporary respites. Though one can be Dorian Gray “just for the day,” the “21st century” and its painful, nondescript boredom encroach the morning after. Wilde offers the notion that there is nothing to strive for, that “beautiful things mean only beauty” (*vii*). Maybe the Albion ideal is not a motivation for progress, but only something to contemplate while considering what is imagined to have been

---

38 The phrase “death on the stairs” is Barat’s shorthand for growing old without meaning, a lonely and wasted life. Part of The Libertines’ mission statement was to avoid such a fate through the rakish behaviors they espouse (Welsh 10).
lost. This ideological conflict will eventually lead to another element of the *NME* indie chronology— the dystopian future.

A coda to *NME* indie’s vision of the hope and hopelessness of art appears via Doherty’s fascination with 18th century poet Thomas Chatterton, an idealistic young poet who died in pursuit of artistic recognition. Also a source of interest for Wilde, who “was in love with Chatterton’s legend and writings” and famously lectured about the ill-fated young man, Chatterton is a perfect example of the “doomed young artist” stereotype admired among these bands as the ideal aesthete (Wright 176; Lewis 164). He also represents the “radical antiquarianism” that characterizes the Albion ideal for *NME* indie and Blake (Williams 103).

Doherty mimics Henry Wallis’ 19th century portrait of Chatterton’s suspected suicide at age 17 on the cover of the 2008 Babyshambles album *Shotter’s Nation*; he also shares Chatterton’s fascination with a historic “dream world” and its exploration through language (Schouler 118). Chatterton rose to fame as a remarkably adept forger of medieval poetry and documents by imaginary historical figures, mirroring The Libertines’ utilization of “archaic slang” and the Albion myth to forge a historical English ideal (Lynskey 1). Chatterton ties *NME* indie to an even more distant English past. Because these musicians romanticize his early genius and untimely demise, he also symbolizes the simultaneously glorified and pessimistic obsession with youth, art, and self-destruction that pervades the genre, particularly in its fascination with the personal, aesthetic pleasures of Wilde and *Dorian Gray*.

Ackroyd uses Ford Madox Ford’s “private and particular image” of England to close his book *Albion*, emphasizing above all else the intensely personal connection that “English writers and artists, English composers and folk singers” feel with their nation (448-449). Though *NME* indie artists often fail to break through to wider international markets because their topics are so
allusive and culturally specific, they seem to prefer this exclusivity as a representation of their pure, non-commercialized, artistic connection to their imagined vision of Englishness. Their art, like Los’ and Basil Hallward’s, is a singular labor of love.

“We’ll never get to heaven with the artillery in tow” — Dirty Pretty Things, B.U.R.M.A.

“All the people like us are we, and everyone else is They.” — Rudyard Kipling

**The War Era**

For *NME* indie artists, Britain’s imagined past and the dreary present intersect in the war era—from the start of the First World War in 1914 to the end of the Second in 1945. The unusual prevalence of World War II imagery and allusions in their music suggests the war as an endpoint for the bands’ vision of the past, but they are also deeply affected by World War I and the interwar period as moments of intense change. Richard Overy asserts the inter-war years brought “a fear of decline or collapse [that] was elaborated in Britain in ways that often defied historical reality,” a precursor to the dramatic dystopian projections that *NME* indie makes for the future (2). Michael Paris’s assertion that “war and preparation for war became deeply embedded in [early 20th century Britain’s] popular culture, particularly in the cultural artifacts that are created for the youth of the culture” nicely illuminates the parallel trend of war themes in *NME* indie, a genre geared toward and produced by young Britons (8). The war decades represent a transition, in both *NME* indie and Britain’s wider cultural consciousness, from a confidently nationalistic “idea and reality of Empire” closely associated with Arcadian

---

39 Overy’s *The Twilight Years* is an excellent and detailed source on narratives of social decline in interwar Britain.
Englishness to a more fragmented, less powerful view of the nation, leading to reactions like the desire for a resurrection of Albion (Giles and Middleton 110).

The imperial identity that faded during the war era had once been an assurance of power and worth, providing a well-defined understanding of British culture as something so immensely valuable that it should be propagated around the globe (Giles and Middleton 110). The NME indie valuation of imperialism is underscored by the nationalistic imagery the bands choose for their live shows. The Libertines in particular attach themselves to traditional patriotic imagery, festooning their stages with Union Jacks and performing in brass-buttoned cavalry jackets. Though Britain experienced a surge of militaristic pride during the war years, it also suffered a cynical loss of unity and identity as the “high summer of imperial supremacy” waned in the face of America’s rise to power (Abravanel, Americanizing Britain 3). A focus on the cultural diminishment of “empire [achieved] at the expense of the English [society]” is a trend seen as early as Wilde; this also becomes a central concern for NME indie musicians as other cultures seep into their own (Frankel 124). Dirty Pretty Things in particular address this period, its connection to British identity, and what Thornton and Sargent call the “lost spirit of Britain,” while The Rakes and The Libertines explore modern England through its ongoing relationship with Germany, a political dynamic heavily influenced by war (18).

The images in this music are, expectedly, mixed; regret and pride are both associated with the war era. Songs about valorous British soldiers during the “hero’s war of 1914” contain an intensely positive nationalism that echoes idealized visions of Albion and its mythical heroes (Giles and Middleton 110-111). However, the bands also express a sense of loss associated with

---

40 Giles and Middleton address the cultural shift reflected in war-era British literature in Writing Englishness. They sample a wide array of British authors to showcase changing trends in the understanding of what it meant to be English as wars redefined national identity.
both the casualties of battle and the demise during the war years of what Giles and Middleton describe as an imagined, socially stable “older rural England” (110-111). Jamie T ties these two threads together with a brief story about his “Great granddaddy [who] fought in Gallipoli/ the only of his friends not shot down dead,” a reference to the incredible loss of life and subsequent cultural change of World War I\(^1\)\(^1\) (If You Got the Money). The war era for these bands represents a fundamental shift in their society; in its wake they clutch at idealized historical versions of Britain, both the imperial and the “little Englandism” movement of the 1930s that embraced the local and culturally unique (Abravanel, Americanizing Britain 5).\(^2\)

Images of modernity in postwar British culture as a whole are often fraught with poverty and the sense that outside influences are making England’s citizens love their nation less. Literature from the end of the war era is colored by both the economic crisis of the thirties and an intensely conservative post-imperial fear of international cultural influences that coincided with a new interest in embracing the local (Giles and Middleton 149).\(^3\) These concerns are understandable in the face of Britain’s shaming debt to America during the interwar period; their imperial power waned further as their own colony overruled them fiscally and culturally (Abravanel, Americanizing Britain 11). In reference to Greenwood’s war-era novel and film about poverty in war-era England, The Libertines suggest that “love is on the dole/And there she will stay.” Fears of losing cultural, monetary, and political control are common to NME indie’s

---

\(^1\) The vast number of casualties among young men during the First World War skewed Britain’s population and changed the socio-economic structure of the nation, a contributing factor in the destabilizing movement away from Giles and Middleton’s “older rural England” (110-111).  
\(^2\) Abravanel explores the war era and the “Americanisation” of Britain’s entertainment industry, particularly the rise of jazz and American cinema, in Americanizing Britain.  
\(^3\) Geographer David Matless explores the rising concern with the local even in basic bureaucratic functions like land surveying (464-465).
perception of the present day and future; these feelings find their roots in the tumult of the war era.

While many instances of multicultural acceptance show that these bands are not xenophobic, their music clings to traditional images of England including Albion, the Union Jack, and the monarchy. They contribute to the art of Britain in a way that blatantly rejects the cultural change that Abravanel calls American “media” imperialism by foregrounding images of classical British imperialism (*Americanizing Britain* 13). However, they are aware of the cultural cross-pollination that imperialism heralded; Doherty groups together “Yellowing classics/ and cannons at dawn/ Coffee wallahs [Indian term for mobile coffee sellers] and pith helmets/ and an English song” as a reminder of the many things that Indian colonization introduced to Britain (*Babyshambles, Albion*). Ultimately, though, the “coffee wallah” becomes part of an English song; other cultures must be sublimated to Britishness to be acceptable. The remarkable level of fan devotion to *NME* indie bands and their assertions of the continuing value of British culture suggests that these musicians are not alone in their concern with a perceived “crisis of civilization” in their nation (Overy 7). The issues of cultural disintegration that they address are considerations for many young Britons who see the strength of international media.

The music of Dirty Pretty Things makes direct references to the war era in *The Gentry Cove* and *B.U.R.M.A*. These songs are notable for their portrayals of fervent nationalism, most often associated with the WWI concept of “nation” as an “effective rallying cry and unifying force” (Robb 5). Paired with DPT’s tour sets based on WWII-era advertisements, the lines “Don’t come back ’til the war is won...let’s make them proud” from *The Gentry Cove* are one of

---

44 Alex Kapranos of Franz Ferdinand has written scathingly against the xenophobic right-wing British National Party, while Barat, Doherty, and their various bands have participated in the charity music festival Love Music Hate Racism.
NME indie’s most explicit and positive references to the era, showcasing the sense of duty to Britain and views of the nation as “invulnerable” that commonly characterized military service during the World Wars (Overy 11). Carl Barat asks, “Did I ever show you all the great memorials, all the factory floors?” Undercurrents of national pride surface in the music relating to British resilience during the Blitz as a symbol of “the unconquerable spirit and courage of the people” (Giles and Middleton 113). Thomas Pynchon, an American author tied to the collective consciousness of these bands through Klaxons’ myriad references on the album *Myths of the Near Future*, offers parallels to these patriotic elements of the war era in his novel *Gravity’s Rainbow*. While Pynchon is not British like the rest of NME indie’s most important influences, he writes about Britons’ responses to the war era with great detail and cultural sensitivity. He describes the heroism of “people out here [London’s East End]” who “were meant to go down first” yet manage to survive German bombings during WWII (174-175). Bands like DPT connect to Pynchon’s visceral, incredibly detailed London, a place of calm evacuees amidst “trestles of blackened wood” where bombs “scream...across the sky” to inform their own portrayals of the war and British stoicism (4-5). Though the novel is far from an accurate portrayal of war-era Britain, the theme of national strength and unity during what Giles and Middleton call the “people’s war” remains prominent in both Pynchon’s writing and the music inspired by it (110).

45 *The Gentry Cove* and *B.U.R.M.A.* can also be read as commentaries on Britain’s involvement in the war in Iraq. For this interpretation, see the “Present” section.

46 It is worth noting that *Gravity’s Rainbow* is a revisionist rather than historically accurate portrayal of W.W.II, dealing with Pavlovian responses to bombing patterns and genetically engineered octopi as often as the Blitz. Also, Pynchon is part of a small minority of non-British authors who influence these bands; in their references to his work, NME indie musicians display a touch of the very globalization that they often criticize. However, *Gravity’s Rainbow* not only provides an extensive exploration of history and cultural attitudes in war-era Britain, but also addresses the relationship between Britons and Americans at the time, making the novel useful to NME indie’s consideration of the nation’s shifting position in the world.
NME indie’s portrayals of perseverant nationalism in the face of devastation contrast sharply with a different reading of *Gravity’s Rainbow* that offers a bleak commentary on the progress of war and imperial expansion. Lawrence Kappel considers the novel’s “psychic geography” and draws lines between the safety of London and the instability and danger of wartime “frontiers” in Germany (226). These narratives of uncertainty parallel the “remorselessly apocalyptic” fears of future war felt by citizens in 1930s Britain (Overy 175). In Kappel’s analysis, leaving Britain on military endeavors leads to “danger, monstrous self-knowledge, and finally oblivion” (226). Attempts to maintain the nation lead to a loss of the ability to connect with it. Pynchon’s vision of war as a destroyer of “national identity, social organization, and personal histories” is mirrored in the images of futility and disconnection that *NME* indie incorporates in its war narratives (Kappel 229). Though *The Gentry Cove* is about men who won’t “come back 'til the war is won,” its coda is, “the very thing you strive for is the thing that makes you blind.” These implications of futility, even in times associated so strongly with national valor, reevaluate the war era as a period of unhappy transition into dreary modernity rather than one of staunch nationalistic preservation.

Doherty’s Albion is a place of “canons at dawn...pith helmets and an English sun,” classic symbols of colonial India (*Albion*). The imperial is central to the ideal image of England, and the war era saw the sun set on the British Empire for the first time in centuries. As seen in Kappel, venturing beyond Britain in the war era becomes a source of chaos rather than power as it was during the age of imperial exploration. Britain’s transition into the modern era, though they won the war, was a moment of profound sorrow. The end of empire signified a loss of the cultural “other” against which to cast England as “the motherland, the place of origin, safety, and

---

47 Later, we’ll see other *NME* indie artists take this interpretation to extremes as they use *Gravity’s Rainbow* to comment on a dystopian future.
identity,” and precipitated the rise of the increasingly insular nationalism seen in the fears of Pynchon’s British characters and NME indie ideals (Giles and Middleton 193; Robb 31). NME indie bands recognize the end of empire—what Britons had learned to “strive for” to define themselves in the world—as a blow to their cultural self-definition.

*B.U.R.M.A.* addresses parallel themes of diminishment and loss of the “imperial unity” that Robb identifies as essential to pre-war British self-perception (16). DPT extols “lost pursuits of excellence/ the glory of the crowd/ lives of imperialists,” then flippantly adds, “they can stick their war, I’m leaving now.” The World Wars and their interim period fundamentally altered Britain’s perception of “glory” in its own population; the entrenched self-image of the pragmatic “stiff upper lip” weakened along with elements of the class structure, of which these working-class bands are surprisingly fond. Traditional class delineation, the highbrow “world of cakes and croquet” of the gentry, is commonly associated with the comforting image of pastoral England, and the stoicism of the royal family was a touchstone for the masses during the war years (Abravanel, *Americanizing Britain* 2; Giles and Middleton 111). The Libertines titled their song *The Man Who Would Be King* in reference to Rudyard Kipling’s short story that explores the class system of colonials in imperial India. NME indie musicians see Britain’s strict class stratification as a treasured remnant of the imperial past, a uniquely British institution, and a

---

48 Robb discusses the changing face of British nationalism during WWI in the first chapter of *British Culture and the First World War.*

49 These lines have a dual meaning; they can be interpreted as a reference to the glorious war era discussed here, or the modern war in Iraq—an option I’ll consider in the “Present” section. The duality itself creates an interesting distinction between a war era that is seen as valuable and one seen as detrimental.

50 See Giles and Middleton for Churchill’s “Address to the King,” delivered to the House of Commons the week after victory in praise of the royal family’s contributions to the war effort, particularly their comforting continued presence in London (135-139).
symbol of cultural stasis; the millions of deaths and economic shifts of the war era created uncertainties about all these definitive traits of English life.

B.U.R.M.A. as a title brings up another connection between music and the war-- slang. NME indie has a particular fascination with slang taken from war era comics like The Beano and Captain W.E. Johns’s fictional tales of R.A.F. pilots. Doherty’s nickname for Barat, “Biggles,” is derived from Johns’s writing. Early Libertines gigs saw the band adopting the personas and linguistic quirks of old fashioned music hall performers from the same era (Thornton and Sargent 20). The slang and ideals of Johns’s work in particular connect these bands to a uniquely British past; he personally identified “sportsmanship according to the British ideal…team-work, loyalty to the Crown, the Empire, and to rightful authority” as the values his works offered (Paris 162). Johns’s tales of military valor illustrate without irony the “heroism and self-sacrifice in the idea of ‘dying for King and Country’” of an earlier era (Giles and Middleton 111). B.U.R.M.A. is war era telegram code for “be upstairs ready my angel,” a sentiment that introduces the longing for Britain as home that is elaborated upon in the rest of the song. Adopting slang from the idealized war era shows a nostalgic desire in the present for the values of the past like those found in Johns.

While NME indie bands don’t express a maliciously isolationist outlook, they resent the modern era for diminishing Britain’s global importance. Portrayals of London during and after the war are often characterized by images of dimming and deterioration that oppose the bravery and stability seen in propaganda films like Listen to Britain and the heroic soldiers of W.E. Johns (Stansky and Abrahams 97-98). Pynchon shows London, once perceived as the center of Empire, 51 Johns wrote prolifically, producing dozens of books for young readers about unfailingly heroic RAF pilot James Bigglesworth from 1932-1968. The author himself was a veteran of Gallipoli, a WWI POW, and a prime example of “middle-class patriotism [and] imperialism” that characterize the idealized elements of the war era (Robb 162).
in decline: “The winding river, the imperial serpent, crowds of factories, flats, parks, smoky spires and gables...” (114). The sense in *B.U.R.M.A.* and Pete Doherty’s *1939 Returning* is of the early twentieth century as something to be looked back upon fondly and yet regretted as the point when Britain’s valuable national identity began to disintegrate along with its empire.

*1939 Returning* continues, in both musical tone and lyrics, the theme of the war era as a transition into decline. The song chronicles the evacuation of “London urchins” from Pynchon’s bombed city to England’s pastoral, Albionesque West Country. Doherty contrasts these images of successful escape and British resilience with ones of modern life. The child that appears as an evacuee at the beginning of the piece makes a hopeless journey “west for the second time” to live in a grim home for the elderly and spend her days “staring blankly into the T.V. guide in 2009.” Here Doherty explores not only the lamentable loss of traditional England, but also what Overy describes as “a rupture with the past” between young people and the older generations that were responsible for constructing the idealized nation that has faded (12). “I’ve only seen her twice since [she moved],” he concludes regretfully. Doherty implies that England’s past fragmented after the war era and the younger generations will not invest time to preserve it, escaping instead into empty modern pastimes like mindless television. The resilience and nationalism of previous eras have been replaced with complacency and the acceptance of mass culture. Most interestingly, Doherty incriminates himself through these incredibly personal lyrics; even he, who uses his art to search so fervently for Britain’s past, remains unable or unwilling to access it by connecting to the older generations.  

---

52 The lines gain further layers when Doherty’s personal life is considered. Though estranged from most of his family due to his excessive drug use, he is very close to his grandmother, a woman from this war era generation (*Books of Albion*).
Not all images of the war era in *NME* indie use it as a positive, “bombastically
nationalistic” contrast for the diminished present (Giles and Middleton 112-113). Other pieces,
like *1939 Returning*, hint at the period as a starting point for the “cynicism and boredom” that
characterize the modern age (Giles and Middleton 112-113). Barat’s “stick their war...” is a
prime signifier of this pessimism (*B.U.R.M.A*). At the 2004 *NME* Awards, The Libertines recited
early twentieth century antiwar poet Siegfried Sassoon’s “Suicide in the Trenches”\(^53\) as an
acceptance speech (Thornton and Sargent 11). The poem, set in a time period traditionally
associated with “heroism and Englishness,” also contains images of the First World War as “the
hell where youth and laughter go,” a destroyer of the Wildean ideals of youth and pleasure that
*NME* indie embraces (Giles and Middleton 111; Sassoon). Giles and Middleton identify this and
Sassoon’s other works as “scathing attack[s]...on the values of heroism,” the very imperial
heroism that characterizes the idealized past for these bands (111). Their choice to bring these
negative images to the forefront in modern times illustrates an unavoidable corollary to military
tales: the shift from “early enthusiasm …to disenchantment and disillusion” that accompanies the
progress of the war era (Robb 145). Life is no longer easy for the “simple soldier boy
who...whistled early with the lark;” a darker, less youthfully optimistic age in British history
arrives as the imperial and Arcadian are destroyed with guns and bombs (Sassoon). Britons can
no longer define themselves by their ever-expanding empire. In fact, *NME* indie bands fear that
postwar Britons will stop trying to define themselves independently at all.

The Rakes choose to address the ties between Germany and Britain that developed during
the war era, although they do so in a way that reflects negatively upon contemporary culture in
their nation. They use Germany as a contrast that allows them to explore modern England, much

\(^{53}\) Find the full poem in Appendix B. Sassoon’s vocal protests eventually had him confined to a
Scottish mental hospital by uncomfortable authorities (Robb 148).
as the British once contrasted their homeland with the rest of the Empire to prove their preeminence. However, Germany becomes a superior contrast rather than the traditionally inferior “other” of colonial narratives. During the making of their third record, The Rakes expressed the opinion that "The London music scene is so dull--it's like wading through a swamp of shit;" in an attempt to find musical inspiration they uprooted themselves and recorded in Berlin (NME, 3 October 2008). The resulting album, Klang, finds inspiration in the dynamic bleakness of late twentieth century Germany, a place they find much more proactively politicized and nationalistic than their “clothes and hair” focused homeland (The Light From Your Mac).

Both modern Berlin and war era Germany become touchstones of cultural contrast for NME indie. Considering the rampant “Germanophobia” that Robb identifies as a relic of the war, the genre uses Germany in surprising ways to comment on British culture (8). References to Nazi Germany and the modern German state mingle with strangely positive results in Strasbourg; The Rakes applaud “courage that your father plucked from inside a cattle truck” [a reference to the transportation of Jews to concentration camps] in a song about the ability of the German people to reform their society before the destruction of the Berlin wall (Strasbourg). They also offer the notion that political reforms and ideological changes that encourage social freedoms are valorous; “Dann sind wir Helden [Then we’ll be heroes],” they say of a plan to destroy the wall.  

Postwar Germany becomes a shockingly positive example of proactive nationalism that contrasts with England’s postwar complacency and “dissolution” (Overy 15). The Libertines’ Arbeit Macht Frei blends another reference to courageous survival in concentration camps with

---

54 Franz Ferdinand also discusses Berlin, though less politically, in Fade Together.
commentary on prejudice in modern Britain. Criticizing the narrow-minded views of some modern Britons, Doherty and Barat scoff, “Her old man/ He don't like blacks or queers/ Yet he's proud we beat the Nazis?/ How queer.” Ironically, the enemy that inspired fervent British patriotism during the war era becomes a gateway for explorations of social reform in Britain as a contemporary example of proactive behavior and patriotic belief.

One track from *Klang* references a historical Brit who left his country behind in hopes of discovery as The Rakes did with their move to Berlin. *Shackleton*, titled for the revered British Antarctic explorer from the years just before World War I, centers on the proclamation: “Dear God! I will drink and I will smoke like no man before me has or ever will... a blinding light in the dark abyss of dull men...like Shackleton before me!” In a world that no longer has a place for progress like Shackleton’s via imperial heroism, these bands progress by adopting the personal, libertine freedoms modeled on the glorious, imagined past. They focus their energies on hedonism and artistic creation because contributing to a debased society on a wider scale lacks meaning. Though they left England to record, The Rakes could not leave behind their concerns about Englishness and the past of their nation. They idolize Shackleton as the dynamic explorer, a symbol of Britain’s great past they strive to emulate in their musical endeavors.

Don’t be fooled by the military jackets. *NME* indie bands have no desire to literally recreate the British Empire. Giles and Middleton identify an increasing skepticism toward nationalism in soldiers at the end of the war era (112). *NME* indie bands display a similar mixture of national pride and cynicism, and an increasing “nihilism and pathos” about the modern nation (Overy 13). They seek a nationalistic spirit that has been lost in an age of mass

---

55 This phrase appeared above the gates of several concentration camps. The song of the same title appeared in the film *Children of Men*, which explores cultural disintegration in a future, dystopian Britain that includes the presence of camp-like compounds for illegal immigrants.
culture, valuing war-era Britain and postwar Germany for their well-developed, devoted national identities, not their military ambitions. Anthony Thornton writes, “...desperate for money, [The Libertines] came up with the idea of joining the Territorial Army to make some fast cash...Once they’d presented themselves, the officer insisted that Carl get his foppish hair cut. He refused and they both left” (20-21). The nationalistic sacrifice of modern military service is not a solution to Britain’s cultural disintegration; their love of the imperial age is only ideological. Positive images from the war era are as much an idyll as Albion, merely symbols of the heroism and indomitable British spirit that they feel have slipped away in modern times. NME indie musicians do not seek a return to Empire, but a return to the proud and distinctive culture that inspired the imperial age and waned after the patriotism of the World Wars. In the past, the preservation of “Britishness” relied on constant and ambitious imperial expansion; now it requires an insular retreat into the “foppish” and artistic—writing idealistic music about the war era as an exemplar rather than waging war.

“East London is a vampire, it sucks the joy right out of me/ How we long for corruption in these golden years…”— Bloc Party, Song for Clay (Disappear Here)

“London has been reminding me why I love her so, am lost in her so...delirium and Embankment gardens, Hackney hideouts and forgotten pathways into, unto Arcady and again Arcadia.”— Pete Doherty

The Present

The conclusion of the war era marks the definitive end of NME indie’s Albion-inspired idyll. As the door closes on the heroic nationalism of the war, the music takes a dramatically negative turn. Portrayals of modern life lean toward disheartening urbanization and cultural decay, centering on London as a representative space for the nation. “Britishness” itself fades in the face of a globally connected, increasingly Americanized culture, a shift that has been a
longtime concern of British cultural commentators beyond this insular group of musicians (Abravanel, “Britain’s Hollywood;” Storry and Childs 150). Particularly in their views of contemporary, corporate London, these bands find much to criticize. However, the city that they flock to for its bustling music scene is not without charm; though they condemn its dreary, cubicle-bound workforce and numbly repetitious pub nightlife, they still love the seamy, underground adventures that the metropolis offers. Architectural historian Ben Weinreb writes: “To each of us London is different. ‘Hell is a city much like London,’ wrote Shelley; while Wordsworth, ‘Earth has nothing to show more fair.’ To De Quincey its streets were an abyss of despair, to Dr. Johnson it was worth living for” (15). Similarly, London is both valued and reviled in NME indie as a microcosm of Britain’s best culture and worst degeneration.

Giles and Middleton describe London during the war era as “an icon for Englishness” at its stoic, unified best (113). However, more recent portrayals of city life are grim. London and the nation have become places of boredom and decay shaped through literary images borrowed from sources like Orwell’s 1984, a novel that inspires bands as diverse as The Libertines and anthemic prog-rockers Muse. Orwellian London is filled with grimy vistas of “rotting nineteenth century houses...bombed sites where the plaster dust swirled in the air” (5). The disintegrating city is a key image for NME indie musicians when portraying the collapse of their idyll. Pete Doherty offers a poem about “New London,” a dreary “trial” of a city “at the fag-end of the 20th century A.D.” filled with “tenements...unlovely and kitsch” that “tussle and brand”

56 Abravanel details early globalization concerns associated with the first American “talkie” films in Britain. Many Brits feared a corruption of their language as it was infiltrated by American slang from the movies.
57 Like Blake, Orwell is repurposed by NME indie; the imagery of his novel is present in descriptions of modern England, but the accompanying dystopian fears don’t arise until these musicians consider the future. Muse frontman Matt Bellamy discusses Orwellian inspiration in Spin, Sept. 2009.
their inhabitants (“Bowhemia”). Images of a cheapened, claustrophobic metropolis are also reminders of Blake’s grimly oppressive “harlot’s curse...chartered Thames...[and] blackening church” (“London” 26). *NME* indie musicians fear the loss of aesthetic grandeur along with personal power and pride in the face of modernity. Britons have abandoned the imperial battlefield in favor of the dole queue; they are no longer the stoic survivors of the Blitz. Arctic Monkeys want only to “sleep in the city that never wakes up/and revel in nostalgia” (*Old Yellow Bricks*). They plan an escape route to “a thousand places better than” the sleeping city—modern London—via the “nostalgia” of idealized pasts like Albion and the glorified war era.

Not every band finds England as deeply degraded as these images suggest, but most express the “concern with [the rise of] mass culture” in the spheres of employment and entertainment identified by British cultural scholar Graeme Turner (34). Turner finds within modern Britain a widespread “concern about the moral and aesthetic content of culture,” particularly the rise of forms of contemporary popular culture such as “the women’s magazine, the cinema…the popular song, and, of course, television,” along with the spread of industrialization that undermines a “more organic version of British existence” (34-35). *NME* indie bands are especially troubled by the combination of industrial and artistic homogenization; they fear the rise of the white-collar corporate lifestyle and commercialization of art that oppose their beloved social, artistic, and moral freedoms. Sardonic rockers The Rakes shrug off a low-paying “22 grand job” with a monotone “it’s all right, in the city that sounds nice” (*22 Grand Job*). With over 40% of Britain’s population currently employed in corporate or government sectors like “banking, finance, and insurance,” “real estate/business,” and “manufacturing

58 Find Doherty’s full poem in Appendix B.
industries,” it is easy to deduce that the workforce is dominated by the dull office culture that The Rakes dismiss as “all right” but unfulfilling (Storry and Childs 91).

Many Rakes songs also deal with the boredom of pub culture, evenings spent “talking shit with…colleagues” at the same “local” (Work Work Work…). They marry form and function through heavy repetition and Alan Donohoe’s monotone delivery in their vocals, reflections of the lifestyle that their lyrics criticize. Work Work Work (Pub Club Sleep) is a litany of cubicle complaints detailing the repetitive cycle of the title. Droning verses about takeaway dinners and evenings spent in Wetherspoons, a massive chain of pubs, are bookended by the chorus “Lean back, stare up at the ceiling/ Just drift along with no purpose or meaning.” For many the mention of Wetherspoons is a reminder that even pubs, one of the most recognizable signs of traditional English culture, are tainted by the corporate. Wetherspoons buys old pubs and turns them into bland franchises. Work Work Work... along with the brilliantly repetitive dialogue of The World Was A Mess But His Hair Was Perfect are satirical commentaries on life in the office and after work, undercutting the pub culture that Britons retreat to night after night in a futile attempt to do something that is, if not meaningful, at least enjoyable (Storry and Childs 70). The song concludes with a mockery of mindless pub banter: “Okay, yeah, can I, uh, get two of them and a pint of that? Yeah. How much? No way! Okay, I've got to use my card. Okay. all right, how you doing? Did you see that, uh, thing last night? Yeah, it was good…Yeah, no, seriously, it was good, seriously.” The Rakes’ scenes of city life offer an image that is not as soullessly degraded as Blake’s or Orwell’s, yet hopelessness remains in their expression of the “dominant British view that work is a treadmill from which people dream of escaping” (Storry

59 Storry and Childs discuss the prominence and sentimental importance of pubs in the daily life of Britons, noting their loyalty to their “local”—the pub they visit regularly (157).
60 We saw Ferber identify similarly painful cycles of boredom in Blake’s London in the segment on the “Past.”
and Childs 93). Their fears of modern life stem from painfully uninspired corporate stasis rather than decay.

Contemporary international politics are also a source of concern for NME indie artists. Because they cling so fiercely to ideals of British individuality, international influence on national identity is a particular source of anxiety. Though not xenophobic, they are concerned that the rest of the world is, for the first time, encroaching upon Britain more than Britain is exerting a cultural influence outward; it has become “easier to define British cultural identity by looking outside than inside” (Storry and Childs 6). Insular and personal notions of Britishness like Albion and the imperial are losing relevance for many citizens as an outward “they” dilutes British culture; “how can they be tired of England?/they’ll never know the England that we know,” Dirty Pretty Things assert (Tired of England). The band is concerned that outsiders, or perhaps misguided Britons themselves, are losing the sense of what makes their nation singularly valuable. They no longer “know” Britain, having abandoned the intimate relationship with cultural heritage that once characterized Britishness. These lines also remind listeners that the band considers their nation’s cultural (particularly literary) productions valuable-- the lyrics allude to Samuel Johnson’s adage, “When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life.”

Other lyrics pinpoint specific concerns with cultural imperialism as rising globalism diminishes British culture and art. Franz Ferdinand argues that “there is no nation of you/there is no nation of me;” the sharp borders that once separated nations and cultures are blurring, resulting in a loss of personal identification and pride related to Britain (Lucid Dreams). The Libertines reference Britain’s imperial past with an allusion to Kipling’s tale of colonization in India, The Man Who Would Be King.61 “I lived my dream today, I lived it yesterday/ And I'll be

---

61 See the “War Era” section for a synopsis of Kipling’s story.
living yours tomorrow,” they write in a song titled after the story. The dreams they have already lived are Britain’s own dreams of the imagined Albion idyll or boundless imperial expansion, while tomorrow’s dreams, the future, arise from “you”—the “other.” This sense of separation from self in the face of globalized culture inspires images of a diminished Britain and idealizes the culturally solidifying imperial influence that the nation once exerted.

The diminishing nation can also be seen in *NME* indie’s portrayal of the modern monarchy, Britain’s most powerful, unifying national symbol. These bands assert that the symbolic importance of the monarch has beencheapened by attempts to become more, in the words of Storry and Childs, “user-friendly,” changing its image to pander to international tourists (14). “The queen of England sits on her throne/ of bingo cards and chicken bones,” Dirty Pretty Things sneer in *Tired of England*. The rather revolting image counters traditional perceptions of the monarchy as elegant and stately. The mention of “bingo cards” also brings to mind Doherty’s writing on past generations in *1939 Returning*. The queen is connected with bingo, a commonplace pastime for the elderly; she and the proudly nationalistic vision represented by the monarchy are no longer relevant for the younger generations. Storry and Childs note this “deterioration in relationships between different age groups,” first seen in the war era, as a rising modern concern as Britain’s population demographics shift (150). *Radio America* further implicates international forces in devaluing the monarchy. The Libertines imagine a “Red faced president/[who] took afternoon tea with her majesty the Queen/ And they watched old films flicker/Across the old palace movie screen.” They marry mentions of the old and outdated with the international force of the “red faced president.” The president, presumably a symbol of America, comes abroad to watch old films; rather than experience England’s

---

62 The past is big business in England; over five million people visited the British Museum in 2008 (Museums and Galleries Monthly Visit Figures).
present, he chooses an artificial view of the past— an idea closely related to Britain’s historic monarchy “repackaged” for tourists. The verse ends, “What a shame as she slipped in the rain/
The poor dancing girl she won't dance again.” Regret, loss, and damage are constant themes for these bands as they move away from their British idyll into the modern world of global influences.

Though these bands value imperial Britain as a example of a cohesive English culture, they react to contemporary multiculturalism in surprisingly positive ways that contrast with what scholars perceive about the cautiously insular majority of Britons (Storry and Childs 222-225). Doherty’s “coffee wallahs” under an “English sun” reflect an acceptance of cultural influence left over from Britain’s colonial past (Babyshambles, Albion). Bands like Franz Ferdinand have vocally opposed xenophobic political groups like the BNP, a party that lead singer Alex Kapranos called “Genuine rightwing extremists, sub-moronic neo-Nazis” (Blog: June 5, 2006). Libertines track Time for Heroes chronicles the 2001 London May Day riots, a class and race-based conflict that Doherty experienced firsthand. “It’s all these ignorant faces that bring this town down,” he says of the “Wombles,” a white power group who sparked the violence. As a part of their escape from restrictive modern life, NME indie bands laud the social and personal freedoms that could be limited by political groups like the BNP; the oppression of others that is sometimes associated with nationalism is not part of their avenue toward imagined ideals of Britain.

63 See Storry and Childs for an elaboration on xenophobic tendencies in Britain (13-18).
64 Though raised in entirely in England, Kapranos has a unique viewpoint on British multiculturalism. The child of a Greek father and British mother performed under the name Alex Huntley for the first few years of his career. He recounts episodes from his childhood in his book, Sound Bites.
A legend among Libertines fans (perpetuated by Doherty himself) tells of Doherty’s own oppressive run-in with “truncheons” when he flippantly attempted to style his hair in the reflection of a riot policeman’s shield; NME indie musicians are culturally aware, but frequently retreat from the painfully political into the personal. The World Was A Mess But His Hair Was Perfect addresses the themes of contemporary social freedom, cultural diversification, and politics from this irreverent perspective. As we’ve seen, it draws inspiration from the novel Lux the Poet, which weaves a narrative of the 1981 Brixton race riots with images of the meandering, libertine lifestyle that bands view as a method of escape from modern culture. Just as Lux escapes the troubles of riots in his neighborhood through dreams of poetry and fashion, The Rakes turn to aestheticism when society offers only insurmountable concerns about modern politics and globalized culture. In the midst of the riots, Lux pauses to ponder how he, “monumentally good looking and the best writer the world has ever seen,” isn’t famous yet (Millar 11). The Rakes capture this rejection of modern cultural troubles in favor of the personal and artistic with the song’s title. Like Lux and Doherty, even if “the world [i]s a mess” and all they can do is “slag off [criticize and mock] America in the pub,” at least their “hair was perfect.”

Concern about the loss of the national identity in contemporary, postwar Britain most often stems from pressures outside the nation, rather than the diversifying population within. “The saturating effects of ‘Americanisation’” are particularly troubling; the notion that American culture is encroaching upon the rest of the world is common, but NME indie artists feel its influence acutely as it diminishes their beloved, uniquely British society (Storry and Childs 153). These musicians have bitter sentiments about their fickle countrymen’s admiration of America.

65 For more on Lux, see the section on “Libertinism and Art.”
Art Brut⁶⁶ complains satirically that “there’s not much glam about the English weather...I’m considering a move to L.A,” while Arctic Monkeys accuse a posing rival band, “You’re not from New York City, you’re from [small English city] Rotheram” (Moving to LA; Fake Tales of San Francisco). NME indie bands shame those who adopt elements of outside cultures, considering such behavior a betrayal of Britishness. “You’ll slag off America in the pub/ Say the war is shite then in the club/ Drink some Buds and smoke some Marlborough Lights,” The Rakes observe (The World Was A Mess…). These lines suggest that the adoption of American culture might not even be entirely purposeful, merely an unconscious response to pervasive importing and advertising. Though Britons struggle to retain their sense of national identity, the influence of other cultures in products and fashion is unavoidable. Even within Britain, faceless corporations are overtaking individual businesses. The Rakes mock culturally bereft pub chain Wetherspoons while Franz Ferdinand asks, “Who gives a damn about the profits of [mega-chain of grocery stores] Tesco?” (The Fallen). Storry and Childs examine the phenomenon of “high streets,” the commercial centers unique to British cities that once housed individual businesses, which are now being overrun by the chain stores that NME indie bands eschew as symbols of the rootless mass culture that is invading every sphere of British life (111).

Modern warfare is a final contemporary concern for NME indie, closely tied to the international relationships, particularly with America, that have influenced Britain’s cultural and political diminishment.⁶⁷ The Rakes not only “slag off America” because of the war in the Middle East, but voice a concern that in modern London, “every plane is a missile, every

⁶⁶ NME indie’s most humorous band, Art Brut, criticizes fame-hungry musicians who want to leave England behind in favor of the “glamour” of Los Angeles in Moving to L.A.

⁶⁷ Razorlight’s America also addresses the global influence of U.S. culture, though the band has been expelled somewhat from the NME indie scene due to the fame-seeking antics of lead singer Johnny Borrell. See Appendix A for the lyrics to America.
suitcase a bomb” (*The World Was A Mess...; Terror!*). International turmoil makes their home a place of fear rather than Arcadian refuge. Most *NME* indie bands condemn the War on Terror, fueled by the bitter sense that Britain was forced to participate due to America’s global influence. In this they echo the majority of Britons; the largest protest in British history occurred after Tony Blair’s decision to participate in the Iraq war in 2003 (Churchill and Amirani 1). *B.U.R.M.A.* becomes a criticism of interventionist politics when the lines “They can stick their war, I’m leaving now” are read as a reference to modern politics rather than W.W.II. The song’s assertion that Britain is already “two world wars down” solidifies this understanding of the track as a commentary on two time periods. The previous, deeply patriotic war era is contrasted against the modern war that reflects oppressive American influence rather than British national preservation. The historical “pursuits of excellence [and] lives of imperialists” are moments of British valor without parallels in the modern war Barat would gladly abandon (*B.U.R.M.A.*). War is no longer a defense of imperial Britain and its people, but an instance of Britain bending to the will of America (Storry and Childs 197). DPT expresses concern that “we’ll never get to heaven with the artillery in tow.” War has become a barrier to idylls like Albion rather than a gateway to the imperial idyll.

*NME* indie musicians’ most significant instances of positive identification with contemporary Britain appear in descriptions of their personal lives, which lie outside the homogenizing white collar economic structure they deride. The anecdotal nature of their music, especially in portrayals of late night, often illicit jaunts through the city, displays a continuing connection with the “idealized versions of working class culture” that Turner identifies as a common trend in British society (47). Whether they are remembering a childhood vacation spot (The Maccabees, *Latchmere*), an afternoon on the Embankment (Bloc Party, *I Still Remember*),
or jumping the queue at a club (Arctic Monkeys, *From the Ritz to the Rubble*), *NME* indie musicians celebrate experiences that can only be had in their homeland, rich in slang\(^68\) and lively detail that oppose the faceless and corporate. The Libertines describe, in bounding up-tempo, an encounter with drug dealers on North London’s shady “Cally [Caledonian] Road” (*Up the Bracket*). “See these two cold fingers/these crooked fingers/I’ll show you the way to mean no,” Doherty sings, then adds the delighted coda, “I was so bold!” There is a joy in the simple and the seedy, often tied to the working class life they prize, that connects these musicians to the nation they also admire for its grandiose imperial and pastoral histories; as their national culture diminishes, they find hope in insularity and Wildean personal freedoms. Franz Ferdinand writes delicately and in poignant detail of a kiss “In the alleyway by jakeys [Glaswegian slang for the homeless]...the sodium light/your leather jacket lies in sticky pools of Cider Blackberry” (*Katherine Kiss Me*). It is an image, and not a lofty one, specific to British life. The Libertines return once more to the rivalry with America and ask, “New York City’s very pretty in the nighttime, but oh, don’t you miss Soho?” (*The Boy Looked at Johnny*). Though the outside world might beguile them, these bands are always drawn back to England, even as they perceive its culture and international power waning.

---

\(^{68}\) Discussions of *NME* indie and slang can also be found in the sections on “Class” and the “War Era.”
these bands perceive the future as predominantly bleak. Drawing on themes from works like *A Clockwork Orange*, *1984*, and *Gravity’s Rainbow* that portray dystopian Britain, the bands create a narrative of “English decline” in which their nation is fractured and dimmed (Frankel 125). *NME* indie artists fear a future of temporal collapse, which heralds a devaluation of the nation’s proud, defined history and foreshadows the approach of a dystopian future, and cultural diminishment that opposes their desire to preserve an artistic, romantic, and historically structured British idyll. They are particularly concerned with a loss of division, whether between time periods, languages, nations, or the government and their personal lives, that could undermine the Albion ideal and British culture as they imagine it.

The band that focuses most on the dystopian future is Klaxons, a group of *NME* indie latecomers who combine ramshackle rock with futuristic keyboards. Their apocalyptic visions are the most extreme and pessimistic projections of the future in *NME* indie. Their 2006 concept album *Myths of the Near Future* draws upon Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*, particularly its focus on unstable perceptions of time, to create a disillusioned, chaotic vision of the future. Pynchon’s work presents an alternate history of London during the Blitz, replete with catastrophic complications from psychics, smart bombs, and blurry temporal shifts. Temporal uncertainty is a theme that carries from Pynchon’s novel into *NME* indie. Though they claim to sing about the “near future,” Klaxons also look ahead to distant images of the “year four thousand” (*Gravity’s Rainbow*). They mirror Pynchon’s focus on unreachable “infinity” in a song that is also titled *Gravity’s Rainbow*: “Could steer through time but I won’t let you/ Come with me, come with me/ We’ll travel to infinity...” (44). In the novel, the future intertwines with the past via central character Slothrop, a man who, through faulty psychological conditioning, can preemptively

---

69 *Gravity’s Rainbow* tracks the creation and firing of two mysterious German bombs during the Blitz; around half the novel takes place in war-era London.
determine the pattern of bomb strikes in London—a prominent instance of temporal confusion. As the narrative progresses, Slothrop seems to disintegrate along with his bombed city, mired in questions about his purpose and the war to which he “will never find out” the answers (Pynchon 566). NME indie bands fear a “ruined” future that brings the loss of identity for their nation and its citizens, represented by Slothrop’s loss of personal purpose and place; the future is not hopeful but vast and unknowable, the antithesis of the familiar Arcadian past.

The chaotic keyboards and abstract lyrics of Klaxons track *Gravity’s Rainbow* echo Pynchon’s dark, atmospheric prose, as do the themes of destruction that arise from the novel’s vision of “German bombs falling on England...rubble... sloping up to broken rear walls in clogging, an openwork of laths pointlessly chevroning, long tatters of wallpaper, split and shattered joists” (79, 677). The tattered, almost nonsensical lyrics of the song (“Across Tangian deserts we’ll flock/Madcap Medusa, flank my foghorn/we’ll change for seasons with our first born”) mirror Pynchon’s thematic and linguistic focus on the descent into a chaos of “transmarginal phases, past borders...past ‘equivalent’ and ‘paradoxical’ phases” (49). Klaxons echo Pynchon’s themes of disintegration with lyrics like, “Your tears leave trails of Tick fall blur room/Autonoma the room is bloom gloom/These crippled lines that I can’t get to.” Mixed images of the infinite and the “ruined...chaos still in motion” in abstract bomb imagery like “tick fall blur” characterize the future as one in which culture and even the basic tenets of time are being shattered, frequently through militaristic or political actions. NME indie projects a macrocosm of fractured war-era London onto the future of its entire culture. British visions of the future are closely connected to the past; Klaxons envision dark years ahead by creating images of war without the heroism associated with idealized history.\(^70\)

\(^{70}\) See Giles and Middleton Ch. 2 for literature that idealizes British wartime heroism.
come next, Klaxons reiterate and magnify the negative images of modern war presented by bands like Dirty Pretty Things.\footnote{Dirty Pretty Things’ commentary on the War on Terror in \textit{B.U.R.M.A.} is discussed in the “Present” section.}

Even more pessimistically, Klaxons also make direct references to the apocalypse in \textit{Four Horsemen of 2012}.\footnote{The four horsemen theme also appears in Muse’s symbolic nod to the quartet in the album art for apocalyptically-titled \textit{Black Holes and Revelations}.} They invoke the Revelation description of “an ashen horse; and he who sat on it had the name Death; and Hades was following with him” with their own of “a halfman, half horse who still runs through my thoughts as he rides on a flame in the sky,” and mix in the Mayan apocalypse myth that predicts the end of the world in 2012 (Rev. 6:8). \textit{Horsemen} is notable, aside from its extreme allusions to the apocalypse, for its time frame. The “halfman, half horse” is not appearing in the “year four thousand” but in “2012.” The apocalypse is near for Klaxons; they see disintegration not only in the temporal uncertainty and sprawling future of \textit{Gravity’s Rainbow}, but in the next decade. The closeness of their apocalypse reflects their perception of England’s declining present; they believe that it is distinctly possible for terrifying things to occur very soon.

Muse first adopts dystopian themes on their fourth album, \textit{Black Holes and Revelations}, an album that shares the apocalyptic anxieties of \textit{Myths of the Near Future}. However, their paranoia solidifies on their fifth LP, \textit{The Resistance}, a concept album about political subversion in a totalitarian future England. Singer Matt Bellamy admitted, “1984, you can hear a bit of that creeping into the album...Dr. Strangelove style thinking” (Frenette 1). One of the most recognizable visions of dystopian England, Orwell’s novel addresses the same themes of “conformity in a claustrophobic, narrow-minded community, manipulation of knowledge and the tenuous hold we have on the past when the reassuring signs of our identities are disappearing”
that many bands pinpoint in modern times, magnifying them to create a bleak vision of the future (Sicher 389). Doherty also has a long-time association with the novel’s bleak outlook: “At 13 I was reading Orwell—1984” he recalls in an *East London Advertiser* interview (*Books of Albion* 222). Literary critics have long debated whether *1984* is “a warning, admonishing us to mend our ways before the totalitarian bogeyman gets us, or...a prophecy, foretelling our inevitable fate” (Snyder 378). Muse sees England’s present as a combination of the two; while not yet beyond redemption, the nation’s current state could easily devolve into a future of grinding government and social control leading to a loss of cultural significance and personal agency.

*NME* indie bands fear the oppressive nature of social homogenization and global commerce as much as a literal totalitarian revolution or apocalypse; their chief concerns for the future focus on the society “devoid of privacy and human dignity” that Sicher identifies in *1984*, often associated with the negative influence of modern warfare (388). “These wars, they can’t be won/Do you want them to go on and on and on?” Bellamy asks in *United States of Eurasia*, a song that returns to the troubling themes of both futile, faceless war and cultural blending. Muse echoes the tense claustrophobia expressed by The Rakes in *Terror!* when Bellamy sings “paranoia is in bloom/ the PR transmissions will resume” (*Uprising*). These feelings escalate in the supremely paranoid *MK Ultra*, titled for secretive Cold War-era CIA research on mind control drugs, that asks “how much deception can you take?” The band touches upon Orwell’s fear of oppressive government control and the loss of the nation’s cultural past, “all history deleted with one stroke.” The future brings with it fears of an invasive bureaucracy that manipulates citizens by erasing a natural, unifying culture and sacrifices them to meaningless wars, something *NME* indie musicians already see as a pressing issue in the face of contemporary conflict in the Middle East.
Muse and their contemporaries do not necessarily believe in an inevitable totalitarian takeover; their fears for the future center on any sort of homogenization or control that moves away from presumably organic or personal visions of self and Britain. They dwell on technologically as well as politically or economically based projections of oppression and loss. The keyboard-related image of “one stroke” in MK Ultra is mirrored in Muse b-side Map of Your Head: “Language confuses…computers refuse to understand how I’m feeling today,” Bellamy complains, connecting dystopian social and emotional degradation to both linguistic disintegration (as we’ll soon see in 1984 and A Clockwork Orange) and the rising prevalence of emotionless technology. However, Muse retains hope for change if Britons can break free from political control and apathy. “I’m hungry for some unrest…I want to speak in a language that you’ll understand…I want the truth!” Bellamy proclaims at the end of Unnatural Selection. A hopeful future is still within reach for Britons if they can reassert the power of individual thought and expression that NME indie bands value above all else.

The Libertines reference another novel that concerns dystopian Britain in the song Horrorshow, titled in reference to the hoodlum slang of A Clockwork Orange. Burgess’ novel ties the future to the regressive loss of distinctively British linguistic quirks—a key source of cultural identification. The “Nadsat” slang of Clockwork is described as "Odd bits of old [Cockney] rhyming slang; a bit of gypsy talk, too. But most of the roots are Slav propaganda. Subliminal penetration" (Burgess 15). The “penetration” of outside influences highlights again the concern for cultural loss in the face of globalization and corporatized society that troubles these bands as time passes. “I’ve been following, following your mind’s instructions,” Doherty

---

73 Connections between The Libertines and A Clockwork Orange appear in NME, 23 Nov. 2009. Doherty also mentions Burgess in a list titled “Recent Books” written around April 1999 in Books of Albion (47).
proclaims at the beginning of *Horrorshow*; loss of a personalized language intersects with the inability to think for oneself. The perversion of Cockney dialect in *Clockwork* is especially horrifying because the slang characterizes one of Britain’s most distinct working class subcultures.\(^74\) Part of a wider dystopian literary tradition that also includes Orwell and Huxley’s *Brave New World*, *Clockwork* also focuses on the degeneration of youth and the generational disconnect that concerned Doherty in *1939 Returning*. The hyper-violent youth who coin the term “horrorshow” in *Clockwork* represent the fragmentation of culture that these bands fear.\(^75\) Similarly, “debasement of language [is] the paramount concern in Orwell’s dystopia;” the homogenous Newspeak of *1984* creates a link between linguistic decline and the demise of cultural and personal freedoms (Snyder 380).\(^76\) Newspeak and Nadsat represent a final stage of the diminishment of culture that *NME* indie bands foresee as a more tangible downfall of Britain than their distant apocalyptic visions.

*What A Waster*, perhaps The Libertines’ most pessimistic vision of modern life in London, also references the dystopian future. Intermixed with squalid flats and heavy drug use are references to dreams “like the Book of Revelation, the [WWII children’s comic] *Beano*, or unabridged *Ulysses*;” the band displays the tandem fixations of dystopia and “books and documentation” seen in fiction like Orwell’s (Pennavaria 231). Orwell and *NME* indie bands use art and literature to gauge both cultural progress and regression, tracking the fate of language and books in imagined futures to see where society might be headed. By connecting literature from diverse time periods in *What A Waster*, The Libertines minimize the distance between the past,

\(^74\) See Giles and Middleton Ch. 2 for an exploration of the romanticized Cockney/tramp image.
\(^75\) See the Nov. 2009 *NME* article on top 50 albums of the decade for more on the *Clockwork* connection.
\(^76\) Snyder explores various interpretations of Orwell’s work, considering the relationship between authorial intent and criticism.
present, and future, echoing the temporal uncertainty of *Gravity’s Rainbow* and making the slide into homogenous dystopia an easier journey. Revelation, a text also referenced by apocalyptic maestros Klaxons, is classed together with children’s literature from the idealized war era, suggesting shades of dystopia even in the hopeful and accomplished artistic productions of Britain’s past.

Franz Ferdinand address themes of collapse and dystopia as well. Lead singer Alex Kapranos wrote on the band’s blog, “submarine captains tune into Radio 4 when surfacing to see whether civilisation still exists. If they hear static, then something nasty may have happened.”

This image reappears in *Walk Away* when he sings, “The Kremlin’s falling/Radio Four is static” after the catastrophic collapse of a relationship, which functions as a miniature version of the disastrous social collapse that concerns *NME* indie. “Stalin smiles and Hitler laughs/Churchill claps Mao Tse Tung on the back,” Kapranos adds, foregrounding the themes of social and political disorder derived from *Gravity’s Rainbow* and *Clockwork Orange*. The unsettling allegiances of these lines also uncover the fear of cultural blending and globalization that appears whenever these bands consider the postwar, diminished Britain identified by Giles and Middleton and project the trends begun in that era onto the future (24). Franz track *Lucid Dreams* addresses these elements of cultural cross-pollination: “There is no nation of you/there is no nation of me/ Our only nation lives in lucid dreams.” The song concludes with a futuristic keyboard solo that moves away from the personal sound of other tracks like *Katherine Kiss Me*.

---

77 8 May 2006.
78 The song also obliquely references the apocalyptic myths of more extreme future projections. “No buildings will fall down/No quake will split the ground/The sun won’t swallow the sky/Statues will not cry,” Kapranos sings, suggesting both the religious and geological repercussions of various apocalyptic projections.
distancing these international images from the detailed, insular present. The future becomes a
colder, less distinctive place of only “aimless love...just plain mystery” (*Lucid Dreams*).

The future that these bands present is overwhelmingly bleak and hopeless; their literary
influences reflect fears of cultural collapse and violence. And yet their timeline doesn’t end in
utter despair. The most fascinating thing about *NME* indie’s dystopia is the hope that remains,
often associated with the values of romance, art, and individualism that are parts of the idyllic
past. Though sometimes seen as lyrical clichés, romance and art both become essential to
combating dystopia because they are the products of individual thoughts and desires, the things
that must be preserved in the face of corporate and government homogenization or cultural
decay. A alternate version of *Lucid Dreams* claims, “I’ll dream a nation of you/ A new utopia for
you to live in/ I’ll dream a nation of me/ A new ambrosia...” If the nation remains connected to
the individual pleasures of art and romance, it can rebel against *1984*’s dystopian, totalitarian
future. Though it seems “uncool” in the face of modern cynicism, “faith in love and music” is
the value in which *NME* indie finds hope (The Libertines, *The Good Old Days*). In *Gravity’s
Rainbow*, Klaxons promise, “I’ll always be there, oh-oh, my future love/ I’ll always be there for
you my future love.” The Libertines juxtapose race riots with hopeful romance in *Time for
Heroes*: “Wombles bleed/Truncheons and shields/ You know I cherish you, my love.” Bellamy
even noted that his focus in *1984* was the subversive relationship between main characters
Winston and Julia; he describes *The Resistance* as “defiant...hopeful and positive...There is
romance to fighting back against malevolent interests” (Odell 52). So, it seems that we’re left
with more than sorrow. Many bands identify their personal relationships as a way to maintain a
meaningful existence in the imagined degraded future.
Libertines role model Oscar Wilde wrote, “Those who find beautiful meanings in beautiful things are the cultivated. For these there is hope” (Dorian Gray 1). Aestheticism of the kind recommended in Dorian Gray also becomes a touchstone of hope for these bands in a culture that is shifting away from the ideals they hold in high regard. For Britons who are tired of just “hanging around” in an increasingly stagnant and homogenous culture, there is always the chance to “pick up a guitar” (The Ha-Ha Wall). Though they reject future advancement in the traditional, capitalist sense, they believe in the attainment of personal value through the production of music. George McKay identifies a similar valuation of literature in 1984, arguing that writing becomes a “heroic character” that opposes the novel’s oppressive society (302). NME indie bands find merit in the literary production of their nation because of the “role of reading and writing in constituting the self,” in their case both the personal and British self (McKay 303). Their choice to reference literature so heavily in their music demonstrates a deep investment in both “high” and “low” art from Britain as valuable escapes from dystopia.

Klaxons also draw hopeful inspiration from a dynamic and rather optimistic text on the future and its artistic potential. Italian poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti’s Futurist Manifesto, written in 1909, celebrates progress and “the habit of energy and rashness...warmth, glamour, and prodigality,” along with fascist tenets that NME indie does not embrace (1). Klaxons were originally known as “Klaxons (Not Centaurs),” a phrase from the text (Pareles 1). Though the Manifesto prizes the industry and machinery that are usually presented as antitheses of the pastoral idyll embraced by NME indie, Klaxons are attracted to Marinetti’s valuation of future artistic progress: “The essential elements of our poetry will be courage, audacity and revolt.

79 These terms are perhaps used somewhat anachronistically. The classification of art is usually the pastime of the upper class cultural establishment, something NME indie musicians are well outside. They would also probably refuse to distinguish between forms of art as more or less valuable since they consider all creative production worthwhile.
Literature has up to now magnified pensive immobility, ecstasy and slumber” (1). The future becomes an exercise in continued artistic dynamism rather than a time of political and cultural oppression, connected to the “speed and youth” that The Libertines have already idealized in songs like *Up the Bracket*. Nationalistic ideas like those embraced during the war era are also applauded in *The Futurist Manifesto*, though we’ll see that Klaxons do not adopt Marinetti’s specific political ideologies.

Allusions to Marinetti suggest that Klaxons, and many of their *NME* indie contemporaries, see the possibility of future redemption through an idyllic devotion to youth, art, and modernity. However, it is important to note that the text is not an English one; *NME* indie’s most important literary influences function on two levels since they carry their own ideas as well as an inherent valuation of British culture and art. *The Futurist Manifesto* remains distanced from British ideals by a Fascist philosophy that advocates “ruinous and incendiary violence” and an interest in industrial prowess (Marinetti 1). Though *NME* indie musicians admire Marinetti’s interest in dynamic artistic production and youth, these oppressive political elements of his work—rather similar to the systems criticized in *1984*—are rejected by British bands that are supremely interested in the preservation of their past and cultural individualism rather than political homogeneity.80

In keeping with its idealization of artistic progress, British music is stylistically embracing the future. After years of media hype for homegrown indie, a backlash of futuristic bands is appearing: the movement of icy electro and low-fi kick-started by Klaxons is taking over the British scene as the new decade approaches. Though songs from this new musical trend sound like they could score an apocalyptic film, the devotion of Britons to the indie music scene

80 Musical individualism is also essential to *NME* indie, as seen in the discussion of “sellout” culture vs. indie in the section on “Class.”
suggests that little has changed ideologically. The level of interest in music from British fans is the most hopeful element of the community. Even though the music is changing, Britain has not lost faith. Though they often embrace themes of conservative nostalgia, *NME* indie bands simultaneously desire constant innovation in their own artistic production; the youth and dynamism of art in Marinetti’s *Manifesto* are reflected in the continual reach for new modes of artistic expression.

“Bring on the backlash!”— Arctic Monkeys, *Who the Fuck Are Arctic Monkeys?*

**Ending the NME Indie Era**

Arctic Monkeys foresaw the end of their musical generation early. In 2006, just after their debut shot them to stratospheric success, they produced a song called *Who the Fuck Are Arctic Monkeys?* in which Alex Turner wonders “Just cause we’re having a say so/ Not lining up to be play-doh/ in five years’ time will it be ‘who the fuck are Arctic Monkeys?’” They released the song during the *NME* indie heyday, but the genre survived only a few years, flaring up with The Libertines in 2001 and fading as bands like Dirty Pretty Things and The Rakes disintegrated in 2008 and 2009. As the decade closed, new movements began to populate the *NME*; a more eclectic mixture of styles from electro to folk, including a surprising influx of female artists, are overtaking the joyously under-produced indie that defined British music in the previous decade. *NME* indie is dying.

The genre, portrayed as a great innovation in British music, collapsed under the weight of its own hype. The *NME* itself and countless blogs were the main culprits in creating the outpouring of media attention for The Libertines and the many bands they inspired, but opinions soured near the end of the decade as journalists and fans began to question their indie heroes. A bitter blogger wrote a retrospective on The Libertines that called them “the final nail in the coffin
of the vapid UK indie music scene,” declaring their Albion ideal “completely substanceless” 
(The Grain). Even other musicians got involved in the judgment; rappers Dan Le Sac vs.
Scroobius Pip declared, “Thou shalt not read NME...Bloc Party, just a band/The Arctic Monkeys,
just a band/The next big thing is just a band” (Thou Shalt Always Kill). The idealization of music
that characterizes NME indie faded too; cynicism is spreading as new genres arise and the
“backlash” predicted by Arctic Monkeys has proclaimed the old sound passé. The bands that are
surviving the firestorm are adapting. Franz Ferdinand released synth-heavy Tonight, Arctic
Monkeys turned to American producer Josh Homme for a desert rock overhaul, and The Horrors
left their Victorian roots behind for psychedelica.

However, the death of NME indie isn’t the end of intelligent, politically engaged music in
Britain; art is still a way to speak about the nation. The underground, uniquely British music
culture continues to thrive, reflecting a resilient interest in Britain’s artistic output, while an
ongoing fan devotion to The Libertines and their idealistic vision underscores the enduring belief
in the power of art to access something essential and beautiful about Britain. A lot is changing—
the proliferation of direct literary references that once defined the genre is diminishing— but a
concern with British identity and society lingers. New musicians are taking up the mantle of
cultural commentary, often rising from the same working class London culture that bands like
The Libertines and The Rakes call home. London breakout Florence + the Machine picks up the
threads of Klaxons’ apocalyptic vision with a warning that “the horses are coming, so you’d
better run” (Dog Days Are Over).

However, Florence warns listeners to “leave all your love and your longing behind/you
can’t carry it with you if you want to survive” (Dog Days Are Over). The new indie maintains an
interest in Britain’s culture and future, but without NME indie’s romantic idealism or desire to
preserve the imagined past. Florence and her contemporaries are ready to abandon “love and longing” of the past in favor of the dynamic progress of Marinetti. “Through these hard times, we’ll work harder,” declares Patrick Wolf, whose dramatic glam rock straddles the line between NME indie and what’s coming next (Hard Times). Satirical songstress Lily Allen expresses both this increased interest in modernity and the pessimism that accompanies it. She retains NME indie’s disdain for mass culture by claiming sarcastically “I am a weapon of massive consumption/It’s not my fault, it’s how I’m programmed to function,” and adds worriedly, “I don’t know what’s right and what’s real anymore/I don’t know how I’m meant to feel anymore” (The Fear). The generation beyond NME indie feels a concern with the loss of culture and meaning, but they seem to have lost the belief in England’s admirable, idyllic past that makes modern life bearable for NME indie musicians.

One surprising development in this new incarnation of British indie is the number of women commenting on culture. NME indie was essentially a boys’ club, but the next generation includes an expanding front of female vocalists like dance pop singers La Roux and Little Boots, who shared a venue with The Maccabees at 2009’s Camden Crawl. The new cynicism and fading historicism of British music could be a symptom of this change; perhaps a female view of traditional British culture is more negative based on women’s differing experience of the patriarchal past and traditional social structures.

It’s too early to tell where the new breed of indie is headed, or why the people producing it are changing. But The Libertines and their contemporaries might not be disappointed. Klaxons admire The Futurist Manifesto because it prescribes a dynamic vision of art that changes with society. Stagnation in NME indie would contradict the genre’s values; these bands admire British art and literature for its constant innovation. The newfound cynicism of British indie could
reflect an acceptance of the failure to reconstruct, or construct at all, the idyll that *NME* indie bands desired. Poignantly, The Libertines counsel listeners, “Don’t look back into the sun/ Now you know that your time has come” (*Don’t Look Back into the Sun*). Even Doherty and Barat, the consummate sentimentalists, are looking toward the future.


Works Cited

Text


<http://www.albionarks.com/wiki/Peter_Doherty_Writings#Bowhemia>.


Frankel, Nick. “‘Ave Imperatrix:’ Oscar Wilde and the Poetry of Englishness.” Victorian Poetry. 35:2 (Summer 1997): 117-137.


<http://www.franzferdinand.co.uk>.


<http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2003/jan/10/artsfeatures.libertines>.


“Museums and Galleries Monthly Visit Figures.” Department for Culture, Media, and Sport.

20 Feb. 2010


<http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/music/article6733836.ece>.


Sassoon, Siegfried. “Suicide in the Trenches.” 25 Jan. 2010


**Music**


Appendix A: Music and Lyrics

Though space constraints make it impractical to reprint the all the lyrics to every NME indie song pertaining to the topics I’ve discussed, I’ve included the most striking and important here. Each set of lyrics also includes some background on the bands at the center of the NME indie movement and their connections to one another.

Arctic Monkeys
Years Active: 2002-present
Key Members: Alex Turner
Key Albums: Whatever People Say I Am, That’s What I’m Not (2006)
Hometown: Sheffield
Inter-band connections: Turner and Carl Barat of Dirty Pretty Things are friends

Lyrics:
I Bet That You Look Good on the Dancefloor: there ain't no love, no Montagues or Capulets
Just banging tunes and DJ sets and
Dirty dancefloors, and dreams of naughtiness…

Who the Fuck Are Arctic Monkeys?: We all want someone to shout for
Yeah, everyone wants somebody to adore
But your heroes aren't what they seem
When you've been where we've been

Have I done something to trigger
The funny looks and the sniggers?
Are they there at all, or is it just paranoia?

Everybody's got their box
Doing what they're told
You pushed my faith near being lost
But we'll stick to the guns
Don't care if it's marketing suicidal
Won't crack or compromise
Your do-rights or individes
Will never unhinge us

And there's a couple of hundred
Think they're Christopher Columbus
But the settlers had already settled
Yeah, long before ya

Just 'cos we're having a say-so
Not lining up to be Playdoh
Oh, in five years time, will it be
"Who the fuck's Arctic Monkeys?"

'Cause everybody's got their box
Doing what they're told
You pushed my faith near being lost
But we'll stick to the guns
Don't care if it's marketing suicidal
Won't crack or compromise
Your do-rights or individes
Will never unhinge us

All the thoughts that I just said
Will linger round and multiply in their head
Not that mad to start with
I'm not angry, I'm just disappointed

It's not you it's them that are wrong
Tell 'em to take out their tongues
Tell 'em to take out their tongues
And bring on the backlash!

It's not you it's them that are wrong
Tell him to take out his tongue
Tell him to take out his tongue
It's not you it's them that's the fake
I won't mess with your escape
Is this really your escape?

Fake Tales of San Francisco: Fake Tales of San Francisco
Echo through the room
More point to a wedding disco
Without a bride or groom

There's a super cool band yeah
With their trilbies and their glasses of white wine
And all the weekend rock stars in the toilets
Practicing their lines…

Fake Tales of San Francisco
Echo through the air
And there's a few bored faces in the back
All wishing they weren't there

And as the microphone squeaks
A young girl's telephone beeps
Yeah she's dashing for the exit
Oh, she's running to the streets outside
"Oh you've saved me," she screams down the line
"The band were fucking wank
And I'm not having a nice time"…

I don't want to hear you no
(Kick me out, kick me out)
Yeah but his bird thinks it's amazing, though
So all that's left
Is the proof that love's not only blind but deaf

He talks of San Francisco, he's from Hunter's Bar
I don't quite know the distance
But I'm sure that's far
Yeah, I'm sure that's pretty far

Yeah, I'd love to tell you all my problem
You're not from New York City, you're from Rotherham
So get off the bandwagon, and put down the handbook
Art Brut
Years Active: 2003-present
Key Members: Eddie Argos
Key Albums: Bang Bang Rock & Roll (2005)
Hometown: Deptford/Bournemouth, England
Inter-band connections: Considered a part of the “Art Wave” scene that also includes Franz Ferdinand

Lyrics:
Formed a Band: Honey pie, I don't know when it started
Just stop buying your albums from the supermarkets
They only sell things that have charted
And Art Brut?
Well we've only just started

And yes, this is my singing voice
It's not irony
And it's not rock and roll
I'm just talking
To the kids …

I'm gonna write a song
As universal as Happy Birthday
That's gonna make sure
That everybody knows
That everything's gonna be ok
I'm gonna take that song
And we're gonna play it
Eight weeks in a row on Top of the Pops

Dye your hair black
Never look back

Moving to LA
There’s not much glam about the English weather
nothing left keeping us together
Sunshine on a rainy day,
Makes me wanna move away.
Think I’ve got it sorted, gonna get myself deported.

I’m considering a move to LA (he’s considering a move to LA)

Hang around with Axl Rose,
Buy myself some brand new clothes.
Everything’s gonna be just fine,
I hear the murder rate, it’s in decline
I’ll do me some relaxing, maybe grab a piece of action.
I’m considering a move to LA (he’s considering a move to LA)

When I get off that plane,
The first thing I’m going to do is strip naked to the waist
And ride my Harley Davidson up and down sunset strip.
Hmm, I might even get a tattoo.
My problems are never gonna find me,
I’m not sending one letter or even a postcard back
I’m drinking Hennessey with Morrissey,
On a beach, out of reach, somewhere very far away
I’m considering a move to LA…

**Babysambles**
**Years Active:** 2003-present
**Key Members:** Peter Doherty
**Key Albums:** *Down in Albion* (2005), *Shotter’s Nation* (2007)
**Hometown:** London
**Inter-band connections:** Doherty was former frontman of The Libertines, helped The View break into the industry

**Lyrics:**

**Albion:** *Down in Albion*
They’re black and blue
But we don’t talk about that
Are you from ‘round here?
How do you do?
I’d like to talk about that
Talk over
Gin in teacups
And leaves on the lawn
Violence at bus stops
And the pale thin girl with eyes forlorn

Gin in teacups
And leaves on the lawn
Violence in dole queues
And the pale thin girl behind the checkout

If you’re looking for a cheap sort
Set in false anticipation
I’ll be waiting in the photo booth
At the underground station
So come away, won’t you come away
We can go to
Deptford, Catford, Walford, Digbeth, Mansfield
Anywhere in Albion

Yellowing classics
And cannons at dawn
Coffee wallahs and pith helmets
And an English sun

New bought classics
And cannons at dawn
Coffee wallahs and pith helmets
And an English song

But if you’re looking for a cheap sort
Glint with perspiration
There’s a four-mile queue
Outside the disused power station
Ah come away, say you'll come away
We're going to...
Semford, Woville, Newcastle
Anywhere oh

If you're looking for a cheap tart
Glint with perspiration
There’s a five-mile queue
Outside the disused power station

Now come away, won't you come away
We're going to...

Wrexham, Oldham,... Bristol
Anywhere in Albion

Deft Left Hand You seem the type to follow the line
Went from cheery vagabondage to cold blooded luxury in four years
No lick spittle or pickthack from sycophant claw back flunky
Oh, I want to lay by your side
Oh, i will lay down and die if I can’t lay by your side

Weaker vessel or better half?
That Woman’s tears could be the death of me...oh dear
You know when she’s had a few she’ll be onto you there’s no letting up
But, I want to lay by your side
Oh, I will lay down and die if I can’t lay by your side

It mayhap that these these are they, the golden years
So don’t despair don’t dismay dry your tears
Everything is for the best in the best of all possible worlds

I had a blast off with the cast of a play on the radio
They were more liberal times
Destined to drone in monotone on your radio
It’s a little dream of mine

Oh but comments were less than complimentary
And the deft left hand it followed the right

I think about my happiest times and one of them
was sat in bed watching a documentary on murderers
A bearcat, a mimosa and a view of arcady…

**Bloc Party**

**Years Active:** 2003-present

**Key Members:** Kele Okereke

**Key Albums:** *A Weekend in the City* (2007), *Intimacy* (2008)

**Hometown:** London

**Inter-band connections:** Discovered after giving a demo to Franz Ferdinand’s Alex Kapranos, who passed it on to record executives

**Lyrics:**

*Ion Square:* I remember how it began
So many great days in a row
Barefoot on Bishopsgate
Trying to find Blake's grave
If we could stay like this in a silver foil
Trapped in amber for a life
Permanent midnight…
Who said unbroken happiness
Is a bore, is a bore…
And I reach out a hand over your side of the bed
Pull that blanket over your shoulders exposed to the night
And the hunger of those early years will never return
But I don't mind, I don't mind.
Cause I love my mind when I'm fucking you
Slowed down to a crawl
Years of crime and the bread line
Have not at all dimmed your shine
So let's stay in, let the sofa be our car
Let's stay in, let the TV be our stars
I found my dancing shoes but they don't fit
All the bright lights do is bore me

Cavaliers and Roundheads: When they get here
You become someone else
Cruel and distant
A cavalier to my roundhead
And as you make
Your pretty speech
I seethe
Like Vesuvius

Waiting for the 7:18: Waiting for the seven eighteen
January is endless
Weary-eyed and forlorn
The Northern Line is the loudest

Sitting in silence in bars after work
I've got nothing to add or contest
Can still kick a ball a hundred yards
We cling to bottles and memories of the past…

Let's drive to Brighton on the weekend

Song for Clay: I am trying to be heroic
In an age of modernity
I am trying to be heroic
As all around me history sinks
So I enjoy and I devour
Flesh and wine and luxury
But in my heart I am lukewarm
Nothing ever really touches me…
Oh, how our parents suffered for nothing
Live the dream like the 80's never happened
People are afraid to merge on the freeway
Disappear here…
East London is a vampire, it sucks the joy right out of me
How we long for corruption in these golden years.
Dirty Pretty Things
Years Active: 2005-2008
Key Members: Carl Barat
Key Albums: Waterloo to Anywhere (2006), Romance at Short Notice (2008)
Hometown: London
Inter-band connections: Carl Barat and drummer Gary Powell are former members of The Libertines. The band also opened for Muse at Wembley

Lyrics:
Tired of England: How can they be tired of England?
They'll never know the England that we know
Never know where the ones with the dreams go, no
Never notice the skies with their eyes down low

We'll never be tired of England
United in rain in the cities
To channel the pain and the pity's woe
To carry them back to the place below

How can they be tired of London?
The sense in the air on a warm day
Generation of hope that sees better days
But moving along in the same old ways

We'll never be tired of London
From Clerkenwell into the city
The state of the roofs is a pity though
Generations all cramped with their kids in tow

While the Queen of England sits on her throne
Of bingo cards and chicken bones

So sing your song of Banbury Cross
Don't breathe a word about your loss

B.U.R.M.A.: Do you remember like I remember?
Lost pursuits of excellence
The glory of the crowd
Lives of imperialists
Leave me with aching wrists
So no wonder you frown when you're two world wars down

The Gentry Cove: Don't come back till the sun is gone
Don't come back till the war is won
We all set out with our hearts in hand
A cold wind covered up a line in the sand
All so young
Nothing to lose
Pieces of silver and a dead man's shoes
...
We all sought shelter from the breaking news
Oh, did I ever show you
All the great memorials, all the factory floors?
Franz Ferdinand

Years Active: 2002-present
Key Members: Alex Kapranos
Hometown: Glasgow

Inter-band connections: Helped **Bloc Party** break into the industry, toured with **Kaiser Chiefs**

Lyrics:

**Ulysses:**
C’mon let’s get high…
Well I found a new way
I found a new way
Come on, don't amuse me
I don't need your sympathy
La, la-la-la-la Ulysses
I've found a new way…
Am I Ulysses? Am I Ulysses?
No, but you are now boy …
Oh, oh then suddenly you know
You're never going home

**Walk Away:** Why don’t you walk away?
No buildings will fall down
No quake will split the ground
The sun won’t swallow the sky
Statues will not cry.
Why don’t you walk away?...

And as you walk away, and as you walk away
My headstone crumbles down…
The Kremlin’s falling
Radio 4 is static as you walk away…

The stab of stilettos on a silent night
Stalin smiles and Hitler laughs.
Churchill claps Mao Tse Tung on the back.

**Katherine Kiss Me:** Katherine kiss me,
Flick your cigarette then kiss me,
Flick your eyes at mine so briefly.
Your leather jacket lies in sticky pools of cider blackberry…

Katherine kiss me,
In the alleyway by jakies
Jacking in the sodium light.
Yes, I love you, I mean I— I mean I need to love.
And though your open eyes stare bored upon the overflowing pipes above me,
Tonight I don’t mind…

Jamie T

Years Active: 2005-present
Key Albums: *Panic Prevention* (2007)
Hometown: Wimbledon
**Inter-band connections:** N/A

**Lyrics:**

*If You Got the Money:* You were always meant to walk out that job
You keep stopping
Should tell your girl more often
That loving is all about doors unlocking
Now you're certain 'nuff near a man free
With a buddy holly hiccup on a karaoke
Tweedle on the needle,
man you adjust the thread
Great granddaddy fought in Gallipoli
The only of his friends not shot down dead

Lovers all talk in the spits and tongues
Fight in the playground
Bully each other
Double dare kids that pollute their lungs
Threaten with the rep of their big boy brother
Some of us stay, want to run away
Momma still wants you home for supper
Work all day, little to no pay
Dance up-town right down to the gutter

*Sheila:* Sheila goes out with her mate Stella,
it gets poured all over her fella,
'cos she says, man he ain’t no better
than the next man kicking up fuss
drunk, she stumbles down by a river
screams calling ‘London!’
none of us heard her coming,
I guess the carpet weren't rolled out

*Oh when my love, my darling,*
*You've left me here alone,*
*I'll walk the streets of London*
*Which once seemed all our own.*
*The vast suburban churches*
*Together we have found:*
*The ones which smelt of gaslight*
*The ones in incense drown'd*

Her lingo went from the Cockney to the Gringo
any time she sing a song, the other girls sing along…

Heavens what a noise! Cold-blooded murder of the English tongue
Good heavens you boys, blue-blooded murder of the English tongue

(italicized lyrics are quotations from Betjeman’s ‘The Cockney Amorist,’ found in Appendix B)

**Kaiser Chiefs**

**Years Active:** 1996–present

**Key Albums:** *Employment* (2005), *Off With Their Heads* (2009)

**Hometown:** Leeds

**Inter-band connections:** Covered Klaxons track *Golden Skans*, toured with Franz Ferdinand
Lyrics:
I Predict a Riot: Watching the people get lairy
Is not very pretty I tell thee
Walking through town is quite scary
And not very sensible either

A friend of a friend he got beaten
He looked the wrong way at a policeman
Would never have happened to Smeaton
An old Leodensian

I predict a riot, I predict a riot

I tried to get to my taxi
A man in a tracksuit attacked me
He said that he saw it before me
Wants to get things a bit gory

Girls scrabble around with no clothes on
To borrow a pound for a condom
If it wasn't for chip fat, they'd be frozen
They're not very sensible

Klaxons
Years Active: 2005-present
Key Albums: Myths of the Near Future (2007)
Hometown: London
Inter-band connections: Singer Jamie Reynolds and Libertines’ Carl Barat intermittently form the live-only band The Chavs

Gravity’s Rainbow: Come on with me through ruined liplock
Across Tangian deserts we'll flock
Madcap Medusa flank my foghorn
We'll change four seasons with our first-born.

All ships of sense on hyper ocean
All kinds of chaos still in motion
My culture vulture such a dab hand
I'll steal you from the year 4000

Come with me, come with me
We'll travel to infinity
Come with me, come with me
We'll travel to infinity
I'll always be there
Uh-oh my future love
I'll always be there
For you, my future love

Your tears leave trails of tick fall blur room
Autonoma the room is bloom groom
Those crippled lines that I can't get to
Could steer through time but I won't let you
4 Horsemen of 2012: There’s a halfman, half horse, who still runs through my thoughts as he rides on a flame in the sky. He comes through the centuries with me on his engines. The kids and the cats watch him fly. Please catch that half horse as he murders my thoughts with the fragments of flames anyway. Won’t you please catch that horse as he murders my thoughts. I’m left with the fragments and flames.

The Libertines

Years Active: 1997-2004
Key Members: Carl Barat, Peter Doherty
Key Albums: *Up the Bracket* (2002)
Hometown: London

Inter-band connections: Barat went on to found Dirty Pretty Things, Doherty went on to found Babyshambles, Barat is an occasional member of “supergroup” The Chavs with Klaxons’ Jamie Reynolds. Razorlight’s Johnny Borrell was part of the band before their rise to fame.

Lyrics:

**Horrorshow:** I've been following
Your minds instructions
Oh how just to slowly, sharply screw myself to death

Ah yes, there is a screw
It's pointed at my head

Then look a dream peddler
And a stick of light through my bones
"Don't get on the wrong one"
"Oi you and you what's your game"

Laying me down to waste laying me down
Pin me up or put me down
Uh uh uh uh oh
Now let it all go

It's a horror show, you should come on round
Horror show, the horse is brown
Uh uh oh left something in Moscow

She said "I'll show you a picture
A picture of tomorrow
There's nothing changing
It's all sorrow."
Oh, no please don’t show me

I'm a swine, you don't wanna know me

**The Good Old Days:** If Queen Boadicea is long dead and gone
Still then the spirit
In her children's children's children
It lives on
If you've lost your faith in love and music  
Oh the end won't be long  
Because if it's gone for you then I too may lose it  
And that would be wrong

I've tried so hard to keep myself from falling  
Back into my bad old ways  
And it chars my heart to always hear you calling  
Calling for the good old days  
Because there were no good old days  
These are the good old days

It's not about, tenements and needles  
And all the evils in their eyes  
And the backs of their minds  
Daisy chains and school yard games  
And a list of things we said we'd do tomorrow  
A list of things we said we'd do tomorrow

The Arcadian dream has all fallen through  
But the Albion sails on course  
So lets man the decks and hoist the rigging  
Because the Pigman’s found the source  
And there’s twelve rude boys on the oars

**What a Waster:** When she wakes up in the morning  
She writes down all her dreams  
Reads like the Book of Revelation  
Or the Beano or the unabridged Ulysses

Oh I really wanna know  
So tell me, where does all the money go  
where does all the money go?  
Straight, straight up her nose…

What a divvy, what a fucking div  
Talking like a moron, walking like a spiv  
I was laying in bed paying my rent  
Knocking on the door for something

That she lent her brother  
Meanwhile from under the covers she says  
Save me from tomorrow now, save me from tomorrow now,  
Oh no, oh no not me

**Muse**  
**Years Active:** 1994-present  
**Key Members:** Matthew Bellamy  
**Key Albums:** *Black Holes and Revelations* (2006), *The Resistance* (2009)  
**Hometown:** Teignmouth, Devon  
**Inter-band connections:** Selected *Dirty Pretty Things* and *Klaxons* as opening acts for their  
2007 Wembley gigs  
**Lyrics:**
**Uprising:** The paranoia is in bloom, the PR
The transmissions will resume
They'll try to push drugs
Keep us all dumbed down and hope that
We will never see the truth around

Another promise, another scene, another
A package not to keep us trapped in greed
With all the green belts wrapped around our minds
And endless red tape to keep the truth confined

**Map of Your Head:** I'm sick of feeding my soul
to people who'll never know
just how purposeless and empty they've grown.
Because their language confuses
like computers refuse
to understand how I'm feeling today.

**MK Ultra:** How much deception can you take?
How many lies will you create?
How much longer until you break?
Your mind's about to fall

And they are breaking through,
They are breaking through,
Now we're falling,
We are losing control

Invisible to all,
The mind becomes a wall.
All of history deleted with one stroke

---

**Patrick Wolf**

**Years Active:** 2002-present

**Key Albums:** *Wind in the Wires* (2005), *The Bachelor* (2009)

**Hometown:** South London

**Inter-band connections:** Featured with *The View* in Burberry’s 2007 ad campaign

**Lyrics:**

*The Libertine:* The motorway won't take a horse
The wanderer has found a course to follow
The traveler unpacked his bags for the last time
The troubadour cut off his hand and now he wants mine…
The libertine is locked in jail
The pirate sunk and broke his sail…

And in this drought of truth and invention
Whoever shouts the loudest gets the most attention
So we pass the mic and they've got nothing to say except:
"Bow down, bow down, bow down to your god"

**Hard Times:** As they
Dig your ditches
Count my stitches
Generation justice wishes for
World at war
Final score
Media come and abhor us

As these are hard times
We'll work harder, harder
Through these hard times
I'll work harder, harder

Divided nation,
In sedation
Overload of information, that
We have grown up to ignore
Mediocrity applauded

In these hard times
We'll work harder, harder
Through these hard times
I'll work harder, harder
for resolution
Show me some revolution
This battle will be won!

Forced to count the hours
Since two towers
Fell to fiction
Those higher powers
Putting gods to war
Who keeps score?
Ignorance is still adored

**Peter Doherty**
**Years Active:** 1997-present
**Key Albums:** *Grace/Wastelands* (2009)
**Hometown:** London

**Inter-band connections:** Former member of *The Libertines* and current frontman of *Babyshambles*, supporter of *The View*

Lyrics:

Arcady: In Arcady, your life trips along
It's pure and simple as the shepherd's song
Seraphic pipes along the way in Arcady
In Arcady
Never saw I such a scene
Such maids upon such a molten green
They employ their holiday with dance and game
And things I may never name
In Arcady

You said he was your teacher
Taught you so true and so wise
But now you know more than your teacher
I see nothing but cool self-regard in your eyes
In Arcady
So you see how twisted it becomes
See how quickly twisted it becomes
When the catgut binds my ankles to your bedstead
That ain't love, no that ain't love

_Last of the English Roses:_ My you did look dapper in your mother's
Old green scarf
With your famous Auntie Arthur's trousers on
You were slapped by that slapper
And how we all laughed
But she laughed the loudest
She's the last of the English roses

(I wish to be so whirl awake again)
She knows her Rodneys from her Stanleys
And her Kappas from her Reeboks
And her tit from her tat
And her Winstons from her Enochs
It's fine and take what I
Coming out, coming alive

_1939 Returning:_ Captured clandestine,
Crawled into the light,
Knew he was in for a shoe-in,
Just wasn't to be his night.

Dragged out of the frozen Rhine,
For the Motherland,
and the Third Reich,
always good to be shoe in,
when it's not to be your night,
your night.

Tread carefully,
so carefully,
on the drifting ice
behind enemy lines,
In 1939,
for Germany,
he sacrificed his life,
catch behind enemy lines,
in 1939.

Kids knee deep in rubble,
London urchins grey with dust,
Back of four west in evacuation,
the farmers wives greeting pleasant lies,
far from the doodlebugs.

Nana doll still remembers,
leaving town in worn-out shoes,
Now she's back out west,
in sheltered accommodation,
Homes for the old,
where pills aren't the only blues.
Tread carefully,
so carefully,
on the drifting ice
staring blankly into the TV guide,
In 2009,
oh how it hurts me,
I've only seen her twice
since she went west for the second time
since 1939.

**Salome:** In the cold, coldest of nights
The fire I light, to warm my bones
I've had enough, of the dreadful cold
And from the flames, appears Salome

I stand before her amazed
As she dances and demands
The head of John the Baptist on a plate

In the morning, shaken and disturbed
From under soft white fur
I see the dust in the morning bright sets the room alive
And by the telly appears Salome

I stand before her amazed
As she dances and demands
The head of Isadora Duncan on a plate
Oh, It's Salome

I stand before her amazed
As she dances and demands
The head of any bastard on a plate

**The Rakes**

**Years Active:** 2004-2009


**Hometown:** London

**Inter-band connections:** Toured with *Franz Ferdinand* and *Klaxons*

**Lyrics:**

*Work, Work, Work (Pub Club Sleep):* I've got the same shirt on for two days in a row
With a soya sauce stain so everyone knows
Can shower and scrub
Still smell like the smoking bit in a Wetherspoons pub

It's all these words, ideas and different arguments
Someone's always talking when I try to make some sense
From all this stress that is constantly going on
I just drift along with no focus or meaning
Lean back, stare up at the ceiling
I just drift along with no focus or meaning

Why do these tourists walk so slow?
Especially now I've got somewhere to go?
And a posh sounding girl, going on and on
About her dog and Mr. Morgan
It sounds so funny when I hear you calling!
Mum be like 'boy what you doing?'
Please shut up and try and sound confident
In a crap job when your minicourse is done

Strasbourg: I'll meet you in West Germany
October 1983
I know that freedom was a lie
And your husband was a spy
You say that words are impotent
But they can help us pay the rent
I knew for sure there was nothing left
Except the vodka on your breath
We meet in Strasbourg
…
The courage that your father plucked
From inside a cattle truck
Will help us fix the exit polls
Our children must have rock'n'roll
Surveillance cameras captured dawn
Breaking on the autobahn
I knew for sure our chance was blown
When rifles made us feel at home

Ideas can change the government
But they never listen to our arguments
On TV our friends smashed cement
And pulled down the bastards monuments
I went outside for a cigarette
I could see things I had tried to forget
The news showed us who we had left
And I could smell the vodka on your breath

The World Was a Mess But His Hair Was Perfect: And you go on and on on on
Talking shite through the night
Just trying to stop our arguments falling to pieces
You slag off America in the pub
Saying the war was shite
Then in the club
Drink some Buds and smoke some Marlboro Lights...

The world was a mess but his hair was perfect

Shackleton: We’re all pawns in someone else’s business
We’re all pawns, baby…

Dear God! I will drink and I will smoke
Like no man before me has or ever will
Every penny I have slaved for
Gladly blown in one glorious, glorious night
Yeah, I’m gonna ask that fireman for a light
I’m gonna run nude in Spain for the bulls
Bounce the earth like a basketball for the animals
Like Shackleton before me.
**Razorlight**

*Years Active:* 2002-present  
*Key Albums:* *Razorlight* (2006)  
*Hometown:* London  
*Inter-band connections:* Lead singer Johnny Borrell was part of the initial lineup of *The Libertines*, though he split from the band before they rose to fame.

Lyrics:

**America:**  
What a drag it is  
The shape I’m in.  
Well I go out somewhere  
Then I come home again.  

I light a cigarette  
‘Cause I can’t get no sleep.  
Nothing on the TV nothing on the radio  
That means that much to me.  

All my life  
Watching America.  
All my life  
There’s panic in America…

**The View**

*Years Active:* 2005-present  
*Key Albums:* *Hats off to the Buskers* (2007)  
*Hometown:* Dundee, Scotland  
*Inter-band connections:* Favorite of *Pete Doherty*, part of Burberry’s 2007 ad campaign with *Patrick Wolf*

Lyrics:

**Posh Boys:**  
You play loud,  
But you have nothing to say,  
Posh boys can't play.  

You have your eyes on our prize,  
Lots of really silly little daft little rock n roll lies,  
Flash before your eyes.  

You have nothing to say,  
(skin up again)  
No one is coming to your show,  
(hair cut again)  
Someone has pipped you to the post,  
(Dee club again)  

You can try to break us,  
But you'll only make us,  
Here's some things that you told yourself.  
I'll have a Brit award standing very pretty with a shine,  
On your bedroom shelf
Appendix B: Poems

**Siegfried Sassoon, “Suicide in the Trenches” (1918)**
I knew a simple soldier boy
Who grinned at life in empty joy,
Slept soundly through the lonesome dark,
And whistled early with the lark.

In winter trenches, cowed and glum,
With crumps and lice and lack of rum,
He put a bullet through his brain.
No one spoke of him again.

You smug-faced crowds with kindling eye
Who cheer when soldier lads march by,
Sneak home and pray you'll never know
The hell where youth and laughter go.

**John Betjeman, “The Cockney Amorist” (1958)**
Oh when my love, my darling,
You've left me here alone,
I'll walk the streets of London
Which once seemed all our own.
The vast suburban churches
Together we have found:
The ones which smelt of gaslight
The ones in incense drown'd;
I'll use them now for praying in
And not for looking round.
No more the Hackney Empire
Shall find us in its stalls
When on the limelit crooner
The thankful curtain falls
And soft electric lamplight
Reveals the gilded walls.

I will not go to Finsbury Park
The putting course to see
Nor cross the crowded High Road
To Williamsons’ to tea,
For these and all the other things
Were part of you and me.
I love you, oh my darling,
And what I can’t make out
Is why since you have left me
I'm somehow still about.
What is it?
It’s bow’s orange sunset spring,
That quickstep groove down the Grove Road,
It’s the blue smoke lamb of a cracked slab lab of bohemia,
The richest man alive doesn’t have a penny,
And I’m looking to cash in on his wisdom,
Looking out for the whites in his eyes and the ice in his next drink,
And his next drink,
And his next drink,
And his next drink,
I watch the world as the top of tower blocks become hidden by the skyline,
So stitch that,
That slit in the sky like a knife gash, and a fallen sixties leather jacket,
The tenements so unlovely and kitsch,
And the people rolling on in our colours and classes, classes and colours,
The beats of New London,
Twisted by the bitter rhythm of the wrong education,
In the big schools,
On the bigger grey gothic, pink plastic flower estates,
Twizzling our biros and cashing our giros,
And it’s tuppence for your philosophy,
And tuppence for your dreams,
Fair ye unwell on the welfare,
And the state is a fair man-made maid,
It understands the sweet sickly pleasure of melancholy,
The lick die happiness of the horrors,
Delights in the mystery of it’s own misery,
A modern love,
So here we are,
The fucked generation,
At the fag-end of the 20th century A.D.,
Young and still breathing,
But now it’s a trial,
Cause we tried it all and we’re tired by it all,
Too much, too often, too many times,
And it’s too late,
But we’re not surrendering though,
Fuck no we’re not,
We’re on the offensive,
On all fours in the puddles of No Man’s Land,
And in that manner we move to the rhythms of ice cream vans playing ‘oranges and lemons’,
Whilst the police sirens spinning the weak in their mythical wails,
Calling this to our selves,
Opium for the elite,
Yeah, and there’s his illegitimate brother,
Unexpectedly smacking the kids of Stepney, at a cost,
So let’s step out now, you and I,
Let’s go now and stay a while,
Underneath the sun,
Council street lamps left on in the middle of the day,
tussling for gravity,
Branding skin,
And it will tussle and brand,
Tussle and brand,
Till it explodes.