

LAST

ORDER



S It was the biggest party in British music since the '60s. Ten years on, as the hangover finally clears, MOJO talks to the winners, losers and casualties to uncover the real story of Britpop – an incendiary period of bad deals, blizzards of cocaine and corrosive rivalries. By Andrew Perry.

LONDON, IT SEEMED AT THE TIME, HADN'T been so good since it was swinging in the '60s or spitting in the '70s. There were sharply dressed young groups to see, scene-defining clubs to be seen at, and there were parties seven nights a week. In little more than two or three years it was all over and, until now, even the vaguest hindsight has seemed too harsh a spotlight for any possible re-inspection.

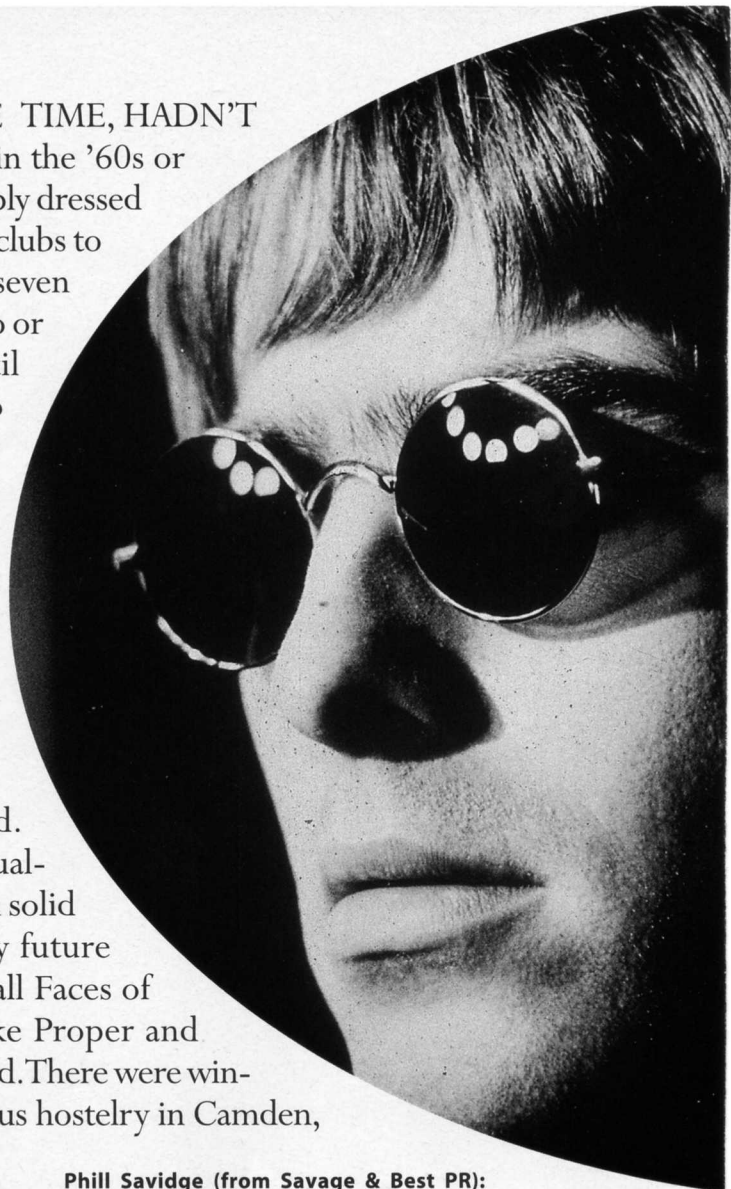
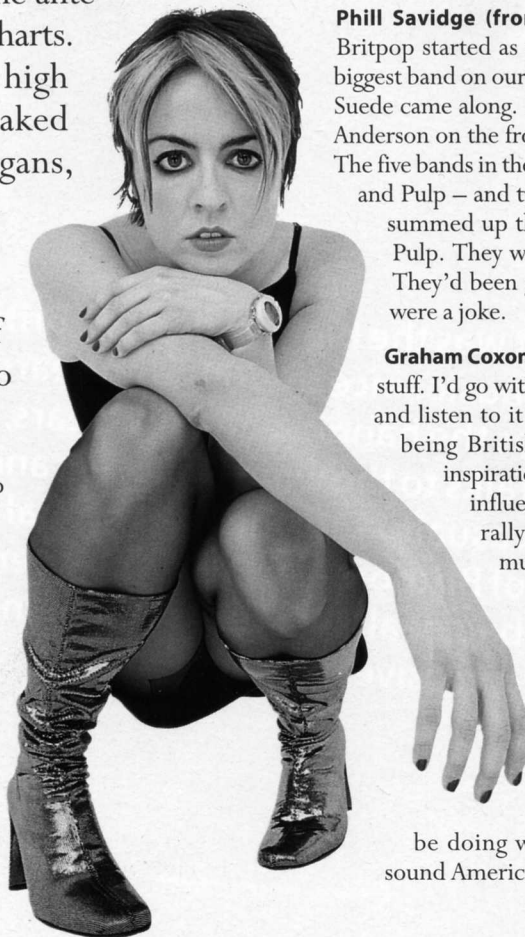
Now that there's a reasonable stretch of clear blue water between us and 'it', we can begin to get some perspective on a time when the British music industry, however fleetingly, was interested in homegrown music with guitars and, indeed, was sinking money into such a commodity faster than bands could form to create it. There's even a new film, *Live Forever*, celebrating the period.

It was a turbulent, cut-and-thrust period. Behind the obvious Blur/Oasis-Beatles/Stones duality, groups like Pulp and Supergrass emerged with solid careers, and may yet come to be discovered by future generations as The Walker Brothers or The Small Faces of their day. Others, unbelievably called things like Proper and Sussed, disappeared almost as soon as they arrived. There were winners and losers; there was Knebworth and a curious hostelry in Camden, The Good Mixer, serving as the ante-chamber to the national pop charts.

In the middle, there were high times, lively minds, naked ambitions, political shenanigans, pointless fisticuffs, financial disasters and some frightening, spiralling drug habits. This, then, is the *real* story of Britpop, as told by those who made it happen...

Graham Coxon (ex-guitarist, Blur): Britpop started with Popszene [Blur's fourth single], that record, which was me telling our drummer Dave to do the rhythm to Mother Sky by Can, and me using this flanger playing one note. That was '92, when we were trying to think about what to do with all this rock that was coming from the States.

Liam Gallagher (singer, Oasis): Grunge? People in shorts and socks and pumps with guitars with stickers on jumping up and down screaming. Not having it. Far too smelly for me.



Phill Savidge (from Savage & Best PR):

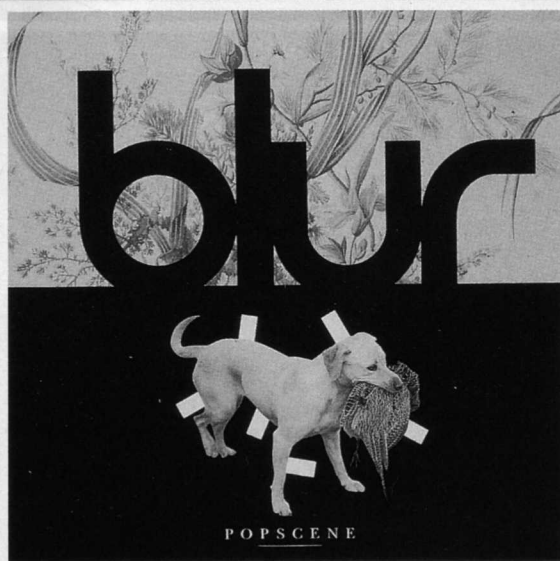
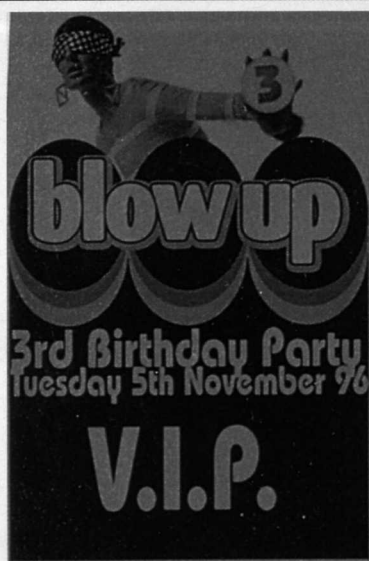
Britpop started as an anti-grunge movement. The biggest band on our roster was probably Curve, when suddenly Suede came along. In Summer '93, *Select* magazine had Brett Anderson on the front cover with the Union Jack behind him. The five bands in there were three of ours – Suede, The Auteurs and Pulp – and two others, Denim and Saint Etienne. That summed up the start of Britpop. Nobody would touch Pulp. They were just linked in to make it a movement. They'd been going for years and everyone thought they were a joke.

Graham Coxon: I was furtively admiring all that American stuff. I'd go with my Walkman to my bunk on the tour bus and listen to it in secret, because we had to be proud of being British at that point. Even then, none of my inspirations were British. I always thought Pulp were influenced by old French pop music. So yeah, the rallying behind the flag was built on sand, musically.

Alex James (bassist, Blur): We made a very deliberate attempt to embrace classic British songwriting values and imagery. The American record company didn't want to release *Modern Life Is Rubbish* – "Oh, you've got to go and re-record this with Butch Vig." Food Records came down and said we were absolutely mad to be doing what we were doing, and that we didn't sound American enough.



We have lift-off: (clockwise from top) Blur en route to the pivotal Popszene, 1992; a Blow Up club flyer; Suede pose for Britain; ice cool Liam. Opposite page, bottom, Sleeper's Louise Wener.



“WE’D BEEN REHEARSING IN SOME STINKING ROOM.

THEN WE HAD THE KEYS TO THE CITY, ANY CLUB, ANY PARTY.”

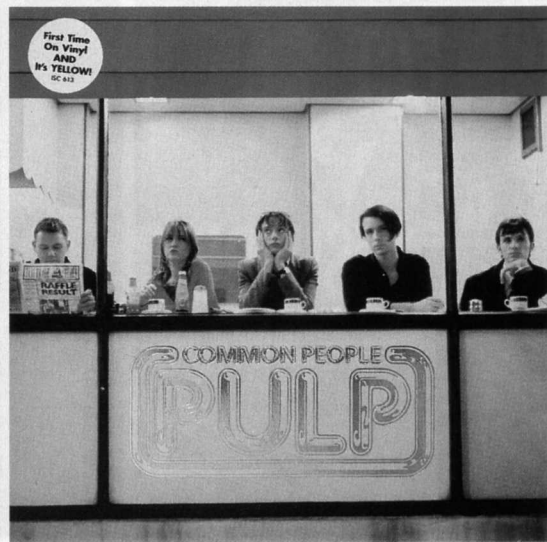
Noel Gallagher (guitarist/singer, Oasis): The grunge thing was all about eating your parents and all that shite. The bands like Suede and Blur were so far up their own arses about their place in the London rock scene. They were all too studied, them bands. We just came along and it was like, if fucking ‘cow’ rhymes with ‘now’, and it goes with a good tune... you know, who cares? ‘Lets have it’ was the main ethos, I think. Nobody was doing stuff like that. All the songs were about leaving Manchester and ending up in the sunshine somewhere, taking drugs and drinking for the rest of your life. Rock And Roll Star, Live Forever, Cigarettes And Alcohol. It’s all about escapism – a pint in one hand, your best mate in the other, whoever that may be, and just having a good time.

Rick Witter (singer, Shed Seven): We were looked upon in York in 1991 as being completely strange and out of sorts. So we were there thinking we were doing something really different and really new for the time. After the Manchester bit died off, it was all your aciiid and your shoegazing and all this business. We were thinking, Let’s make it good again, without realising that there was an Oasis in Manchester thinking the same, and Sleeper wherever they were thinking the same... All these bands were thinking the same.

Louise Wener (singer, Sleeper): We were one of the bands that sort of rode in on the coat tails of the big three – Blur, Oasis and Pulp. Underneath them there were these rungs of other bands that sort of filled in the gaps. It was like Bagpuss. The mice on the mouse organ – that was the rest of us.

Phill Savidge: Elastica actually formed in our office. Justine had been playing with Suede and she was in one day and said, “Ooh, I think I might form a band”, and we were like, “That’s not bad idea actually.” Donna and Justine were very talented, I thought. Not the most prolific of bands, obviously, and it was possibly Justine’s plaything to a certain extent. She didn’t have quite the hunger – she couldn’t have, could she? Donna might have done.

Justin Welch (drummer, Elastica): We rehearsed for six months, and it seemed like suddenly we’d be rehearsing in the same stinking little rehearsal room, and bottles of champagne would arrive, and gold discs – and not just from Britain. You had the keys to the city. You could go to any club, and any gig, any party. I lived with Steve Mackey from Pulp at the time, in this house in King’s Cross, which was madness. Sometimes I’d come downstairs and Jarvis would be asleep on the floor in our front room. He’d been kicked out of some- ➤



◀ where because he'd been out all night. Blur, Pulp and us were all good mates.

Phill Savidge: Anything me and John [Best, Savidge's business partner] did seemed to go ballistic. There were bands who got huge deals because of their association with us. It probably didn't help them in the long term, but it wasn't our fault. There's one band I can't name, who were signed because the A&R guy had his hand up at the wrong moment at the bidding war. It was "200... 250... 300... 325... 350... sold to that man there!" He went, "Argh!", and everyone laughed and left the room. They didn't really know what they were bidding for. I doubt that they'd even listened to the songs properly.

Pearl Lowe (singer, Powder): Everything seemed so easy. Getting record deals was so easy. We'd been playing gigs to no-one, then John Best saw us and that was it. He told everyone about us, and then, Whoom, everyone wanted to sign us. We did one show at the Monarch and every single label was there, every band was there and it was like, "Oh my God, we have all these offers from everyone."

Chris Gentry (guitarist, Menswear): In Summer '94, we used to go to [London club nights] Blow Up and Smashing. When you're 16, 17, you think, well, I could do a band, get a record deal and get on Top Of The Pops. We did our first gig on October 9, 1994, and it had to be a secret gig, because we didn't want any record companies coming down. We couldn't do a pub in north London or the West End, so we went for some old man's drinking hole in south London. Still, we were offered a deal before we'd even finished the last song. The second gig, about 50 A&R men came down. We got taken out

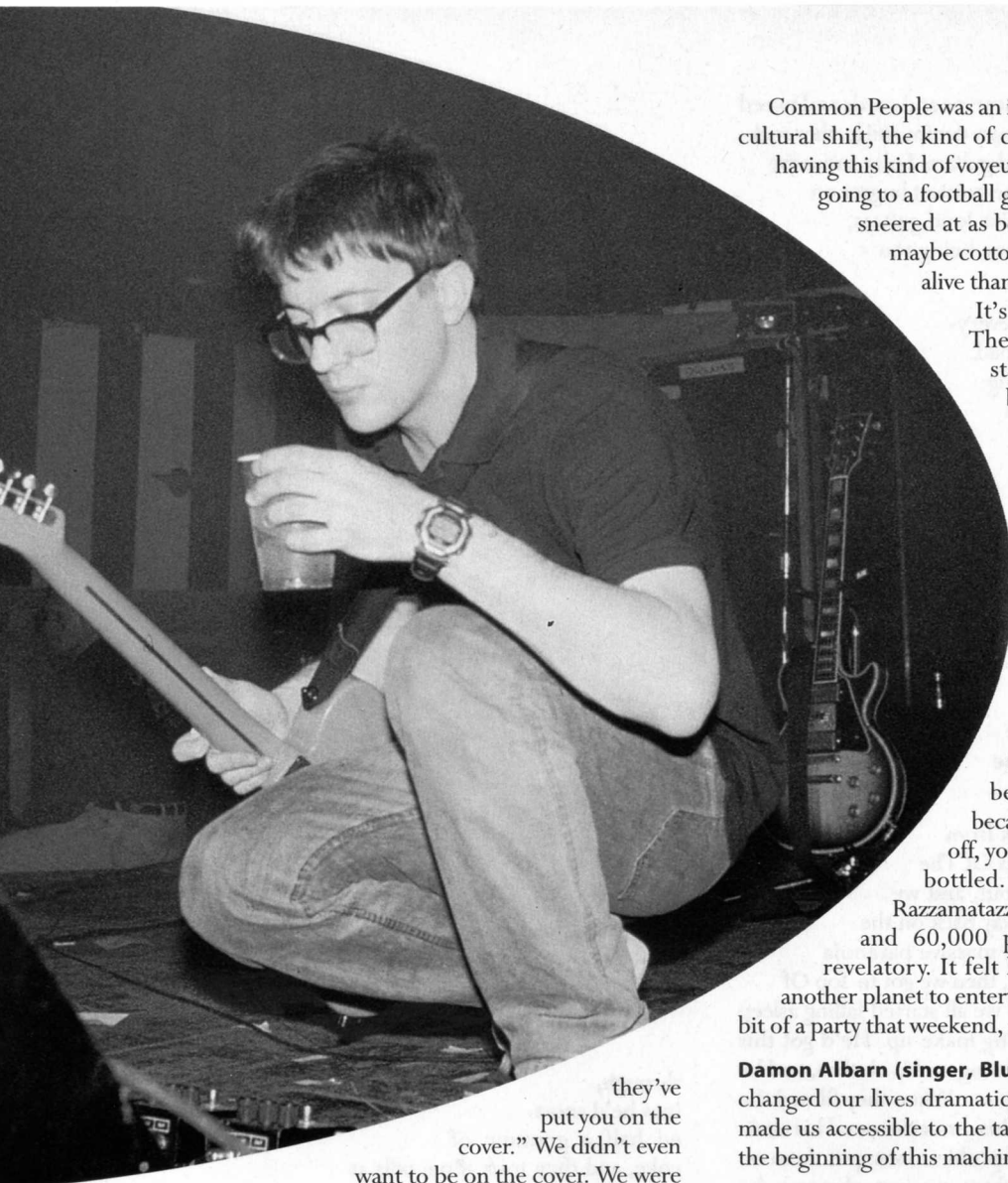
for dinner every night for two months, got flown out to New York, given as much champagne and coke as we could handle. The night before we actually signed our deal, we were at some party at [a certain major record company], and they were trying to get us to pull out of our deal. We said, "We really want to get some coke." They said, "Oh, we know where you can get some, but it's in Liverpool. If you get in this cab now, we'll drive you to Liverpool and give you cocaine" – just to get us out of London so we couldn't sign.

Richard Hawley (guitarist, Longpigs): Cocaine appeared out of nowhere. One day we were doing E's and speed for a laugh, or maybe a bit of acid if we had a day off. The next thing, we were up until six every morning doing charlie. The consumption was relentless. Whenever the four of us were together with time off, we'd be up for days. I'm surprised that no-one died, particularly the drummer Dee. I'm really surprised he's still alive.

Noel Gallagher: When you're on fucking coke, you would sit on the bog with Hitler, quite literally. "I like the 'tache," you know... You'd fucking go out to anybody's house, you'd probably end up in Number 10 Downing Street, ha ha. I loved all that in the beginning, meeting people you'd only seen on telly, and supermodels and actors. You know, I had posters of Paul Weller on my fucking wall and the next thing he's at my fucking house and I can't get him out at seven o'clock in the morning. Fantastic.

Chris Gentry: I was in the Good Mixer in '94, and this guy from the Melody Maker walked in and said, "Oh, you're on the cover of the Melody Maker this week." I said, "No, we're not." He went, "No,

PA Photos, SIN, All Action, LFI



they've put you on the cover." We didn't even want to be on the cover. We were

trying to get it stopped because we thought it

was too early. It was before we even had a single out. The press was being thrown at us, and the backlash was horrendous. We had a backlash when our first single came out.

Liam Gallagher: The thing about our band is that we didn't want to just be playing to 2,000 people. That was fine at the beginning, but we always wanted to be at the top. 'Cos a lot of bands these days shy away from being big, there's no point being in it if you're not going to check out what it's like. It was just Phil Collins and all these boring people and boring bands who were playing big gigs but it was like, "You've got nowt to say, you don't look like rock stars, you look like dicks in tights, like summat off a pantomime, and it's time for some real lads to get up there and take charge."

Jarvis Cocker (singer, Pulp): It was kind of a breath of fresh air when people were quite crude. I remember walking around town in Sheffield and there were always gangs of lads parading around going, "Do you want a sausage with them chips, love?" and stuff like that, and I thought it were quite funny. I do like crudity actually but it's when it's as a laugh that it's all right. If you actually believe that, it's pretty bad. It probably started off as a joke and then people kind of took it seriously.

Above, (clockwise from top left): Elastica in 1995 (Annie Holland, Justine Frischmann, Donna Matthews, Justin Welch); Graham Coxon sporting regulation pint and US indie chic; Common People sleeve; Noel chez Tony. Right, Pearl Lowe of Powder.

Common People was an important song because all of that was a cultural shift, the kind of cultural slumming-it mentality, people having this kind of voyeuristic attitude, like middle-class people going to a football games. Working-class culture was often sneered at as being crude, and then suddenly people maybe cottoned onto the fact that it was a bit more alive than the supposedly high-brow culture.

It's still there in fashion shoots and stuff. There's a glamour about trashy circumstances which I do find a bit worrying because it's like a kind of tourism – "Yeah, let's look at this shitty place and take some pictures of it and then fuck off and leave these people living in their own shit..."

Phill Savidge: Pulp were asked to stand in for The Stone Roses at Glastonbury '95, because the Roses had pulled out at the last minute, but we didn't think they could pull it off on the main stage – they were just a band that we were into in the office. We thought it was going to be a bunch of pissed-up Mancs booing because they weren't the Roses, going, "Get off, you poof!" I really thought they might get bottled. They came on and started with Razzamatazz – supposedly an obscure early single – and 60,000 people were singing along. It was revelatory. It felt like they'd been beamed down from another planet to entertain us, it was so other-worldly. It was a bit of a party that weekend, all weekend.

Damon Albarn (singer, Blur): We were given four Brits, which changed our lives dramatically, for ever and ever. It immediately made us accessible to the tabloids. OK, we embraced it, but it was the beginning of this machine.

Louise Wener: We toured with Blur on the Parklife tour. The kids in the audience were absolutely devotional. At one gig, we came off and went up into the balcony to watch it. Damon lost his shoes and he sort of spread his arms out wide, and the audience started chanting, "Jesus" at him. Christ knows how it felt for him.

Alex James: I adapted by getting very drunk and fucking everybody. Glory days! It was fun being a Britpop twat. We were just pissing around.

Graham Coxon: When what you're doing has got such a vast appeal, there's different understandings of what you're doing – too many. You can end up playing gigs to people you despise, and they're really into your music. I know it's really snobby of me, but I wasn't playing music for 12-year-old kids, or American football players, or English football players, or fucking Guardian readers. They're the worst of the lot. Then it was like: but who am I playing music to? By that stage it was very difficult to know. It was a spectacle. It wasn't a musical appreciation, it was a sensation – a smaller scale version of what The Beatles may have been thinking in '65 and '66.

But all this was just in the tiny crappy world of Britain. It didn't get anywhere abroad. It was shot to bits before it even left the trench, as regards France and America. ➤



◀ There we were in our little paisley scarves and cords and tweed jackets, and we were running at these greasy denim and leather rockers in the States, with these massive loud guitars. I play a massive loud guitar. I was trying so hard to be the noisiest bugger on the stage but when there's three massive loud guitars, you can't really beat them. And we were being too clever. Britpop was a bit too clever.

Rick Witter: We found ourselves going everywhere. It was always funny going abroad. We'd be doing E's and shit, and gooning from hotel balconies at all these foreign people, on their way to work first thing in the morning. It was always funny, because they don't get the humour. You'd find yourself in the back end of Holland, or getting barred from Oslo for smashing up the dressing room. We played in this club, the So What? Club. The name of the venue said it all – like, a 'Why on earth are you playing here?' sort of reaction. No respect, so we gave no respect back. The last thing we were told was, "Don't come back to Oslo."

Richard Hawley: One time we flew back from Germany on Dee's birthday to do Top Of The Pops. We'd just finished a German tour, and we were all so drunk, off us faces all the way back on the flight, and white-knuckling it. I got a massive paranoia comedown. We managed to stay awake, then we got to Top Of The Pops, but all the drugs ran out, so we all started falling asleep one by one. I just remember Dee doing make-up. He'd got this serviette on him to stop the powder getting on his clothes, and he was asleep, while they put the make-up on. When they filmed the rehearsals, he was asleep at his kit with this serviette round his neck.

Our management's answer to every problem was: put them on tour. We toured relentlessly. We thought it was just what you do. We'd bump into other bands and they'd go, "Fucking hell, are you still on tour?" We suddenly figured out we were on tour more than anyone else. I just kept asking myself, "Why? What are we trying to prove?" In the end I just didn't believe in it.

Justin Welch: We toured America five times in a year. The touring stopped when we finished the Big Day Out in Australia. I arrived home at five in the morning. It was snowing, and I'd still got my shorts on. Justine and Donna had decided to stay out there for another month. We'd had enough of seeing each other. We didn't see each other for another year.

Pearl Lowe: At the end of the day, your label just wants you to earn them loads of money, and they don't give a fuck how your health is, or how your emotional state is. I had a daughter as well, who I'd had when I was 18, and at that time was only three or four. I lived with my mum and she brought her up with me. I felt such terrible guilt leaving her all the time. I'd come back off tour and I'd be absolutely exhausted and I remember thinking, "Can I actually handle this?"

Chris Gentry: It was all excess, and it was encouraged by management and record companies. When we were making the Stardust video, they thought it would be a really great idea to get us off our heads, but they ended up having to call an ambulance for our guitarist halfway



Noel: "The drug habit kicked in. Big sunglasses and pretending to be Ziggy Stardust."

through, 'cos he'd snorted half a gramme of coke, and then took three pills at once. He ended up in mental hospital for two weeks. Nobody really looked after us, or our careers. It was basically, "Here's the money, off you go." Nobody ever said to us, "Look, what are you doing?"

Liam Gallagher: We were recording *Morning Glory* in about a week. Me and our kid had a bit of a scuffle, and I came out with a broken arm, broken leg and a shotgun on me shoulder, and me Mam goes, "What fucking kind of music are you making down there?" Then it was all out. I can't remember much of it. We were never here anyway, we were in fucking America when it was all going off for us. We were trying to turn on a load of fucking idiots in America.

Damon Albarn: *The Great Escape* was a hard time. Because the whole *Parklife* thing had gone wrong. I couldn't fucking walk down the street without someone shouting "Oasis". I couldn't go into a shop.

I used to walk down the street and, literally, people would open their windows and turn up Oasis. I'm not exaggerating. It was a nightmare, but it taught me a lot. It made me realise that, emotionally, I had a lot of catching up to do.

Noel Gallagher: We had no problem with Blur right up to the point that they started pissing about moving singles back and forward, and then they started booking gigs in the same towns as us when we went on tour, and they had this big stupid projection of Number 1, and they were going to project it onto our gig –

The gig fight

BLUR PLAY HERE **OASIS PLAY HERE**

Oasis and Blur play concerts 200yds apart on same night

BOURNE TROUBLE... where the rivals are playing on the same night in Bournemouth

BLUR and Oasis' rivalry has hit the road—with gigs just 200 yards apart on the same night.

Oasis are to play to 3,200 fans at Bournemouth's International Centre—years from the 500-capacity Play Show Bar, where Blur are booked. They claim the clash is a coincidence, but an Oasis spokesman says: "We just a cheap trick to

steal our Spotlight. It won't be hard in the country."

Oasis' September 16 show, sold out in just 30 minutes, while tickets for Blur went within two hours.

Their spokesman says:

"You want some?" Musical rivalries get out of hand, 1996.

Jill Furmanovsky/Oasis, SIN, Virmag Archive (2)

