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End of an industry?

Bands dropped, gigs cancelled and records unsold. Is it really that bad or, asks Daniel Grabham, is it a little premature to sign the death certificate?

In June 1998 the NME produced one of its most significant editions of recent times. It brought into question the 'crisis' of the industry it supported, indeed, the industry that supported it. The cover of the June 13th edition proclaimed "The Great Rock 'n' Roll Dwindle", and showed a guitar sporting a Union Jack paint job in flames. The article itself was a multi-page denunciation of the entire record industry in 1998. According to many, this was not far off the mark. But did the NME exaggerate the situation? Whilst they made the argument last for several pages, The Guardian harked back to where it all was before it all went wrong in its article 'Pop goes the music scene's future' of June 10th 1998, the day that particular edition NME went on sale. *"Three years ago it seemed that British pop music was back to its best. Oasis and Blur were fighting it out for the number one spot, Pulp and Suede were in the wings, and the Britpop sound was set to conquer America."* But now if you believed the music press, Britpop had died by 1996 and since, with no real direction just exactly where was the industry heading? Beside this hypothetical argument there are the bare facts of the more recent part of the pot-Britpop era- gigs being cancelled, an abnormally high level of bands being dropped and most importantly dwindling album sales. Since Oasis first belted out the soundtrack to a generation in 1994, labels took it upon themselves to find a band that could repeat the discovery that Creation's Alan McGee had made. What the industry failed to contemplate is whether the public actually wanted the same diet served up again.

After all, so many of Britpop's heroes had faded away and although survivors like Shed Seven and Gene continued to plod along there was nothing new. Indeed, during 1995-6 no one really broke ranks. Indeed the only real Oasis II that anyone found was Embrace who emerged nearly three years after they did. They released a series of acclaimed EP's that promised greatness, but when the album materialised in early 1998 the public were disappointed, especially after the amount of publicity and acclaim the music press had afforded them. The British Labour Politician Aneurin Bevan once said: "if you stay in the middle of the road, you get run down." So is this what has happened? Has the industry now become a victim of the public's thirst for something new, or at least, something that their generation has not seen before? Surely this is a phenomenon which labels must surely have created themselves

So what has been going on since Britpop? Some bands have sold records by the bucket load. Oasis released their massive-selling second effort 'What's the Story (Morning Glory).' (The band have been credited by the BFI with having a "dramatic effect" on album sales figures- their third Be Here Now sold 700,000 copies from

August 21-23 last year.) Also Pulp, the new Richey Edwards-less Manic Street Preachers and the Verve grew from just being Indie bands into selling hundreds of thousands of units. However, whilst the album situation seemed to have improved, in the single market the situation was far worse. Since September 1994 when Whigfield's "Saturday Night" flew straight in at the top spot, the first debut single to do so, chart history has been conflicted again and again.

Since that point more singles have entered the chart at number one than in the whole of chart history since 1952. The Top 40 announced on 25th October 1998 made the biggest news yet. For the first time ever the top five singles had all been new entries. The next day 'The Times' devoted a third of a page to Jane Hughes' article "Bargain stars leap to top of the pops". It gave two causes of the previous night's listing, firstly (and reasonably) the 'big names' of the acts involved (like George Michael and Cher) and secondly, and more importantly, the discount prices at which these records were selling. Jane Hughes refers to this 'discounting' as '...the latest marketing tactic.' In reality it is nothing new- it is mostly this which is to blame for the devaluation of the Top 40 chart. The Oasis/Blur competition of 1994 highlighted this. Blur won primarily because they had two CD's for sale compared to Oasis' one, and both were cheaper. Why? Blur's record company (Food, part of EMI) gave one free single away to stores with each one bought, thus allowing the discount, but Oasis' Independent label, Creation, only gave away one free single with every ten. This is how 'discounting' operates. Generally, the discounts only apply in the first week. This all serves to promote sales in the first week to gain as high a chart placing as possible. This 'first week syndrome' is often to the cost of subsequent weeks, some new entries not even staying in the Top 40 the next week. In 1997 the chart had the two furthest falling number one singles ever in Blur's "Beetlebum" and Michael Jackson's "Blood on the Dance Floor", which flopped down to numbers seven and eight respectively. Radio One's Mark Goodier, speaking in Jane Hughes' article says that there is "an element of truth" in the devaluation of the chart. He cites "...less intensive marketing and discounts phased out" as the cure. I would argue that another factor is the very early airplay given on high profile networks such as MTV and Radio One. For example, Radio One played The Beautiful South's new single "Perfect 10" at the beginning of July 1998. It was released on September 21st. The solution could be a more American style approach, playing singles few times before they chart.

Is it possible to see if singles are real hits? The value of a number one single has certainly been devalued. However some singles are always exceptions to any rules. Oasis' comeback single "Do you Know What I Mean" from 'Be Here Now' sold 250,000 copies in three days in August 1997 at the full price. Tony Brown, of the industry bible Music Week, states that even given all this, sales of singles were at an all-time high in 1997 and even though 'Candle in the Wind' took a lot of that, sales are only slightly down in 1998.

Another recent crisis point for the industry was in the aftermath of Radio One's 1997 "Hyping the Hits" documentary. This highlighted 'dirty tactics' employed by labels promoting the 'first week syndrome'. The programme found it was common practice for some companies to send out 'buying teams' to purchase their **OWN** records. Elsewhere, RCA records gave every copy of former Take Thatter Mark Owen's second single "Clementine" away to shops absolutely free. The industry had

gone mad. By mid to late 1997 the rot became serious, eating into the real product of the industry: albums, which singles are effectively adverts for. The NME illustrated this. In April 1998 Pulp's 'This Is Hardcore' got to number one with 50,000 copies sold. Catatonia's International Velvet succeeded Pulp at number one selling only 32,000. Garbage, number one the week after that only sold 31,500 copies. The very nature of three albums going in at number one in successive weeks with extremely poor sales (for relatively large acts) justifies the closer inspection that the NME gave and the rest of the industry at that time. There were, of course, exceptions. The Verve's 'Urban Hymns' was a surprise major success as was the Prodigy's rock-dance crossover 'Fat of the Land' in the summer of 1997.

However the sales of records were not the only problem that industry scrutinisers focused upon. Concerts also appeared to be taking a beating. Mass-appeal band Lighthouse Family cancelled a concert at Finsbury Park in London after only 2,000 tickets (from 25,000 capacity) were sold. Universe'98 at Knebworth was also shelved 9,000 tickets from 40,000 were sold. Both cited the World Cup as a factor.

Two weeks after the NME "Rock 'n' Roll Dwindle" piece the Phoenix Festival was cancelled, giving the paper the opportunity to revive 'the industry is dead' angle, citing the demise of the festival as "...the latest sign of recession biting the music industry...." Less than 15,000 of the 45,000 tickets had been sold.

Phoenix organiser Vince Power of the Mean Fiddler Organisation said in NME, that it was "...a strange situation in the UK at the moment" He also stated in the Guardian article that "...ego keeps the music business going. ...Perhaps the truth is that the acts that are around just aren't big enough."

Glastonbury booker Martin Elbourne added: "...all European festivals are struggling this year because there are no international acts touring, there's no records out there and not enough quality bands to go round." The Guardian's article also points out that Wembley Stadium is staging two shows this year when normally it would have "more than eight." However the NME also highlights the point of view of Ian Huffam, tour agent for Blur, and the Beautiful South amongst others who says that "...live music is stronger in the UK now than it has been for 15 to 20 years."

Creation boss Alan McGee, a member of the Government's Creative Industries Task Force also throws another spanner in the works. He suggests that record companies will soon be obsolete and that bands will sell their music directly to the punters via the Internet. Speaking in the Guardian's article he said: "Nobody's selling any records. If anybody's telling you different, they are liars. There is a worldwide recession in the music industry. They might be all smiley-smiley at the Brits, but it's an industry in absolute crisis." McGee also suggest that this change could be in as little as five to ten years' time and that it will be "sexier" for bands to have their music downloaded in this way: "There's no rebellion in music any more. But if you are 15 years old and you buy a laptop, your mum doesn't even know how to turn it on, man. That's rock 'n' roll...That's where the generation gap is now."

The band Rialto recently re-released a single to fans on the Internet, charging them £1.99 for the pleasure. But is it a pleasure? Collectors would have nothing to collect. Part of the subconscious joy of buying a record is surely to have it in your hand, to

own it and listen to it whenever you want and also to be able to read and feel the sleeve notes. This must be preferable to looking at a webpage on your computer, which seems, contrary to Alan McGee's comments, is distinctly unsexy.

In the same issue the NME reported the cancellation of Phoenix a letter to the 'Angst' page delivered a damning verdict to the paper itself: "NME is not only one of the causes of the 'recession' you diagnose but it is also one of the symptoms." Another letter, the week after claims that time will resolve the problems: "The fact is that the music industry has always seen a boom/bust swing every few years." NME writer James Oldham's reply to this is that "...there is no obvious next generation of bands to succeed Blur Oasis and Pulp." But hang on, surely that cannot be right? For one thing all three of those bands are still around and they, like many others, have matured into world-class acts. The Verve and the Manic Street Preachers, for example are others that have matured into great (and more essentially, commercial) acts. Just because the three bands the NME cites came to fruition at (very) roughly the same time under the banner of Britpop does not mean we have to have a complete 'new wave' of a whole series of acts **all at the same time**.

Talking in the Guardian article The NME's editor, Steve Sutherland, justifies the reasons for the article: "We always get a bit anxious around April when labels start to drop bands, but this year it just seemed to continue. And then we saw some sales figures which are frankly quite frightening."

This year, amongst others, Dannii Minogue was dropped by WEA and Kenickie have split after poor sales of their second album 'Get In' and subsequently have blamed record company politics amid rumours that they were about to be dropped. [Click here](#) for an article on the demise of Kenickie.

Is this all too much of an over reaction? Even Steve Sutherland hopes he will still have something to write a paper for: "We're going to see a really healthy industry underground. ...Over the next few years, this underground music will coalesce into something that the general public can relate to again." I hope and think he is right. I also think that the lack of new noticeably Indie bands is because what was once the Indie and independent free-minded new music now has been incorporated more into what is regarded as popular music. The charts now consist of more pop tunes; such is the resurgence of the 'genre'. Acts such as Fatboy Slim would have, a few years ago, would not have been regarded as pop music as it is now. Another theory could dictate that, quite simply, given the present climate record companies are reluctant to invest. This has heralded the re-emergence of pop music- an undemanding diet that has a wide (and safe) appeal. So is there really enough talent coming through? On one hand we have the judge of one of music's most prestigious prizes saying there is and on the other hand the promoter of Glastonbury saying there is simply not enough. From some quarters at least, all is not lost. Some bands have made a step into the 'unknown' this year. Virgin records signed [Gomez](#), winners of the 1998 Mercury Music Prize after they sent them a demo tape. The band, who recorded most of the album 'Bring It On' in a garage, are one of the only successful bands doing something different. Even the Verve, Pulp (the only band to have been nominated three times) and [Robbie Williams](#) did not in the end triumph over serious innovation- the [Spice Girls](#), Oasis and All Saints were not even nominated. Instead,

the main competitors were two other innovating groups: Cornershop and Asian Dub Foundation. At the announcement of the shortlist the chairman of the judges, Simon Frith, said: "These albums of the year reveal a new landscape - multi-musical, multi-cultural, ever fascinating and exciting. Take no notice of the doom-sayers. British music is alive and well." He's probably right. After all, even the Manic Street Preachers are pop stars now.