



Seasick, But Still Floating: Blur and 'The Great Escape'

[5 August 2014]

By Brian Doan

Best Days

"This next song is about the country (laughs)...This is called 'Country House.' It's about neurotic pop stars and... people like that..."
—Damon Albarn, introducing his new album's first single to 27,000 fans at the Mile End concert

It was the "Country House's" first public performance, on a wet June Saturday in 1995—the first time anyone outside the studio had heard it. Compared to the polish of the recording that would be released a few weeks later, the live rendition (included on the 2012 reissue of [Blur's *The Great Escape*](#)) is faster, harder, and immensely propulsive. Graham Coxon's guitar riffs slice and grind against the *oompah* horn sections and bounce off of drummer Dave Rowntree's insistent beat. Frontman [Damon Albarn](#) almost raps the lyrics, while his mates toss off their harmonies as if the very notion of melody is anathema.

Stripped of the album's immaculate gloss, the cynicism of the song's lyrics—which detail the anxieties and delusions of a wealthy English gentleman (supposedly based on David Balfe, co-founder of Blur's label, Food Records)—becomes even more apparent, and not even Albarn's keen sense of showmanship can translate the complex, Queen-ish harmonies of the bridge ("Blow, blow me out / I am so sad, I don't know why") to a live setting: like the protagonist he's both embodying and mocking, he's literally out of breath, gasping the words out before the rest of the band jumps back in. Crowd noise is almost a fifth member of the band, adding a pleasant fuzziness to the mix, culminating in Albarn ending the number with falsetto "la's" that sound like Fritz Freleng outtakes, and Coxon making his final riffs sound like escaped noises from a theremin.

It's a strikingly odd performance from a band at the height of their popularity. "I'd just like Blur to be the biggest group in Britain, not the world. That'll do," Albarn said to a journalist that same year, a position that their previous record, [Parklife](#), had secured for them. That album swept the Brit awards that February. Albarn and bassist Alex James were courted by Tony Blair's shadow cabinet as possible Labour endorsers in the coming elections. They met idols like Francoise Hardy and Ray Davies. Their faces were everywhere in the media. Remembering the Mile End performance, Alex James would later note in his memoir, *Bit of a Blur*, "...the whole crowd was bouncing as one, waving their arms in time and smiling as they squashed each other senseless. By the last chorus, they were singing it. When that happens that means it's a single."

But even more than the edginess of "Country House's" debut, what stands out on the live recording is Albarn's introduction, noted in the epigraph above. Far from triumphant, it sounds both confessional and confrontational, an uneasy blend of tones that Blur's 1995 record *The Great Escape* would take as its mission statement. Continuing his introduction, and looking out at the expectant audience swaying before him, Albarn would offer a pointed, deadpan reading of his fans that suggested how keen he was to bite the hand that fed him: "That is *great*...When you do that, you all look like barley or wheat, in the wind...So if you all do that...it'll be, um, be a bit...it'll be a bit *special*."

He Thought of Cars

Time is a funny thing. While Blur were selling out London stadium shows in the summer of 1995, I was packing a U-Haul and saying farewell to Bloomington, Indiana, where'd I'd spent four happy college years, one of them doing occasional stints on the campus cable radio station. (You could get a very faint signal via traditional broadcast methods, but otherwise needed a hook-up to hear anything being played on WQAX; it was there I learned that you could catalogue a lot of station records by dropping the needle on a 20-minute Jello Biafra performance piece, and getting to it). Blur's "There's No Other Way" had been a recurring play on the station in the fall of 1991 (and on *120 Minutes*, the late-night/early morning MTV show that caused so many of us to stumble bleary-eyed to Monday morning classes), but because I got involved in other parts of the campus and bid farewell to my brief DJ career, I hadn't kept track of what Blur had been up to since.

I was one with my country—nearly every book or documentary about Blur takes a moment to note their relative lack of American airplay as compared to their English superstardom. In his definitive history, *Britpop!*, journalist John Harris describes the 1992 American tour that Blur was forced to undertake to pay of the debts caused by bad management: "In the two-and-a-half months it took to complete their itinerary, Blur flew to the edge of psychosis," encountering audience apathy, obnoxious radio hosts, and their own creeping sense of career disappointment. Harris quotes Alex James: "They like their pop stars quite Mickey Mouse in America. You've got to be squeaky-clean, and you've got to play ball...And we were slung out of radio stations for swearing and being drunk."

They didn't even feel the need to pay fealty to grunge, the current king-beast of American alt-radio. According to James' memoir, when asked by a DJ in Ithaca what he thought of the sound, Graham Coxon "said he fucking hated it," and their on-air interview quickly ended. Even when they returned to England, things were rough: grunge was growing in popularity there, too, and the band's fondness for alcoholic dissipation wasn't blending well with their manic depression or their fading chart presence.

All of these trials and tribulations are captured in the brilliant 1993 documentary *Starshaped*, which follows them on tour around England in 1992 and 1993, after their debut, 1991's *Leisure*, which transformed them into temporary stars. 1993's *Modern Life Is Rubbish* further saved them from one-hit-wonder status. The title, drawn from one of the best songs on *Modern Life Is Rubbish*, is both ironic reference to their fading status and, according to Albarn, to the shape one collapses into when drunkenly falling onto a hotel bed.

The movie plays with familiar pop signifiers—opening with the band running towards the camera a la *A Hard Day's Night*, even though no one is following them down the street, and closing with them walking hand-in-hand down the M1 like the Monkees—but the blend of banality and anxiety it captures is real. This ranges from Alex and Damon's blank stares as a day trip takes them to Stonehenge, to Albarn desperately, drunkenly pogoing around a Glastonbury stage as the band plays "Day Upon Day," trying to engage the crowd; this culminates in his pulling a Bono and climbing up on the scaffolding, then smashing into a large amp, damaging his foot).

At a key moment in *Starshaped*, a hung-over Albarn vomits before heading onstage to sing "Colin Zeal", the soundtrack of the performance laid over on this shot to suggest that the song's hapless title character is at least a bit autobiographical. The film intercuts this older footage with the band in 1993, looking back on their horrible year. "The thing they asked us," Albarn says, sitting and smoking with his bandmates in a greasy spoon, "was what was it like being in Blur last year, in 1992?" After a beat, he chuckles ruefully and says, "As you can see... no one has anything to say about it."



Blur

The Great Escape

(FOOD/VIRGIN; US: 26 SEP 1995; UK: 11 SEP 1995)

AMAZON

LALA

They'd make their statement on record. *Rubbish* offered a mélange of English pop (from the Kinks and glam-rock to XTC and Adam Ant) granting the band a neoclassical sonic palette through which to frame the cynical/sympathetic stories of contemporary English life that dominated Albarn's lyrics; it was followed in 1994 by *Parklife*, whose Top Five single, "Girls & Boys," would put Britpop on the map (fueled by a wonderfully tacky video that its director, Kevin Godley, would later disown as "Page 3 rubbish"), and whose ability to rope *Quadrophenia* star Phil Daniels in on the title song made the link with mod and New Wave antecedents explicit. You know a band is at the height of its powers when it feels comfortable enough to make a video spoofing *Last Year at Marienbad* (as Blur did for the lush, John Barry-like "To The End"), and can actually pull it off. The future was wide open.

None of this registered with me as I landed in Chicago in late June of 1995. Hip-hop, post-Cobain alt-rock, neo-'70s bands like Counting Crows and Hootie, and local legends the Smashing Pumpkins dominated Chicago rock radio. Stations like WXRT and Q101 would play English pop music, but even then I remember more [Oasis](#) than Blur, whose "Parklife" video was most memorable for me in that moment because of a wickedly funny takedown of it on *Beavis and Butthead*. (What can I say? I was young.)

Odd, because I was also busy reading Martin Amis that year—*Money*, *The Information*, *London Fields*—and Amis would be a key influence on the "Life" trilogy that would culminate in that fall's *The Great Escape*. "I read *London Fields* when Blur were on their second tour of America," Albarn noted around the time of *Parklife*'s release: "It saved me."

In a great biography of Blur that was published last fall, Martin Power smartly reads the stylistic influence on Albarn's cartoonish social critique: "While nominally set in the Western part of the city, Amis' London was an almost imaginary terrain, its topography shifting to suit wherever the writer's fancy took him." It would be a few more years before my fancy took me to Blur, and a few years more until it ended up gripping my imagination. But I've spent much of the last year listening obsessively to the band, and especially to *The Great Escape*, an album that, as Power wryly notes, "was deemed a masterpiece... Then, all of a sudden, it wasn't."

Fade Away

It opens with a blast of electric guitar, backed by the drunken hurdy-gurdy of a keyboard: it's like the opening credits to a movie, but everything is slightly out of focus, swaying in the listener's ear. This is the world of "Stereotypes", once pegged as the album's first single, until that fateful Mile End concert. "End of a century / It's nothing special," Albarn had sardonically sung on Blur's previous record, and the protagonists of "Stereotypes"—the suburban housewife who "runs a little B&B" and cheats while her husband is away at work, the couple who video role-play in view of the neighbors—are the logical carryover of its *fin de siècle* boredom: "From time to time, you know, you should be going on another bender," Albarn advises.

His "Mockney" accent stretches out the vowel sounds, slowing down each line and creating a vocal lethargy that acts in tension with both the lasciviousness of the story and the New Wave energy of the band's performance. In particular, Albarn's keyboards have a nice early '80s pub rock feel; that and the group's fascination with the oddities of suburbia act as a reminder that the missing piece in Blur's chronology of influences might be Squeeze.

"Graham was already beginning to go a bit weird, but generally it was fantastic," James notes in Stuart Maconie's *Blur: 3862 Days of The Great Escape's* recording period. Producer Stephen Street, in the same volume, is more circumspect: "They were good sessions but you could feel the pressure beginning to tell."

The pressures included a brewing media battle with Oasis, whose energetic *whoosh* of a single, "Roll With It", was set to face "Country House" in a chart battle. Extensively documented in Maconie, Power, and Harris' volumes, "The Battle of Britpop"—inspired by Albarn's sense of competition, the Gallagher brothers' laddish counterattacks (including Noel's infamous wish to a journalist that Albarn and James both get AIDS, and Liam's lewd hitting on Elastica guitarist/singer Justine Frischmann, who was Albarn's girlfriend)—was an absurd but delightful media event that was fueled not only by the bands, but a British media determined to turn it into a class war, regardless of how well each group's reality fit their pre-set images (Blur as posh public school art band, Oasis as Northern rock ruffians).

The shame is that this obscured just how sad and finely detailed its music and lyrics are, from its own *whoosh* of an opening (James' rumbling bass blending with Dave Rowntree's drums to create the effect of a man falling into a confusing new life), to the way the interlocked "blow me out" harmonies reappear in the later choruses, haunting a cheery sing-along with an air of unresolved melancholy. Speaking to Stuart Maconie for *3862 Days*, Blur's A&R rep Mike Smith observed, "There's four different melodies in there," an observation with metaphoric resonance, given how divided the four members of Blur were about the song's merits (Graham Coxon, ever Blur's indie cred watchdog, would later brood, "It seemed insincere and cynical. Like a great big trailer filled with money on the back of a fat man's car"). But it's a fine addition to a history of ironic English pop that includes Paul McCartney's "Maxwell's Silver Hammer", the Kinks' "Dedicated Follower of Fashion", and nearly every Smiths single: it offers the catchy melody that brings you up short.

It's a lovely lead-in to "Best Days", a string-and-synth-driven ballad that blends West End melodic phrasing and New Order-like arrangements into

something sadly beautiful and wonderfully self-deprecating: "Picks up the London yo-yos," Albarn sings of a cabbie in the song, "All on their own down in Soho / Take me home..." The lyrics are full of characters in hotel rooms, "listening to dull tones" and "sleepwalking back home," but the song itself is so striking that it's hard to know how ironically one should take the title. An echoey drum sound kicks the beat down the lane until it segues imperceptibly to the vibrating hum of "Charmless Man's" opening notes.

That hum—a quivering of keyboards and guitars, holding back until an explosion of melody nine seconds in—feels like the musical translation of the panic attacks Albarn experienced throughout Blur's mid-'90s success: he told Maconie, "I remember doing 'To The End' on *Top of the Pops* and lying at the side of the studio really convinced that I was going to pass out right there on *Top of the Pops* in front of millions." "Man's" rush of riffs and unceasing "na na na" harmonies is simultaneously intoxicating and claustrophobic, embodying both the allure of pop stardom and its crippling effects.

In the 2010 documentary *No Distance Left to Run*, directors Will Lovelace and Dylan Southern cheekily layer the song over paparazzi images of Alex James, suggesting that Blur's chief hedonist was its target; but the lyrical descriptions of the title character—a non-stop gabber who's "educated the expensive way" but desperately wants to be like gangster Ronnie Kray; who "moves in circles of friends / Who just pretend that they like him / He does the same to them"—sounds like no one so much as the media-aggressive, idea-rich, constantly performative Britpop icon Damon Albarn. (This reading is enhanced by the song's witty video, where the bourgeois fop at its center can't escape a band that's always singing into his face.)

It's the kind of lacerating takedown of Blur's public image that Pulp could only dream of, and it complicates one of the most common knocks against *The Great Escape*—its supposed reliance on third-person narratives and suburban anecdotes that have a nasty edge. John Harris takes up this particular cudgel, declaring the record "very cold," full of "gloopy theatrical arrangements" and "whimsical ugliness", and critiquing "the rather empty sneer of the bourgeois bohemian, passing predictably withering judgement on sad little people living sad little lives".

A more sympathetic Martin Power feels that "Though beautifully constructed, carefully arranged and deftly played," songs like "Charmless Man" "were also curiously utilitarian, sounding as if Albarn had written them as theoretical exercises rather than lasting statements."

What journalist Bill Flanagan called the "John Lennon, 'another little song about me'" tradition dies hard in popular music criticism, a space that too often holds to twinned modes of authenticity: that a pop musician is either singing about himself, or offering social critiques. Harris himself wryly explores and critiques in *Britpop!*'s early chapters as the tradition of "Right on!" rallying cries masquerading as pop songs.

As Kim Cooper and David Smay note in *Bubblegum Music Is The Naked Truth*, "Rock criticism, born of and beholden to the sixties, stumbles badly when confronted with music produced outside of its short set of registered myths." On *The Great Escape*, Blur is chameleonic, its musical fluidity matched by a prismatic perspective that shifts from first to third person, displaces autobiography onto character study, and finds a sweet spot between personal confession and societal examination. "Fade Away" and "Yuko and Hiro" use their tales of suburban ennui and cross-cultural difference to explore the strain in Albarn's relationship with Justine Frischmann, while "Ernold Same" gives its vocal over to Ken Livingstone, soon to become Labour mayor of London.

Yuko and Hiro

I'd like to read Martin Power's "theoretical exercise" positively, especially given his explorations of Albarn's obsession with Bertolt Brecht. Brecht's "alienation effect"—the desire to break the audience's attention with a fourth wall jolt that calls attention to the means of production—can be seen all over Blur's albums and videos. Examples include Coxon's insistence on "demystifying" his performances by including guitar chords in liner notes; the ironic plays with stock advertising imagery on their covers; and the video for "The Universal," *The Great Escape*'s centerpiece, a soaring ballad full of Bacharach-like chord changes that is set in tension with a lyric about the narcotizing effects of pop songs exactly like, well, "The Universal": "Every night we're gone/Into karaoke songs/How we like to sing along/Though the words are wrong..."

A close-up of a microphone against a sheer white background is followed by a shot of the mic cord on a roof, where it's hooked up to a large, round white speaker that resembles both a golf ball and the white "Rover" balls from *The Prisoner*. This is the dystopia of "The Universal," where everyone is drugged up and watching each other inside the panopticon of a nightclub. The video's next shot is lifted from Stanley Kubrick's adaptation of *A Clockwork Orange*, pulling back on the band decked out as Droogs. The video's intertextuality offers one way to break the fourth wall, and also calls to mind Brecht's vision of his work as scrap collecting, drawing on and redeploying other texts (Brecht's metaphor is a trumpet discovered at a flea market, and sardonic horns dominate "The Universal").

Suddenly the Droogs are onstage; music plays, but Albarn stands silent with a demented grin on his face, breaking into performance midway through a line: "...Yes, the future's been sold..." It's almost a moment of montage—stillness juxtaposed with engagement, and no transition in-between. In Brechtian terms, it's an epic gesture, another means of calling attention to the mechanics of performance.

For most bands, this would be the logical musical and thematic endpoint of the album; for Blur, it's just the end of side one. "Mr. Robinson's Quango" takes the listener back from the future to the present, offering a cross-dressing Conservative Member of Parliament whose obsession with order is

undercut by affairs with his secretary. The song moves like a slowed-down ska skank: horns growl, Coxon finds ever-more complex variations on his riff, and Albarn scats in falsetto during the chorus: “Ooh, I’m a naughty boy!”

The song ends on a waltz arrangement that sounds less like a pop band than a child’s wind-up toy. But Mr. Robinson can’t be repressed: the song’s guitar riff returns and becomes the centerpiece of “He Thought of Cars”, its dissonant repeated figure floating through the song’s open spaces and alienated figures. “The Universal” is a futuristic critique, but it calls back to the dense classicism of the Brill Building. “He Thought of Cars” is thrilling precisely because its simpler arrangements create a vertiginous sonic effect: we’re falling with its lost souls, with no soft sonic place to land.

It’s that lack of an easy landing—musical, ideological, or thematic—that has shaped much of the critical response to *The Great Escape* in recent years. While it was greeted with rapturous praise in 1995 (“Bloody essential,” *Melody Maker* raved, before giving it the mathematically fanciful “12/10 stars”), a backlash began almost immediately in the wake of (*What’s The Story*) *Morning Glory*’s commercial dominance. The backlash was further fueled by Blur’s own recurring dismissals of the album, and the darker rock sound on 1997’s *Blur*. It’s the red-headed stepchild of the “Life” trilogy; a supposed monument to excess; a country house, the album’s detractors say.

The Great Escape ends with “Yuko and Hiro”, about an office drone kept apart from his girlfriend because of his career: “We work for the company / That looks to the future / We work hard to please them / They will protect us” (these lyrics are sung again in Japanese towards the end of the song, a female voice playing off Albarn’s vocal). The song is commonly read as coded autobiography—since both of their bands were on tour at one time or another, Albarn and Justine Frischmann were often apart for months. But it’s also a song about multiple definitions of “home”: geographic, emotional, and stylistic. “Yuko and Hiro” describes the state of the lovers without offering closure, and fades away musically without resolution; its almost nursery-rhyme rhythms and woefully dissonant instrumentation make it feel like a sad fairy tale.

This refusal of resolution suggests that Blur, for all of Britpop’s nationalism, recognizes the contingency of home, the need for pop to remain similarly open-ended in its possibilities, and the costs—for young lovers or pop stars—of trusting in stasis.

Salman Rushdie pondered such contingencies in 1992, as Blur were on their disastrous American tour, in his BFI monograph on another fairy tale, *The Wizard of Oz*. He notes that while ostensibly suggesting “there’s no place like home”, the movie is actually about “the joys of going away, of leaving the grayness and entering the color... It is a celebration of Escape, a grand paeon to the uprooted self, a hymn—the hymn—to Elsewhere.” As the “Yuko’s” chimes fade, it’s clear Blur have left the drizzled grayness of Mile End and the strictures of Britpop’s high priests behind. The next 15 years saw the band expand their musical colors, lose and regain members, and record some of the best music of their careers. But as *The Great Escape* ends, all that matters is that contingent Elsewhere, waving like barley in the distance.

Brian Doan is an Affiliate Scholar with Oberlin College, and the author of *The Song That You Hear In Your Head: U2’s Pop* (forthcoming from Thought Catalog). He has contributed essays on film, television and popular culture to RogerEbert.com and Cinespect.com, and also blogs at [Bubblegum Aesthetics](http://BubblegumAesthetics.com). He lives in Oberlin, Ohio.

Published at: <http://www.popmatters.com/pm/feature/184232-seasick-but-still-floating-blur-and-the-great-escape/>

[advertising](#) | [about](#) | [contributors](#) | [submissions](#)

© 1999-2010 PopMatters.com. All rights reserved. PopMatters.com™ and PopMatters™ are trademarks of PopMatters Media, Inc.
PopMatters is a member of the BUZZMEDIA Music advertising network.