

THE CONVERSATION

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Jarvis Cocker in the film clip for Common People. Screenshot from Youtube

My favourite album: Pulp's Different Class

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The album is an artistic statement, a swag of songs greater than the sum of its parts. In this series, our authors nominate their favourites.

For many, the explosion of Britpop on the global music scene in the 1990s was a bright counterargument to the grunge sound emerging from the US at the time. It was the musical contribution to the Cool Britannia revitalisation of British creativity, later co-opted for jingoistic purposes by New Labour.

The 2003 documentary Live Forever: The Rise and Fall of Britpop is rather preoccupied with the famous feud between Britpop powerhouses Blur and Oasis. The film characterises this as something of a class war between middle-class Blur and working-class Oasis. But no band better captured the real tensions between class and youth in the time of Cool Britannia than Pulp and its 1995 album *Different Class*.

My first taste of the album was what is now recognised as Pulp's greatest single, Common People. It has a catchy pop hook, no doubt, but I was drawn in by Jarvis Cocker's sardonic storytelling. I wanted more and as soon as I had enough pocket money saved, Different Class became the second album I ever bought. It remains my most listened to.

Regularly listed among the greatest albums of all time it combines clever pop musical styling with honest lyrics about fumbblings, infidelities, and music festivals (such as their controversial single, Sorted for E's and Whizz). Above all, it's an album full of stories from everyday people living their everyday lives.

Pulp was first conceived by a teenage Cocker and his friend, Peter Dalton, in 1978, with other members joining over the years. In his introduction to Mother, Brother, Lover, a published collection of his lyrics, Cocker describes his blueprint for songwriting as "an attempt to marry 'inappropriate' subject matter to fairly conventional 'pop' song structures."

This blueprint is undoubtedly the formula for success in Different Class. Punters could see themselves in lyrics that evoked the hazy smoke lingering around the pool table at the pub (Common People), or the exhausted collapse at a café table after a night out (Bar Italia). These weren't things you were supposed to sing about, but Pulp did.

Pulp - Common People



Pulp still trod some of the well-worn territory of pop music - love and sex - but the romantic soft focus was removed from the lens. Owen Hatherley, author of Uncommon: An Essay on Pulp, observes with a shudder that Pulp write songs about sex that focus on "embarrassment, mess, and clothes".

There is still room on Different Class for the astonishment of unexpectedly falling in love in a song like Something Changed. In F.E.E.L.I.N.G.C.A.L.L.E.D.L.O.V.E. they remind us that every day love “isn’t chocolate boxes and roses – it’s dirtier than that, like some small animal that only comes out at night.” The band explores the awkwardness of first sexual encounters in Underwear and the torture of unrequited love in Disco 2000.

The most prominent theme of Different Class is, of course, class itself. It’s the kind of gritty subject matter usually left to earnest rockers like Billy Bragg and Bruce Springsteen rather than bands breaking on to Top of the Pops. But Pulp got fans singing and dancing to searing commentaries on class and privilege. The album opens explosively with Mis-shapes, a call to arms for working class youth to reclaim a society after the years of Thatcherism.

Raised on a diet of broken biscuits, oh we don't look the same as you, we don't do the things you do, but we live round here too ... Brothers, sisters, can't you see? The future's owned by you and me.

The class warfare finds a more intimate outlet in Pencil Skirt and I Spy as the lyrics explore the transgressive potential of sexual relationships between the classes. Both songs are tales of “a bit of rough” undermining the middle classes with adventures in tawdry sex and infidelity with posh birds. The lover who laments with bittersweet regret that class difference is exactly what gives an embrace such frisson in Pencil Skirt transforms into a sinister class terrorist crowing with delight over a cuckolded toff in the Leonard Cohen-esque I Spy. The sweet revenge promised in Mis-shapes comes to fruition.

It was Common People that presented the most honest and accurate discussion of class as an inescapable phenomenon for those without the means and privilege to pretend otherwise. Based upon an actual encounter Cocker had with a young woman while studying at Central St Martins in London in the late 1980s, the song mocks her misguided class tourism. She could slum it with common lovers and a cheap apartment but class – real socio-economic disadvantage – is something inescapable:

You'll never fail like common people, you'll never watch your life slide out of view, and dance, and drink, and screw because there's nothing else to do.

The irony, of course, is that the song launched Pulp into celebrity and with that comes a form of privilege. It did not, however, sit well with the band. Seven years and another two albums later, Pulp undertook a nine-year hiatus, returning only for a reunion tour, not to produce new material.

While Cocker's cocaine addiction is easily presented as more attention-grabbing evidence of decline (as was the famous bottom-wagging incident at Michael Jackson's performance at the 1996 BRIT Awards), guitarist Mark Webber's habit of playing with his back to the audience was most revealing as to how uncomfortable the band were with their level of celebrity.

Their discomfort with the tawdriness of fame and fortune found its outlet in their next album This Is Hardcore. If we see Different Class as the working class ingénue moving to a flat in the city with some mates to try make it as a model or actress, This Is Hardcore finds her a few years later making pornos just to pay the rent.

Are you a music or culture academic who would like contribute to this series? Please contact James Whitmore or Suzy Freeman-Greene