

Simon Reynolds's Notes on the noughties: Clearing up the indie landfill

At the start of the noughties, indie was seen as the rubbish dump of contemporary music. But by the end of the decade, it had produced some of the most impressive sounds

"Landfill indie" was one of the decade's great memes. Coined by [Andrew Harrison of The Word magazine](#), it captured that sense of alarming overproduction, the gross excess of supply over demand. All these bands! Where did they come from? Why did they bother? Couldn't they tell they were shit?

Once upon a time, long long ago, the shitness of indie actually had a point. Back in the 1980s – the days of [Bogshed](#) and [Beat Happening](#), the Membranes and June Brides – indie was about defiant amateurishness and naivety. Its defects – shaky rhythm sections, weak voices, clumsy playing – were a refusal of the perfectionism and professionalism of 80s rock and pop. The awkwardness and abrasiveness reaffirmed the "anyone can do it" principle that many at that time saw as the crucial element of punk ideology. Indie's flailing substandardness (as measured in conventional terms) could thus be felt by its fans as liberating and confrontational.

By the late 1990s and on into the noughties, though, indie wasn't crappy for a purpose. In fact, it wasn't especially inept or ramshackle anymore, so much as drearily adequate. Instrumentally, there was just a sustained absence of flair in the playing. This guitar-based music didn't rock, but equally the songcraft wasn't sufficiently strong, or forcefully sung enough, for it to make the grade as proper pop music. What was it for then? A vague aura of superiority to the commercial mainstream clung around it still, but really only as a hangover from the past: a set of received assumptions adopted by each new generation of the indie demographic, which kept on reconstituting itself in the same way that every year a fresh crop of first years arrive at uni. That inherited sense of undefined alternativeness crumbled on close scrutiny, since the music was not innovative by any stretch, and only rarely was it artistically adventurous in terms of its lyrical content, or expressive of bohemian values. A lot of indie wasn't even released via independent labels.

Looking back over the noughties, then, you'd have to say that indie produced a good proportion of the decade's least impressive music. Yet indie also produced some of the most. Even on its traditional terrain – the songful guitar band with "interesting" lyrics, "attitude" and a decent shot at an NME front cover – there was a series of indie heavyweights, starting with [the Strokes](#) and [the Libertines](#), who jolted the scene out of the dismal post-Britpop slough of the late 90s. And once you strayed beyond that narrow strip of indie-as-commonly-understood, there was a steadily accumulating ferment of activity that shredded the indie stereotype to the point where, by the decade's end, the word was virtually meaningless.

As is so often the case with the music industry, the groups that made indie a force to be reckoned with were responsible for setting in motion the landfill avalanche. In the first half of the decade, an orderly queue formed to be the NME readership's Band of the Year: the Strokes, the White Stripes, the Libertines, [Franz Ferdinand](#), [Arctic Monkeys](#). Personally, with all of these groups I went through a definite process, starting from the kneejerk

skepticism/prejudice of your typical 90s ex-raver/electronic music partisan ("What is this crap?"), proceeding to a grudging acknowledgment ("Hey, this group is actually ... pretty good") and culminating in a less grudging "Well, fuck me, they're actually REALLY good". In each case what swayed me, along with the tunes, was the band's combination of rhythmic force and big, bold vocal presence (ie. things you'd never really associated with indie rock, up to that point at least).

Apart from Franz Ferdinand, who fuelled up on the gawky-but-groovy verve of an earlier moment of dance-rock synergy (early-80s post-punk as per Scottish ancestors Josef K and [Fire Engines](#)), none of these indie gods were funky or danceable in the generally accepted sense. But all were significantly more dynamic rhythmically than the late-90s Britpop afterbirth. The Strokes had a curious post-techno precision and propulsiveness to their sound, their mathematically plotted, grid-like songs at times resembling Daft Punk if they actually had gone punk rock. The Libertines pulled it off through the simple expedience of having an excellent drummer (something that seemed to slip the mind of 97% of indie Brits) while the White Stripes did it by going back to blues-rock dynamics. [Arctic Monkeys](#) likewise plugged into that side of the 1960s that indie always forgot about (the fact that the great 60s bands were dance bands) but some of the group had also played in a funk outfit and they were also keenly aware of hip-hop (an enthusiasm that blossomed in the form of a Dizzee Rascal collaboration). Later on came Klaxons, who drew inspiration from 90s techno and house, but rather than do the obvious thing and grapple with the appropriate technology they instead tried to mimic its feel via the bog-standard guitar/bass/drum format, resulting in a sound that combined the rushy euphoric drive of rave with the shambolic energy of 80s-style indie.

None of these groups could honestly be described as pointing the way to any kind of future; there was little about them that would have been incomprehensible to, say, a Smiths fan in 1985. Equally, though, they weren't chronically chained to a specific region of the past in the way that Oasis and Ocean Colour Scene had been. Apart from maybe the White Stripes, none could really be described as retro. But you didn't have to stretch out too far beyond the NME/BBC 6 zone to find groups who were nominally indie (in the sense of the labels they were on, the venues they played) but who were progressively mixing things up in a way that made nonsense of the word "indie" as an a priori pejorative. Drawing on everything from German minimal techno to west African guitar-pop, these groups – Animal Collective, Micachu and the Shapes, Gang Gang Dance, [TV On the Radio](#), [High Places](#), Foals, Vampire Weekend, Telepathe, Dirty Projectors – shared an interest in rhythm as something that grabs the listener's attention rather than plods along in the background. From Noah Lennox's skittering drums in Animal Collective to the sinuously shifting basslines of Vampire's Chris Baio, from High Places' undulating percussion to Micachu's mismatch of skiffle-like guitar-strum and intricate electronics, none of this music was expressly made to rock a dancefloor but all of it pulled at your body. In truth, the best stuff by these bands had more rhythmic life and surprise in it than [the majority of hip-hop](#) or dance music made these past several years.

In the early years of the noughties, it was still a perfectly permissible and thoroughly warranted stance to look down on indie as the laggard sector of contemporary music. Hip-hop (plus related genres like R&B and dancehall) and electronic dance music commanded the aesthetic high ground then. Now, at the other end of the decade, it's a lot less clear cut, I think. You'd have to say that things have at very least evened out. On the production and rhythm front, rap and R&B – once so startling – appear to be all innovated out, sunk deep into formula. The alleged high points of hip-hop this year include a comeback/sequel LP by a Wu-Tang Clan elder (a 90s flashback in other words) and various tunes in the jerk

genre, which is a twist on electro: a form of music that goes back 25 years at least. Meanwhile in dance music, the big European "development" this last year was the return to deep house: another music from the mid-to-late 80s, and not only that, one that's already been returned to once or twice in the last couple of decades. (Plus deep house, even in its original prime, was always the most backward-looking corner of house.) As for UK dance, there's much more creative ferment, but even here a lot of the reference points – funk (everything from Cameo to the Dr Dre sound) and 80s videogames – have a retro-tinge too.

Given the predominance of recycling across the sonic spectrum, even indie's more conservative operatives seem less culpable than they would have in the early noughties (when there was real futuristic action to contrast them unfavorably with). Regardless what you think of the actual result of the process, how different in essence is what the Horrors do (mashing up Goth, shoegaze, post-punk, late-80s neo-psych in the Loop/Spacemen 3, etc) from what post-dubstep operators like Untold, Jam City or Martyn are doing in relation to their own tradition? Just like the Horrors, they're engaged in assembling a distinctive, fresh-enough style by mix-and-matching elements from all across the last couple of decades.

But indie also has a real forward sector again, and one that seems, if anything, to be less insular than its counterparts in rap or dance. I can't see a figure in either that's equivalent to, say, Mica Levi, who bridges the considerable gap between riot grrrl and grime, between Woodentops-style indie-bop and Herbert's blippy, micro-syncopated glitchtronica. Unexpectedly, the pre-indie associations of the word "independent" – the post-punk ideal of music that's forward-thinking and all-gates-open, that embraces technology and is challenging without wholly abandoning pop pleasure or dance groove – have been reactivated.