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## Introduction

In March 1997 the front page of the magazine *Vanity Fair* announced “London Swings! Again!”. This headline was a direct reference to the London of the 1960s, which was famous for its rock and pop music, its daring new youth culture, and the boutique fashions of Carnaby Street.<sup>1</sup> In the 1990s this renewed interest in the culture of the 1960s seemed to bring an end to the doom and gloom of the 1970s and the 1980s (Mandler, *Two cultures - one - or many?*, 2003, pp. 136, 146, 149). For many people, these decades were bleak ones, characterized by energy crises, trade union disputes, strike action, unemployment, and the hard-nosed Conservative politics of Margaret Thatcher. For some, it seemed that Britain had also stopped believing in itself culturally, even if Thatcher had won the Falklands War and done much to restore a sense of British patriotism in the 1980s. After being led by a Conservative government for eighteen years, many people wanted change and the youthful Tony Blair and his New Labour party offered this, which helped them win the 1997 General Election. Blair and New Labour argued that they wanted to renew Britain and give the country a confidence boost. One of the ways that they tried to do this was by co-opting the British cultural sector. To promote British cultural renewal they used the phrase “Cool Britannia” to symbolize the revival of all things British, but particularly British youth culture, music, art and fashion. However, the problem remains whether New Labour genuinely succeeded in accrediting the social and cultural changes of the time to this phenomenon.

The thesis sheds new light on this question by analyzing a range of popular magazines that were published in the 1990s. It asks how this phenomenon was perceived amongst cultural figures who were often assumed to be involved in it. Therefore, it relies mainly on interviews that were published in magazines at the time, as well as on other forms of journalism and comment. In doing so, it looks at how opinions were expressed across a range of popular youth magazines. Altogether, the thesis asks whether “Cool Britannia” was a new cultural phenomenon that had genuine substance, or if it was just a constructed term that was used strategically to encapsulate a range of different cultural developments in order to re-brand Britain

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<sup>1</sup> Carnaby Street is known for its fashion boutiques and lifestyle retailers, and in the 1960s it was seen as the center of ‘Swinging London’, promoting and developing fashion that became popular worldwide.

politically. This means that the thesis will ask if artists themselves believed in this phenomenon, whether they tried to resist or promote the re-branding of Britain along these lines, whether the media exaggerated it, and to what extent politicians manipulated it and them for their own ends.

In order to examine the cultural phenomenon of the 1990s it is necessary to take a closer look at the term “Cool Britannia”, but also the term “Britpop” because both of these terms could be used interchangeably. The terms are clearly problematic because different people within the media, cultural, and political worlds define these notions in slightly different ways.

The term “Cool Britannia” was first used by the Bonzo Dog Doo-Dah Band in 1967 (Harris, 2004, p. 328) as the title of a song referring to the rather patriotic “Rule, Britannia!” by James Thomson and Thomas Arne from 1740. Furthermore, the term was used in a Ben & Jerry’s commercial from the summer of 1996. The name had been entered by a British solicitor in a competition to name a new ice cream, and the year after, it was used “to describe the cultural tone of Blair’s New Britain” (Mandler, 2006, pp. 235-236). Tony Blair, personally interested in culture, “tried to yoke entrepreneurialism and creativity more closely to specific trends in popular culture, entertaining pop stars, fashion designers and avant-garde artists” as part of New Labour’s “Cool Britannia” campaign before the election (Mandler, 2006, p. 235). Journalist and freelance writer John Harris also points to the connection between “Cool Britannia” and politics, as he says that within Labour “there was a brief spasm of excitement about the concept of ‘Cool Britannia’, later translated into a brief political project known as ‘the re-branding of Britain’” (2004, p. xviii).

As stated by Harris, both Labour and the Tories wanted to be associated with this term (2004, p. 328). The Blairites and the Labour Government of 1997 wanted to modernize the country and its culture, to make people regain confidence in their nation, and they wanted to do so by focusing on creative Britain. These visions were illustrated through the new, young, and “cool” prime minister, Tony Blair.

The newly elected Labour government did everything it could to associate itself with this youthful, modern coolness. It embraced the ‘culture industries’, renamed the National Heritage department the Department of Culture, Media

and Sport, boosted the flow of lottery money into cultural, educational, and especially information-technology programmes. (Mandler, 2003, p. 154)

In other words, the government wanted to focus on culture in renewing and refreshing British society and identity.

Even though these references point to the origin of the term and illustrate the importance of the phenomenon in politics, they still do not succeed in providing a clear definition of the term. In this thesis, however, I have chosen to define “Cool Britannia” as a distinctive cultural moment in Britain during the mid- to late 1990s, which was highlighted by the media and politicians, especially those in Blair’s New Labour Party.

Music was one of the main aspects, if not the most important, of British culture in the 1990s, owing primarily to “Britpop”. Several sources establish 1994 as the year “Britpop” became a fixed term and was firmly planted in British culture. According to Harris, the British rock band Oasis were “ambassadors of a musical wave that had decisively taken root in 1994 and had been accorded a term that soon passed into ubiquity: Britpop” (2004, p. xiii). *The Face* magazine claimed in May 1994 that Britpop’s time had come, and the *Guardian* also pointed to Britpop’s relevance and popularity by saying that Britain never had had it so good<sup>2</sup> and that it was “in the middle of a Britpop renaissance” (Harris, 2004, p. 201). Nevertheless, it is worth keeping in mind that Britpop had really started to emerge in 1992 as a reaction to the musical style of grunge (Harris, 2004, p. xiii).

Additionally, several magazines started to use the word “Britpop” and refer to it as something positive, but still, few of them provided a clear definition of the term. For instance, in an article about 50 small revolutions in the 1990s, *The Face* described Britpop as the 22<sup>nd</sup> revolution:

Lasted 12 months; started by uniting people against a common enemy (bad American rock), and ended up just highlighting the differences between them all; no one ever actually agreed what it really meant; the less imaginative members of the student union took it all at face value (Liam haircuts! Gaz

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<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, this quote came from former Prime Minister Harold Macmillan in 1957 when Britain was experiencing a consumer boom and economic growth (Crafts, 1995, p. 246).

sides!); left a reactionary self-serving bunch of old men in power who made things worse than they ever were in the first place. (Anonymous, 1997a, p. 129; my emphasis)

The *Melody Maker*, on the other hand, claimed that Britpop was “simply good music of British origin, lent a new air of excitement by the fact that it was allegedly avenging the dominance of the US” (Harris, 2004, p. 201). David Hesmondhalgh, professor of media and music industries at the University of Leeds, also emphasizes the British aspect of the music, describing Britpop as “a tradition of ‘distinctively British’ pop with recurring themes, such as: an intense interest in style (...); modes of performance (...); and oddball, eccentric characters, seemingly derived from the music-hall tradition” (2001, pp. 275-276). Harris provides a definition of his own:

Britpop was music that accorded with Damon Albarn’s two-year-old wish to reacquaint domestic rock music with a heritage that took in music hall, the upper end of the 60s canon, and the more cerebral aspects of punk. Its lyrics were expected to ooze an inescapable sense of Englishness (...) and preferably combine even the saltiest observations with an overarching air of camp. (2004, p. 202)

Both Hesmondhalgh and Harris claim that Britpop had its origins in British music hall, and this is supported by Dr. Steven Gerrard from the University of Wales and his description of the phenomenon, which first flourished in the 1860s. Music hall was entertainment mostly associated with the working-class and included sketches, songs, dances, tumblers, ventriloquists, prestidigitators, and illusionists, and “became *the* mass populist entertainment” to represent British culture (Gerrard, 2013, p. 487). Similar to this, Britpop had a comedic, football-stadium, working-class cultural element to it, as seen in, for instance, Oasis’s appeal to football fans, Blur’s album, *Parklife*, and the latter’s music video “Country House”. Furthermore, Gerrard argues that music hall provided an escape from the rigorous industrial labor at the time, which can be compared to Damon Albarn’s claim that music in the mid-1990s was just for escapism (Cigarettes, 1996, p. 38). Put differently, Britpop had an entertainment aspect that was rooted in old British traditions.

According to the *Independent*, Britpop was “British indie-pop bands magpieing the past and enjoying mainstream success” (Harris, 2004, p. 202). What is more, even the looks of artists became an attribute to Britpop, with “cropped hair, charity-shop



clothing that took in either 60s fashions or decade-old sportswear” (Harris, 2004, p. 202). Thus, Britpop was looking back to the past and especially to the 1960s, when British music was a huge success.

At first, Britpop was referred to as a particular genre, namely indie rock, but later it was used to denote a number of contemporary acts (Hesmondhalgh, 2001, p. 276). For instance, both Blur and Oasis were labeled Britpop artists. However, as pointed out by Hesmondhalgh,

Britpop was never, in any sense, a movement with common artistic aims. Nor can Britpop usefully be thought of as a musical genre [...] (...) Britpop is best understood, instead, as a discourse: a group of utterances and statements that have a significant role in organizing understanding of the social realm. And what Britpop discourse did was to construct a tradition of quintessentially British and/or English music that distorted and simplified British musical culture. (2001, p. 276)

The most extensive and possibly clearest definition of Britpop, provided by *Q* magazine, also denied that Britpop was a genre. Here, it is stated that the term

does not apply to a particular sound or musical idiom. (...) Nobody’s quite sure who is Britpop and who isn’t. (...) Britpop is not a genre. Rather, it’s a catch-all – and some might argue spurious – term intended to designate (a) that which is melodious, guitar-based, fashioned by British human materials, playlisted by more than one national radio station and bought by upwards of 60,000 people, and (b) a feeling that Britain has finally, after a period in the wilderness, got something the Yanks might go for. Or, to put it another way, Britpop is indie with more record sales and better organisation. (Cavanagh, 1996, pp. 37-38)

Moreover, the “Brit” part of the term became increasingly popular in the media, which enthusiastically started to use the prefix to create other, similar genres within different cultural aspects, such as “Britdance, Britart, Britfash, Britpop and BritBritain” (Drummond, 1997, p. 140). The prefix had a heroic sense and was linked to increasing pride in forms of British national identity: “Layouts were now set in red, white and blue, and writers infused their reports with a newly acceptable kind of patriotism” (Harris, 2004, p. 203).

Since one of the main topics of this thesis is to examine the concept of “Cool Britannia” it is most logical to look at the period after April 1996, which was the first

time “Cool Britannia” was mentioned in the 1990s’ sense of the term. Nonetheless, it is crucial to keep in mind that many of the aspects associated with the phenomenon started before 1996. Britpop, arguably the main part of “Cool Britannia”, was, according to Harris, used as a single word already by 1994 (2004, pp. 201, 328). The thesis will therefore remain sensitive to these complexities but still be very much concerned with the period when this terminology was fully adapted and exploited by the media and the political class. Furthermore, Harris claims that an article in *New Musical Express* from March 1998 (investigated further down in the thesis) marked the beginning of the end of “Cool Britannia” (2004, p. 358). Therefore, this also represents a logical concluding point for the research used in this thesis. Many of the bands associated with Britpop and “Cool Britannia” continued to produce the same music after this point, but this was no longer seen as a major cultural development, as it had been prior to 1998.

Media play a crucial role in informing society about everyday issues. Since this is a study primarily of British youth culture through magazines, a selection of various British magazines has been made: two fashion magazines, *The Face* and *Loaded*, and two music magazines, *New Musical Express (NME)* and *Q*. These magazines have been chosen because, in general, they are amongst the most representative of British youth culture in the 1990s. This can be seen from their healthy circulation numbers from the mid-1990s (see Appendix A), which indicate that the magazines were relatively popular and read by a significant number of people.

According to Willing’s Press Guide (1998), *The Face* focuses on music, fashion, film, art, design, photography, and youth culture. This can be confirmed by an analysis of all of the magazine’s issues from 1996 to 1998. Additionally, based on my own analysis, one can see that *The Face* is in general a more serious and “adult” magazine than either *Loaded* or *NME*. For example, it featured quite a few serious and informative articles about drugs, as well as news reports about situations in other countries, like Russia and Bosnia. In other words, it is more diverse regarding the topics covered in the magazine compared to *Loaded* and *NME*. Of the four magazines analyzed in this thesis, *The Face* focuses the most on photography and art, including graphic art. Within the issues between 1996 and 1998, *The Face* presented a significant number of articles on cartoon characters and computer games. Concerning

music, *The Face* tends to present articles about and interviews with less famous and popular artists (in addition to the most popular artists) than *NME* and *Q* present. In the end, though, it seems that *The Face* has the broadest perspective, content-wise, of the four magazines.

*Loaded* is a typical “lads’ mag” (a term that gained common currency in the 1990s), as illustrated by its coverage of music, sex, sports, humor, fashion, and general lifestyle. Its target readers are 20-35-year-old single men, or, as the magazine says itself, “men who should know better” (Willing’s Press Guide, 1998). It tends to contain articles mostly about sex (including articles about and interviews with porn stars), football, alcohol, drugs, and drunkenness, but there are also articles about fashion and music, interviews with people from other countries, travelogues, some news reports, and quite a few odd articles, like coverage of snail races and gambling grannies. Between 1996 and 1998, the magazine *did* contain a few bigger articles related to politics, and in general, these tended to be comments on the administration of Tony Blair and the Labour Party. The tone of these politics-related articles, and also of the magazine in general, tended to be humorous, mocking, and satiric. Overall, though, *Loaded* has more unserious, nonpolitical articles.

*NME*, which is the only weekly magazine in this research, covers news and reviews on music, films, and videos and “[r]ock and roll weekly”. As opposed to *Loaded* and *Q*, *NME* does not target readers of a particular age but rather “young rock and pop enthusiasts” (Willing's Press Guide, 1998). Of the four magazines of interest, this well-known music magazine has the most colloquial, informal, and slang language. Within its 1996 to 1998 issues, it included a substantial number of articles about Britpop, such as the ones related to the battle between Blur and Oasis, but also articles about various other genres. Furthermore, the magazine provides numerous interviews with a wide range of primarily British (but also foreign) artists, who tend to discuss the role of music in Britain, why they make music, what they think of other artists, why they are better than these other artists, and their views on love, women, sex and drugs. *NME* also tends to include quite a lot of unserious and humorous material, yet between 1996 and 1998, it also featured several serious articles, reports and comments about the political world.

The last magazine, *Q*, covers modern music, reviews of new music releases, reissues and compilations, film, radio, television, and live concert reviews, and it is aimed at people of both sexes between 18 and 35 years old. After analyzing the magazines, it is clear that *Q* is a more serious magazine than both *Loaded* and *NME*, and at times also *The Face*. Every issue contains articles and interviews of considerable length, and much of its material is relatively serious. Some of the issues present a few good factual articles, but so-called senseless interviews can also be found. Music- and artist-wise, *Q* has a wide perspective (though not as wide as *The Face*) and contains material about artists from almost all musical genres, including Britpop. Still, as opposed to *The Face*, *Q* magazine tends to focus on the most popular artists, in addition to a few “golden oldies”. In general, *Q* seems to be the classiest and most serious magazine in this analysis.

Even though this arguably is a good selection of magazines, one needs to keep in mind that these are not *all* of the magazines, and they do not amount to all forms of British youth culture. Consequently, this research only reflects a part of British youth culture and media, which played a role in popularizing the issues that are under discussion in this thesis. To analyze these four magazines systematically across this chronological period is also an incredible amount of work. Therefore, it would not have been realistic to try to cover more magazines while researching this thesis. However, it is still possible based on this selection to say much about the nature of cultural change in Britain in the 1990s, especially in relation to the specific theme of “Cool Britannia”.

The remainder of this thesis consists of three main chapters. The first introduces the subject of British cultural change in Britain up to the mid-1990s in more detail and traces the origins of some of the themes that will be analyzed later in the thesis. The second chapter discusses the peak of the “Cool Britannia” moment when it garnered so much attention in the national and international media, and how it came to be involved with the political sector both before and during the 1997 General Election. Finally, the third chapter discusses the merits of this phenomenon and what happened after the election.

## **Chapter 1: Cultural change in Britain in the mid-1990s**

Margaret Thatcher was prime minister from 1979 until 1990, and her successor as prime minister was the Conservative party leader John Major who remained in office until 1997. This meant that British youth in the 1990s had never experienced anything but Tory rule. Under Thatcher, the cultural sector was besieged by conservatism, partly because the Tories looked backwards and focused on heritage and traditions instead of looking towards what was new (Mandler, 2003, p. 148). For instance, grants were withdrawn from cultural institutions, and subsidies for cultural activity became more difficult to obtain because of the rearrangement of local government structures. Furthermore, the Conservatives' idea of an "enterprise culture" was promoted. This meant that commercial culture was in the center of attention as market-driven, utilitarian approaches to arts organizations were encouraged, including "an active search for customers but discouraging the difficult or experimental" (Mandler, 2003, p. 147). Thus in short, the inspiration of the 1960s and "Swinging London" had disappeared, and the cultural sector had lost its significant position in society, both at home and internationally.

As a reaction to all this, discontent had increased within society by the late 1980s. But this was also caused by other issues seen under Tory rule, such as privatization, unemployment, strikes, economic recession, and deepened social inequality. In the discontent of their own society, the British people started to look increasingly towards America, even regarding culture and music (Mandler, 2003, p. 151). In the mid-1970s, Anglo-American punk rock gained much popularity in Britain, "[drawing] on working class bitterness and self-flagellation" (Mandler, 2003, p. 148). By the early 1990s, the Seattle-based music genre of grunge had taken root in British youth culture. At first, American bands like Nirvana, Pearl Jam, and Alice in Chains experienced great success in Britain and influenced many British bands, but in April 1993 the front cover of *Select* magazine showed a large photo of Brett Anderson, lead singer of the Britpop band Suede, in front of the Union Jack with the headline "Yanks go home!" (see *Figure 2*, Appendix B). According to John Harris, the "indie" genre of Britpop had been born the year before when the London-based Suede had "accompanied their first records with showy statements about their proud sense of

place” (2004, p. xiii). Suede represented something new and fresh, and its Britishness and pride in its origins became very popular among the British youth. As stated by David Hesmondhalgh, the band was determined to resist the perceived Europeanization and Americanization of British culture (2001, p. 275). Thus, Suede spearheaded what *Select* called “The Battle of Britain” that came to distinguish the 1990s. This so-called battle was advanced as the death of Nirvana vocalist Kurt Cobain in 1994 allegedly introduced a “happy new era” in British popular music and ended “the cult of depression” in Britain (Taylor, found in Cloonan, 1997, p. 61).

The 1990s, this “happy new era”, saw the emergence of new British talent in all three cultural sectors of music, art, and fashion. As a matter of fact, some of the sectors’ artists would become very popular worldwide, which is reflected in the *Vanity Fair* article “London Swings! Again!”. *Vanity Fair* is an American magazine with a truly global readership. The iconic front cover from the March 1997 edition, often used by scholars working on pop culture in the 1990s, shows a photo of the rock singer and lead vocalist of Oasis, Liam Gallagher, and his movie star girlfriend, Patsy Kensit, draped in the Union Jack. These were two of Britain’s biggest celebrities at the time, and as a couple they symbolized both the renewed interest in and the success of a revitalized British culture, which was heavily based on the marriage of “indie” music and fashion.

Comparing the 1990s to the 1960s, especially concerning music, the article pointed to London’s renewed global popularity: “[T]he British capital is a cultural trailblazer, teeming with new and youthful icons of art, pop music, fashion, food, and film. Even its politicians are cool. Or, well, coolish” (Kamp, 1997). The article focused heavily on Noel and Liam Gallagher, the lead members of Oasis, which was awarded the Q Award of *Best Act in the World Today* in both 1996 and 1997 (everyHit.com, 2010). Music was one of the most important and popular aspects of British culture in the 1990s, partly because of the emergence of Britpop. With Suede initially leading the way, new British bands emerged and gained immense success at home, leading Britpop to become firmly established in the British cultural sector and society as a whole. However, Britpop faced not only a “Battle of Britain” but also a war within the movement itself, famously illustrated by the “Battle of Britpop” and the chart war between Blur and Oasis, the two ultimate Britpop bands, in 1995. Blur had decided to

release its single “Country House” the same day Oasis released its single “Roll With It”, which involved the whole nation in the race to sell the most copies, a race that was largely hyped up by the media (Harris, 2004, p. xvi). By the mid-1990s, music’s role and popularity in society had increased enormously, and as the Britpop and indie rock band The Charlatans claimed, British music had become something of “national importance” and was being taken seriously again (Oldham, 1998, p. 19). With the expansion of music’s significance, live music also was revived, and the number of gigs and festivals increased (cf. Oasis at Knebworth, see further down). Furthermore, even radio experienced a revolution when stations started to play new, more modern music like Britpop acts instead of the ordinary “Smashie and Nicey” playlists they had played previously, which focused on pop and soft rock acts such as Chris DeBurgh (Maconie, 2014). “Smashie and Nicey” refers to a parody of aging disc jockeys on BBC Radio 1 who stayed too long on the show without changing their playlists, which then made them appear as old-fashioned and outdated. In short, music in the mid-1990s became so all-embracing that it started to influence other aspects of society as well to an increasing degree.

All of this contributed to a renewing and refreshing of British culture, and it might be claimed that this more or less happened naturally without any directory assistance from the authorities. Arguably, one of the reasons why British music and Britpop came into vogue was the change of focus from America and its rather depressive and self-pitying grunge, to music of a more positive character and lyrics about topics and concerns that were uniquely British and that British people could relate to. According to Harris, the Britpop lyrics were about “a world defined by its own reference points, lyrical concerns and dress code” (found in Cloonan, 1997, p. 51), arguably promoting what Martin Cloonan, professor of popular music politics at the University of Glasgow, calls “quintessential Englishness”<sup>3</sup> (1997, p. 51). This is illustrated in Pulp’s song “Common People” about the British social classes, which was recently voted the number one Britpop anthem by BBC Radio 6’s listeners (Lamacq, 2014).

In relation to music, club culture, often referred to as “acid house” and including electronic dance music, also saw developments and increased popularity in Britain as

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<sup>3</sup> The difference between Britishness and Englishness will not be taken into account in this thesis.



well as in other European countries. Hesmondhalgh claims that the importance of dance clubs to British youth culture has been long-standing and “difficult to convey to outsiders” (2001, p. 279). In other words, club culture can be seen as a typical feature of British youth culture. The reasons for dance clubs’ increased popularity in the late 1980s and early 1990s are numerous: first, they were widely covered in “style magazines”, such as *The Face*; second, ecstasy became a well-known attraction among the youth in these places; third, new music influences were found here, in addition to the appeal of DJs’ progressively adventurous mixing styles; and fourth, the youth were encouraged to participate in this culture as it was associated with rebellion and danger due to press coverage of the police descending on illegally organized parties (Hesmondhalgh, 2001, p. 279). Nevertheless, British club culture appealed to the youth elsewhere in Europe too, and with the opening of the Eurostar from London to Paris in 1994, fashionable British clubs, such as the Ministry of Sound, became more accessible to European youth. This well-known nightclub in London was enormously popular in the 1990s, and it has sub-businesses like a record label and a radio station. However, in a time where Britain came closer to Europe and vice versa, the nation arguably felt an urge to celebrate what was truly British, such as music. For instance, the *Independent on Sunday* announced that the British music industry was number two among the “Ten things Britain can still be proud about” (found in Cloonan, 1997, p. 50).

In general, though, Britain saw events and developments in all sorts of areas that contributed to the nation’s growth, both culturally and economically. For instance, the export of British “indie” music, Britpop, and British club culture as popular global entertainment contributed to the economic growth the country saw in the mid-1990s. Furthermore, as pointed out in the *Newsweek* article “London Reigns”, City of London strengthened its position as a center of international finance in the 1990s (McGuire, 1996). This economic boom was also helped by international trade within art and fashion and the success stories of British designers like John Galliano, Alexander McQueen, and Stella McCartney, and Young British Artists (YBAs), such as Damien Hirst, Tracy Emin, and Sarah Lucas. These promising artists were important promoters of British culture in Europe and in America at the time, and they are also among the cultural icons discussed in the *Vanity Fair* article. Furthermore, even art dealers became famous in Britain in the mid-1990s, some even more famous



than the artists themselves, such as London-based Jay Jopling and Charles Saatchi (McGuire, 2009). They were known for their art galleries White Cube and Saatchi Gallery, as well as their support and contribution to Britart and YBAs.

Naturally, the time of cultural, social, and economic prosperity in Britain contributed to the increased sense of pride in national identity and patriotism that was seen in the mid-1990s, and this was also related to the growing popularity of football. “Lads’ mags” like *Loaded* were peppered with articles, reports, interviews, and notes of various length and style about football, especially as Britain prepared to host the 1996 UEFA European Football Championship (Euro 96). In connection to this international event, *Loaded* presented numerous articles about football in association with national identity. Even British pop music was brought into football culture, illustrated by the song “Three Lions” by the Britpop band The Lightning Seeds, recorded with David Baddiel and Frank Skinner. The latter two hosted the well-known TV program “Fantasy Football League”, where celebrities would talk about football and their dream teams. The English Football Association (FA) chose “Three Lions” to be the official England song in the championship, and it became very popular in Britain, partly because it reflected the national hope that the British would do well in the tournament. The song was catchy and uniting, and people could relate to the lyrics since they pointed to how people should look forward instead of backwards, a tendency that had seemed to influence many aspects of British society previously, including politics. “Three Lions” expressed a belief in the future and that things would get better. Baddiel claimed that the song

takes you somewhere. You start off doubting and end up convinced we’re going to win or draw. (...) [The players] must be proud to play for England. All we’ve played is friendlies but when we’re in the tournament we’ll find out who are the men and who are the boys. (Southwell, 1996, p. 28)

In fact, closely related to the football culture, “being men” attained renewed attention in British society in the 1990s with the emergence of the “lad culture”, promoted through “lads’ mags” like *Loaded* and *FHM*. This culture was characterized by its emphasis on masculinity, British ethnicity, and “post-permissive scripts of ‘cars, girls, sport and booze’” (Nixon, 2001, pp. 380-384). Additionally, this lad culture was marked by an attempt to be anti-aspirational and the “too pissed to bother” attitude

conveyed in *Loaded*. Oasis were seen as the ultimate lads, and their “version of Britpop was more blokey, less arty” than other Britpop bands such as Pulp and Suede, which were seen as misfits, “swaggering suburbanites”, and “awkward indie kids” (Maconie, 2014). Furthermore, Oasis’s opponents Blur were referred to as “laddishness personified” (Shelley, found in Cloonan, 1997, p. 60), and even Elastica, a predominantly female Britpop band, were described as “honorary superlads” (Taylor, found in Cloonan, 1997, p. 60). Hence, with even women being referred to as “lads”, this culture clearly had a significant place within British culture in the 1990s.

All these events and developments and the renewed national pride led to an increased awareness of Britishness and British identity and an increased sense of national optimism. Several newspapers and magazines, both British and international, commented on this and presented articles and reports of the new spark of positivism and enthusiasm in British society. Once again the British people felt they were the center of the world, and London was seen (internationally) as the “coolest city on the planet” (McGuire, 1996). People were increasingly more concerned with Britain itself, thus England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland, than with America. Recall, for instance, how the Troubles in Northern Ireland were moving towards peace and the Good Friday Agreement, signed in April 1998. Regarding the English-speaking nation across the Atlantic, however, Noel Gallagher said he was “not particularly arsed about America” (Sutcliffe, 1996, p. 87), that Americans focused too much on religion and still thought they were pilgrims, and that even aliens would go home if they met a redneck (Deevoy, 1998a, p. 60). Furthermore, Irvine Welsh, Scottish novelist known for his novel *Trainspotting*,<sup>4</sup> and Bill Drummond, Scottish musician and co-founder of the art foundation K Foundation, criticized the American way of doing politics (Drummond, 1997, p. 139; Welsh, 1996, p. 19). Even Blur expressed its contempt for everything American (Anonymous, 1997d, p. 107). Arguably, the tables had turned as America started to look more towards Britain, illustrated by how American magazines focused on London (cf. *Newsweek* article “London Reigns” and the *Vanity Fair* article “London Swings! Again!”).

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<sup>4</sup> The novel was adapted for film in 1997.

Being British became cool, and Britpop was arguably in the center of it all. British culture experienced international success and various Britpop acts contributed to the promotion of this culture abroad since many of them became very popular and influential internationally. Additionally, it is widely accepted that Britain became a more attractive country in this period. This point is illustrated by the fact that England saw a record-breaking three million overseas visitors by August 1996. A press release from the Heritage Department the same year claimed that

London is universally recognised as a centre of style and innovation [and our] fashion, music and culture are the envy of our European neighbours. This abundance of talent, together with our rich heritage, makes “Cool Britannia” an obvious choice for visitors from all over the world. (Harris, 2004, p. 328)

In other words, people felt a sense of pride of their country and the range of cultural developments that flourished there in the early and mid-1990s. As illustrated, this period within British popular culture was largely characterized by new, fun, and positive aspects, which again would influence the political sector.



## Chapter 2: The “Cool Britannia” moment

As with most trends and movements, the boom seen in British culture reached a peak. The following section argues that this peak, the so-called “Cool Britannia” moment, happened around 1996-1997. At this point, the series of cultural developments that had begun in the early and mid-1990s seemed to shift into something potentially more united, and this tendency was seen by the political sector as an opportunity to gain attention from the British people prior to the 1997 General Election.

Throughout the mid-1990s and towards the general election, people increasingly expressed a wish for change in society. The cultural sector had already changed for the better, and 1996–1997 arguably saw the culmination of British cultural life. Oasis, for instance, played for 250,000 people at Knebworth Park in 1996, with more than 2.6 million applications for tickets beforehand (Harris, 2004, p. 298). This event is thus seen as one of the greatest moments of Britpop. Additionally, *Trainspotting* and *The Full Monty* were released in 1996 and 1997, respectively, two films that gained immense success and portrayed life in Britain in the 1990s. Within the fashion world, the 1997 London Fashion Week was a huge success, and, at the time, fashion was allegedly the country’s fourth largest export (Sawyer, 1997, p. 142). Moreover, British names like John Galliano, Alexander McQueen, and Stella McCartney put Britain back on the fashion map internationally, and British magazines celebrated fashion when the designers made their entry into French fashion houses around 1996–1997: Galliano to Givenchy and then to Christian Dior, McQueen, declared “British style’s brightest current star” by *The Face* (Sawyer, 1997, p. 144), to Givenchy, and ex-Beatle Paul McCartney’s daughter Stella McCartney to Chloé. Furthermore, the art scene also experienced a boom in these years, illustrated by the great success of the Saatchi exhibition *Sensation*, which took place in 1997 and presented art by YBAs such as Damien Hirst, Tracy Emin, and Sarah Lucas, among others. The exhibition was organized and owned by art collector Charles Saatchi. Even cuisine became part of British popular culture as celebrity chef Jamie Oliver was discovered by BBC and offered his own TV show in 1997, called *The Naked Chef* (Oliver, n.d.). In other words, a wide range of categories within the cultural sector experienced success

around 1996 and 1997, which became an outstanding moment for British culture in general.

With all this cultural upswing and the upcoming general election, dubbed “the first pop election” (Benson, Craik, & McLean, 1997, p. 38), New Labour and Tony Blair saw an opportunity to play on culture in order to appeal to young voters. Arguably, Blair’s cultural image was reinforced by the magazines, which portrayed him as “minty-fresh”, hip, and culturally up-to-date (Ratcliff, 1996, p. 196). He hung out with David Bowie at the 1996 Brit Awards (Anonymous, 1996a, p. 43), he played the guitar and used to be in a rock band himself (Harris, 2004, p. 157), and he showed genuine interest in rock ‘n’ roll (Barber, 1996). This image was illustrated in *The Face* with a photo of him playing his guitar (Ratcliff, 1996, p. 196). In December 1996, *NME* included an article about Blair’s ten favorite singles from 1996 (Blair, 1996a, p. 31), and most of these were songs by British artists. The article can thus be seen as supporting Blair’s up-to-date image and showing his interest in British music from the mid-1990s. Furthermore, Blair himself said that some songs were included because of the artists’ support of Labour, such as Oasis’s “Don’t Look Back in Anger” and the song “Angel” by British soul-pop band Simply Red, whose singer, Mick Hucknall, donated money to Blair’s election campaign (Deevoy, 1998b, p. 100). This portrayal of Blair as young, cool, and interested in rock ‘n’ roll was the opposite of how the magazines portrayed most Conservative politicians. Former Prime Minister Edward Heath, for instance, was presented as a sycophant to dictators, old-fashioned, and interested in classical music (Yates, 1997, p. 6). Compared to this, then, people expressed much more optimism towards New Labour and had hope that Blair would do better than the previous Conservative prime ministers.

As pointed out by several sources, among them *Newsweek* journalist Michael Elliott (found in Oakland, 2001, p. 48) and John Harris (2004, p. xviii), Labour used the term “Cool Britannia” as a marketing brand for the election campaign as part of its “re-branding Britain” image. To support this “cool” new image of Labour, and to show his appeal to the culturally interested, Blair used a modified line from the football song “Three Lions” in his party conference speech in 1996: “Seventeen years of hurt never stopped us dreaming. Labour’s coming home” (Blair, 1996b; Malins, 1997, p. 103; Southwell, 1996, p. 25). Additionally, Blair also used the upbeat “Things Can

Only Get Better” by the Northern Irish dance-pop group D:Ream in his election campaign, a song which summed up Labour’s attitude for change. In other words, Tony Blair and his New Labour tried to make use of “all things culturally fab” (Alexander, Long, Sutherland, Smith, Thompson, & Willmott, 1998, p. 18) to gain voters before the upcoming election.

Following this, when Labour’s landslide victory in May 1997 was a fact, the British cultural world celebrated the relief from the 18-year-long Tory rule. Jarvis Cocker, lead singer of Pulp and one of the figureheads of Britpop, said he watched the “important national event” on the TV and realized that “something quite extraordinary was happening”: it was “the dawn of a new era” (Anonymous, 1997c, p. 37). Blair’s victory was also celebrated by Noel Gallagher and his girlfriend Meg Matthews, who had champagne, brandy, and cigars all night long (Sutcliffe, 1997, p. 98). Additionally, Paul Weller, British musician and singer-songwriter, said he was glad there had been a change (Cooper, 1997, p. 103), and Mark Chadwick from the British rock band Levellers said Labour’s victory was “a change and that [was] as good as a rest” (Anonymous, 1997b, p. 4). Britain’s renewal was also illustrated in an article in *NME* that drew a picture of how music and politics were united in 1997, when “rock music fell in love with Tony Blair”, who was the “hippest Prime Minister in history” (Alexander, et al., 1998a, p. 27).

Look, there’s Alan McGee acting all grown-up and chatting with Tony and being taken seriously! And here’s our Tony at the Commonwealth Conference flanked by a stage set celebrating Cool Britannia, forcing the wincing Queen to listen to a New Labour-Approved, New Britain stylee Afro-Caribbean version of the national anthem. Groovy! (Alexander, et al., 1998a, p. 28)<sup>5</sup>

First of all, according to this article, “Cool Britannia” was something to be celebrated. Additionally, what this quote is referring to is the fact that Alan McGee, producer and owner of Creation Records, the record company of Oasis, was appointed member of the Labour Government’s newly established Creative Industries Task Force.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The jazzed-up version of the national anthem is also referred to in an article in the *Economist* from 1998, which stated that the foreign leaders who were present when the song was played “reacted with commendable tact to these forward-looking displays” (Anonymous, 1998c).

<sup>6</sup> Creative Industries Task Force was established to map current activity within the sectors of Britain’s creative industries, to assess their contribution to the country’s overall economic performance, and to evaluate policies that would promote these industries’ further development (Flew, 2012, p. 9).

Apparently, a cultural figure was to have his say in political matters. McGee's great influence in the music sector and his previous support of the Labour Party, such as his contribution of £50,000 to its election campaign, might have made Labour realize that it would be advantageous to have him on the team. Thus, the cultural and the political sectors really did unite.

Alan McGee was not the only cultural figure to be open about his support for Tony Blair and the Labour Party. Welsh drummer of the rock band Stereophonics, Stuart Cable, also gave credit to Labour for being the first government that tried to be hip and cool (Alexander, et al., 1998c, p. 33). Furthermore, Noel Gallagher, one of the greatest Britpop characters, occasionally expressed his support for Tony Blair, such as at the 1996 Brit Awards when he said that Blair was one of the few who gave hope to young people in Britain (Sutherland, 1996, p. 4). The six others to do so, he said, were Alan McGee and Oasis themselves. The annual Brit Awards is seen as "the biggest event in the British music industry's calendar" (The BRIT Awards 2014, 2013), and concerning the number of people who saw the show, this was obviously good publicity for Blair. The connection between "Noel G" and "Tony B" was hyped up in the media, especially after the election and Labour's landslide victory. In July 1997, Tony Blair arranged a victory party at Number 10, and among the guests were both Noel Gallagher and Alan McGee. A photo from the party shows Tony shaking hand with Noel, and this became the ultimate image of "Cool Britannia" and the love affair between politics and popular culture, especially music (see *Figure 3*, Appendix B).

After this, politicians were often seen taking part in cultural and musical matters, such as when Labour Minister for the Arts, Mark Fisher, made an appearance on stage at the Glastonbury Festival in 1997. This immensely popular greenfield festival is the world's largest for music and performing arts (Glastonbury Festivals, 2013), and by giving a speech there, Fisher was able to address a large crowd of young people. In 1998, Labour Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott went to the Brit Awards, accompanied by his wife, Pauline Prescott, and Cherie Blair, Tony Blair's wife. Similar to Gallagher's publicity stunt for Blair in 1996, Prescott being at the Brits in



1998 would be good publicity for the “cool” and cultural New Labour.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the new secretary of state for culture, media, and sport, Chris Smith, acknowledged that music at the time was a very important industry in Britain (IRN, 1998, p. 8), and following this it would be only wise of Labour to support that part of culture. Not only did it play an enormous role in British culture in the mid-1990s, but it also contributed to promoting British culture abroad and arguably had an impact on the nation’s economy. Consequently, music was central to British politics.

British music was also relevant for and associated with the political world and Labour through a rather controversial issue, namely that of club culture and drugs. In fact, *Q* magazine drew a direct line between Labour, “Cool Britannia” and the use of ecstasy among the British youth (Eccleston & Malins, 1998, pp. 84-92). In general, the article discussed how the ecstasy economy in Britain had grown by 500 percent between 1988 and 1998, mostly due to the popularity of the club scene and acid house, which very often was associated with drug use. As a matter of fact, ecstasy and other drugs were given immense attention in all four magazines at the time and were discussed by journalists, musicians, and politicians. Some articles, such as this one, provided information about the different types of drugs and the growth of their use in Britain, whereas others presented comments and reactions to the Labour Government’s drug laws and policies (see Alexander, et al., 1998a, p. 28). In the *Q* article, though, “Cool Britannia” was mentioned in relation to ecstasy. First of all, the article pointed to how acid house and drugs had become a central part of mainstream culture in the 1990s, illustrated by Labour’s choice of anthem for the election campaign, “D:Ream’s pean to ecstasy, Things Can Only Get Better” (Eccleston & Malins, 1998, p. 92). Arguably, by choosing this song instead of “a traditional socialist anthem”, Labour underlined how it was trying to be modern and cool, in accordance with the “Cool Britannia” image. Due to the growth in ecstasy use and unfortunate cases like Leah Betts, a young girl who died from ecstasy (see Benson, 1996, pp. 86-90), people in Britain were very much concerned with the drug issue in the 1990s, illustrated by the numerous articles about drugs in the media. As *Q* stated, “[ecstasy] use was still a

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<sup>7</sup> This was not the case though. Danbert Nobacon, vocalist in the British anarchist band Chumbawamba, criticized Prescott quite heavily for being at the Brit Awards and said it was a vain attempt to make Labour seem cool. Nobacon also expressed his contempt with Labour and how its policies affected Britain’s poor and needy by pouring a bucket of icewater over Prescott. However, a poll showed that 63 percent of *NME*’s readers disapproved of Nobacon’s actions (Smith, 1998d, p. 6).

catalyst of moral panic, but the music, fashion and design associated with it were accepted as a natural part of Cool Britannia's cultural make-up" (Eccleston & Malins, 1998, p. 92). In other words, drugs were associated with culture, and culture was associated with politics. The legitimacy of this link between Labour and drugs is disputable and rather controversial, but it illustrates how Labour's alleged coolness arguably was exaggerated in certain aspects, which again could have given it somewhat negative associations. Even though Labour did not promote drug use, this was still what was being presented by *Q* to its readers.

What is more, the *Q* article is just another example of how "Cool Britannia" is most often associated with Labour. When the Tories, on the other hand, realized how much popular culture meant for the British people, they tried to join in on the party and surf the "Cool Britannia" wave. In fact, they were the ones who tried to promote the phenomenon in the first place. In an article about the Labour Party Conference in 1997, Bill Drummond<sup>8</sup> argued that even though Britain was no longer a world power or leader, it knew how to sell cool and run good campaigns. Here, he referred to Blair's "courting of pop people", which he called "more insidious than Clinton's" (Drummond, 1997, p. 140). Drummond then blamed the Tories for, among many other things, how the politicians started to use the same marketing techniques for their policies as clothing companies and record labels used for their products. Additionally, he claimed that Virginia Bottomley, the secretary of state for national heritage under the Conservative Government, was the one who spread the "Cool Britannia" slogan, "lifting it from a *Sunday Times* article in 1996 and sticking it on its letterhead and press releases" (Drummond, 1997, p. 140). In other words, the Tories tried to promote "Cool Britannia", but clearly their attempt was a failure since the notion later became associated with Labour. Robert Hewison, professor of literary and cultural studies at the University of Lancaster, commented on the Tories' failed attempt to promote "Cool Britannia" saying they had promoted a "new" vision of Britain at the same time as they were holding on to their traditions (Drummond, 1997, p. 140). In the 1980s, the Tories had allegedly traded on heritage industry and glorious images of the past instead of dealing with the problems of the present. Additionally, Hewison claimed that "Cool Britannia"'s idealized vision of the future was just a myth, and Drummond

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<sup>8</sup> In this article, the K Foundation founder acted as a journalist for *The Face*.

stated that the social conditions created under Thatcher spawned Britpop and similar movements promoted by people who were either indifferent or hostile to the establishment. Thus, Drummond demonstrated how everything related to Britpop, and indirectly “Cool Britannia”, was unfortunate to the Conservatives.

In the dying days of the Tories’ empire, Cool Britannia became their way of claiming as their own the very things that had come to bury them. Most Tories, remember, think that “irony” is something womenfolk do in front of the fire while watching *Corrie*. (Drummond, 1997, p. 140)<sup>9</sup>

Virginia Bottomley’s letter was also referred to on another occasion in *The Face*, in an article that looked back at cultural events and happenings of 1997. The article discussed issues like drugs, Tony Blair’s election victory, governmental proposals to ban fox hunting, the expansion of Manchester airport, how Hong Kong was given back to China, devolution, and the death of Princess Diana, among other topics. Bottomley’s letter was the press release mentioned in the previous chapter regarding how London and Britain had seen a record-breaking number of foreign tourists in 1996. As pointed out by John Harris (2004, p. 328), Bottomley and the Department of Heritage had written the press release only days after and as a reaction to the American news magazine *Newsweek*’s article about London being “the coolest city on the planet” (McGuire, 1996). In other words, the article led the Tories to start use “Cool Britannia” as a marketing brand name for their country, but *The Face* stated that “[t]he kids aren’t fooled” and implied that people did not acknowledge the Tories’ attempt to give the notion any value. On that account, even if “Cool Britannia” apparently was created by and initially associated with the Tories, it did not become a Tory concept with any success.

Previous to and just after the election, people had expressed (more or less) faith in Tony Blair and New Labour, and at the same time, all four magazines portrayed the Conservatives as old-fashioned and desperate to try to be as cool and popular as Labour. In an *NME* article about various campaigns to encourage young people to vote, Ministry of Sound’s television advertisement and Rock the Vote, an organization set up to boost enthusiasm for voting, were presented as having a left-wing undertone that favored Labour. As a reaction to these campaigns, Charles

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<sup>9</sup> “Corrie” is a nickname for *Coronation Street*, British TV’s longest-running soap opera.

Hendry, Conservative MP and vice-chairman, allegedly said that the Tories had many stars supporting them too (Anonymous, 1996c, p. 7). *NME* reported that the Tories had problems following up on Labour's coolness in the election campaign. The Tories' desperation was also illustrated on a later occasion, when they reportedly tried to ban "Things Can Only Get Better" from the BBC radio stations during the election campaign. Their argument was that it was "patronising for John Major to think young people [would] decide how to vote on the basis of a dance record" (Smith, 1997, p. 4). In other words, since the Tories could not catch up with Labour on the culture front, they were depicted as putting a spoke in Labour's wheels.

Former Prime Minister John Major was not a favorite among several cultural icons either. In his speech from November 1996, Major had changed his opinion on which image of Britain he wanted to promote, from "a Britain of warm beer, cycling old maids, county cricket grounds and morning mist" to "a Britain of packed pubs and clubs, streets bustling with tourists and a capital described (...) as the 'coolest city on the planet'" (Bevins, 1996). The Conservative prime minister also emphasized how Britain once again had become a trendsetter, seen in how the "country [had] taken over the fashion catwalks of Paris" (Bevins, 1996). What he here referred to was Alexander McQueen's newly acquired position at Givenchy, but McQueen himself did not like the way Major took the credit for McQueen's success:

Did he say that? (...) Ah, fucking plank! I'm not one of his own! He didn't get me there, the fucker! Fuck him! So fucking typical of government! They do nothing to help you when you're trying to do something, then take credit when you're a success! (Kamp, 1997)

Clearly, the fashion designer did not want to be associated with the Conservatives.

In *Loaded*, politicians in general were portrayed as a different humankind with negative connotations, regardless of which party they belonged to. A good example of how both politics and politicians were presented was the magazine's article from the Labour and Tory party conferences in 1996. First of all, politics was called a "strange and evil business", and the politicians were sleazes who spoke in a strange language (Deeson, 1996, pp. 91-93). Second, politicians from both parties were presented in an unappealing and negative way: dumb, like Labour MP Harriet Harman, who proposed

dry cleaning as a solution to the problem in Kashmir; crazy, like Labour MP Ken Livingstone, who only wanted to talk about his horny toad; oily, like Labour MP Peter Mandelson, who surprisingly enough did not leave a slime trail; suck-ups, like Conservative MP Seb Coe, who pushed away *Loaded*'s reporter in order to ingratiate himself with Conservative Deputy Prime Minister Michael Heseltine, who himself was presented as an hypnotic snake who almost made the reporter repeat like a sleepwalker "Vote Tory. Vote Tory" (Deeson, 1996, pp. 93-101). It is worth keeping in mind that these presentations are in accordance with *Loaded*'s image as a "lads' mag", and arguably, the magazine presents politics in a bad light because this is what its readers expect. However, with such depictions of the people who run the country, there is no wonder why the British people were skeptical towards them.

As seen from this section, this revitalized form of British culture reached its peak around 1996–1997, which was fortunate for the Labour Party, who tried to make use of what seemed to come together into one large movement in relation to the general election, the so-called "Cool Britannia" phenomenon. Due to "cool" New Labour's appeal to culture and its attempt to re-brand Britain by means of the cultural sector, the party was both supported and celebrated by various celebrities and cultural icons. Yet, keeping in mind how politicians often were portrayed in the magazines, the question is whether Labour's promotion of "Cool Britannia" and its interest in culture really did have any significance, which will be discussed in the next chapter.



### **Chapter 3: Tony Blair's "Uncool Britannia"**

The cultural change around the mid-1990s was characterized by optimism, pride, and positivity. Clearly, this was something the political sector wanted to make use of and be associated with, but its success in doing so is disputable. Less than one year after the election, people's discontent with Labour's policies and the "New Labour–Cool Britannia love affair" became visible both in the media and in public (Alexander, et al., 1998a, p. 27). Not everyone supported the two sectors' close relationship, and already at this point people had started to question how genuine this relationship was and how much substance "Cool Britannia" actually had.

Both the musicians and the magazines were aware of the politicians' systematic use of culture to promote themselves and accused them of trying to exploit the cultural sector to win votes: "Cool Britannia's continued support for New Labour makes New Labour look good. But it's also starting to make the Cool Britons look like mugs" (Alexander, et al., 1998a, p. 28). For instance, Damon Albarn, lead singer in the rock and Britpop band Blur, said he did not warm to Blair because Blair had spoken to him only because Albarn occupied an important position (Albarn, 1997, p. 169). Phil "Albino Priest" Ward from the British electronica group Lo Fidelity Allstars claimed that some people thought less of Labour for trying to be the party of youth (Alexander, et al., 1998c, p. 31). As a matter of fact, on several occasions, artists and journalists explicitly criticized the politicians' exploitation of musicians to win votes (see Udo, 1996, p. 4). Still, the criticism did not address only Labour, as all the major parties sought support from music industry figures before the election. Musicians and other show business personalities were used "openly" in campaigns like Rock the Vote, and the Ministry of Sound also contributed to the election campaign by creating advertisements, particularly aimed at young people, to encourage people to vote (Anonymous, 1996c, p. 7). Regarding Labour, however, even other politicians criticized the party for its exploitation of the music world. Edward Heath, for instance, referred to Labour when he said that politicians would fall over themselves "to appear 'down', as young folks say" with artists and that it could be "costly in the end" because voters could see it as an attempt to put on a show more than to do politics (Yates, 1997, p. 6). Arguably, disregarding whether the cultural figures

approved of the politicians' use of their significance as celebrities, the political sector did not give back to the cultural sector what it had initially promised. In fact, Alan McGee stated that Labour "nurtured its relationship with Noel and [himself], for the party's benefit" (Yates, 1998, p. 15). McGee acknowledged that Gallagher and he might have swung a couple of votes, but he also claimed that there were more downsides than benefits for them in aligning themselves with Labour. Thus, it is clear that people saw the politicians as exploiting culture.

A special edition of *NME* from March 14, 1998, in hindsight called the "Betrayed Issue", presented various articles on Labour's alleged abuse (see *Figure 4*, Appendix B). The front cover of the issue showed a large photo of Tony Blair with the headline "Ever had the feeling you've been cheated? Rock'n'roll takes on the Government" and contained numerous articles, reports, and interviews about four of Labour's recent policy changes. The main article, "BETRAYED – The Labour Government's war on you", criticized the new government for not keeping its promises, but rather doing the opposite of what it had said in the first place. What was supposed to be "culturally fab" did not turn out as expected, and instead of following the "Cool Britannia" image it had tried to accredit themselves, Tony Blair and the Labour Government allegedly focused on the middle of England and Mondeo man (see Benson, Craik, & McLean, 1997, p. 38) Furthermore, the "Betrayed Issue" presented Middle England as "Uncool Britannia", "the heartland of the mean-spirited, narrow-minded, culturally conservative, politically reactionary, homophobic, xenophobic, racist and misanthropic *Daily Mail* reader" (Alexander, et al., 1998a, p. 28). Additionally, Labour was supposed to support culture, youth, and creativity, but instead it focused on appealing to "Tory Britain – the place where culture goes to die" and "the worst of Britain and Britain at its very worst". Nevertheless, despite the critical content of the article, it still acknowledged "Cool Britannia" per se as a positive phenomenon, "a dynamic, perverse, perverted, polyglot, multi-racial, multi-cultural place. It's sweaty, druggy, cool and funky. (...) It's the Britain where diversity is not only celebrated but is taken as a source of inspiration." (Alexander, et al., 1998a, p. 28). What is worth noting here is that the magazines in general rarely commented on "Cool Britannia" as a phenomenon, as if it never had any genuine significance. In this case, however, *NME* acknowledged the phenomenon and even presented it as something positive, except that it was never realized. Instead, "Uncool Britannia" happened.



What caused *NME* to publish such a critical and controversial article was Labour's so-called policy U-turns. After just a short while in power, the new Labour Government started to carry out its politics and make various changes to society – changes that would gravely affect the British cultural picture. First of all, it proposed introducing a curfew for anyone under the age of 18 as a means to clamp down on the increased violence seen in the 1990s, and second, it denied that the drug laws in Britain needed any changes, such as introducing decriminalization (Alexander, et al., 1998a, p. 28). Nevertheless, what caused the most furor among cultural figures and discussion in the magazines were the new policies related to the proposition of a Welfare to Work program and the newly imposed student tuition fees for higher education at the same time as student grants were abolished (Alexander, et al., 1998a, p. 28). Furthermore, Labour allegedly planned on cutting art, music, and drama off the priority list in the national curriculum (Smith, 1998d, p. 6). These propositions caused cultural figures who initially had supported the Labour Party to revolt against it in the media. If Labour was promoting “Cool Britannia”, then why did it give culture a hard time? Labour's love affair with “Cool Britannia” was in trouble.

Damon Albarn, one of the spearheads of Britpop, commented on Labour's policy change in March 1998. At the time, Labour had just announced its plans for the student grants and tuition fees, and Albarn went to the Houses of Parliament to lobby against these policies, saying he believed that people should have the right to free education (Smith, 1998e, p. 4). Before the 1997 General Election, politicians talked about how the country needed a change, and in his speech, Albarn expressed his awareness of how politicians from all parties had used popular culture to attract voters both before and after the election. He also pointed to how they named this culturally appealing marketing strategy “Cool Britannia”, but even though Albarn claimed that there was a large amount of creativity in Britain in the 1990s, he also said that much of this strategy and the politicians' praise of culture was rubbish. As seen in the magazines, Albarn shared the view of several others, all of whom were critical towards the previous Conservative Government and felt that also the new Labour Government had betrayed the people. In other words, one of the head figures of Britpop was not critical towards “Cool Britannia” per se but to the politicians' use of it. He stated that the politicians exploited popular culture for their own profit, and he

also expressed his feelings towards this exploitation by saying that “Cool Britannia” was “a patronising name” for the whole marketing exercise (Smith, 1998e, p. 5). Lastly, Albarn argued that it was hard to live on one’s creativity in the first place, but that Labour’s new education bill would make it even more difficult to succeed as an artist. Put differently, he pointed to the contradiction between Labour’s mouth and actions: it promoted itself as hip, cool, and supportive of culture and creativity, but its actions and legislation communicated the opposite of this. Labour’s policies were not in accordance with the “Cool Britannia” image. What more is, this was also the opposite of what Blair had emphasized in his speech at the Labour Party Conference in 1996: “Ask me my three main priorities for government and I tell you: education, education and education” (Blair, 1996b).

What is worth mentioning is that at the time, there was disagreement within the Labour Party regarding the new tuition fees bill. Susan White, spokeswoman for Labour Education and Employment Secretary David Blunkett’s office, confirmed that Labour had noted the demonstration against it but “that the introduction of [the] fees [was] the fairest way forward” (Smith, 1998e, p. 4). On the other hand, Edward Short, Lord Glenamara and former Labour education minister, claimed that it was “the worst bill he ha[d] seen go through Parliament in 47 years” (Smith, 1998e, p. 4). Ken Livingstone also opposed the bill. In fact, he was the one who invited Albarn to lobby against it, and he also asked Tjinder Singh from the British indie rock band Cornershop, Bobby Gillespie from the Scottish rock band Primal Scream, and the British electronica duo The Chemical Brothers to send a letter to Blair to present their opinion on the matter. Livingstone later told *NME* that there was “very real concern among Labour MPs that the abolition of the maintenance grant [would] hit the poorest students hardest [and] make access to education more difficult for thousands of young people” (Smith, 1998c, p. 2). Livingstone even explained how John Major himself had told him that the politics of the new Labour Government were very right wing, a view he shared with many others (Smith, 1998e, p. 4). On another occasion, John Major admitted that “the Conservatives *had* considered abolishing student grants but hadn’t done so because it would have been such a *bastard* trick” (Alexander, et al., 1998a, p. 29). Long-time Labour supporter Mick Hucknall from Simply Red, on the other hand, justified Labour’s move to the right by arguing that society had moved to the right, and that politicians were public servants of this society (Deevoy, 1998b, p.

100). Hence, Labour's controversial new education policies faced criticism not only from external parties but also internally within the party.

Alan McGee was also aware of Labour's contradictory politics. He stated that the politicians had no understanding of the world of music and rock or the lives of musicians, claiming that many politicians had "a grasp of the essentials of rock'n'roll that borders on the non-existent" (Alexander, et al., 1998a, p. 28). McGee's initial support had been useful for Blair and his party, but this relationship became somewhat stormy after McGee was familiarized with Labour's plans. In an interview in the "Betrayed Issue" McGee claimed that the government was making life worse for musicians by introducing Welfare to Work. As part of this program, the government would cut musicians' dole if they failed to find work after six months on unemployment compensation, leaving the musicians forced to take any full-time job after this. Consequently, musicians would have little time to work on their talent (Smith, 1998b, p. 5). "On one hand, you've got Tony Blair and Chris Smith making this thing about Cool Britannia, but on the other hand they're taking away the means for the next generation of artists and musicians to go away and create" (Alexander, et al., 1998b, p. 33). In other words, McGee argued that Labour's actions were not in accordance with its creativity-supporting image and the policies it had promoted itself with. Nonetheless, McGee also proposed a solution to the dispute by suggesting a scheme for musicians enabling them to focus on their music and talent. After all, he was member of several advisory bodies, such as the Creative Industries Task Force.

In addition, similar to Damon Albarn's comment about "Cool Britannia", Alan McGee did not criticize the concept but rather the politicians' exploitation of it, or their failure to be "Cool Britannia". Arguably, both Albarn and McGee thus acknowledged the idea of "Cool Britannia", but neither of them saw it happening. This was also indicated by the magazines on several occasions, and by various other musicians who pointed to how the Welfare to Work scheme would stifle creativity and prevent talent from being developed. Tony Blair was accused of betraying musicians and artists "by living off the 'Cool Britannia' image, while not cultivating it at grass-roots" (Smith, 1998b, p. 5). Even if "Cool Britannia" in itself was not portrayed as something negative, the only direct comments on the phenomenon presented by cultural figures relate it to a negative issue: the government's betrayal of

the cultural sector. It is worth keeping in mind that this is what the readers of *NME* were presented with, besides general criticism towards the political sector.

The “Betrayed Issue” of *NME* received much attention in the media in the days and weeks following its release, and *NME* featured various small and larger articles on the topic in several following issues. Furthermore, the furor caused by Labour’s new policies made the government revise these policies as it arguably “attempt[ed] to regain its Cool Britannia” (Smith, 1998a, p. 4). In a fairly short article, *NME* explained how the Labour Government cooperated with the music industry, including Alan McGee, to create a “New Deal” for youngsters who wanted to succeed within the music industry: the six-month limitation for being on the musician’s dole was abolished, and instead, young promising artists would be interviewed and assessed for their commitment and talent in order to be allowed to continue on the dole. Additionally, they would receive support and guidance from trained advisers and offered training in how to get a job in the music industry. Furthermore, they could now spend up to three years on this scheme (Smith, 1998b, p. 5). The government took the media publicity and people’s reactions into consideration and revised its policies. Labour listened to the people. In relation to the policy revision, Chris Smith said that the government wanted to change the rules so that it did not “leave people on the dole but [provided] them with real opportunities to make a good career for themselves in music” (IRN, 1998, p. 8). He said that Labour took criticism seriously, that Labour had regular business meetings with the music industry, and that the government did not court musicians “only to turn a deaf ear to their advice”. Additionally, Tony Blair said he did not “accept that lots of young people were disillusioned with the government. (...) What you don’t do is elect a new government and suddenly the world is put to rights” (IRN, 1998, p. 8). Despite the youth’s dissatisfaction with Labour, the party was, at least to a certain extent, praised for its policy revision, and the change was seen as being more in accordance with the “Cool Britannia” image.

However, not everyone applauded Labour’s way of handling the problem. Ann Widdecombe, Conservative backbencher, said that “[e]verybody’s got views. Actors have got views. (...) Pop stars have got views. And there’s nothing wrong with making these views known. What I’m saying is that it’s not a great asset to a cause to

have a pop star along” (Smith, 1998e, p. 4). Thus, where Labour was presented as taking musicians’ views into account, the Tories were presented as criticizing Labour for this action and as not acknowledging the value of cultural figures’ opinion. Moreover, the magazines reflected people’s views on the Tories at this point. Even if people were not satisfied with Labour, they did not think that the Conservatives would have been any better. This was illustrated by Noel Gallagher, who also contradicted his previously positive view on Labour: “[S]omething tells me that the Labour Party will probably contrive a way to fuck it up for themselves. (...) [B]ut at least it’s not the Tories lying to you” (Deevoy, 1998a, p. 60). In other words, people were relatively negative towards Labour but even more towards the Conservative Party.

As seen in the magazines, most musicians tended to be more or less negative and pessimistic towards politicians, and politics in general, no matter which party they were talking about (more negative towards the Tories than towards Labour, though). Then again, on many occasions the musicians were reluctant to be serious when discussing political matters. For instance, Paul Heaton, known by some as lead singer in the British pop rock group The Beautiful South, said that if he had formed a government, he would “[b]ring back public hanging. Free taxis for pensioners. No VAT on fish and chips and pop and crisps. I’d nationalise fucking everything” (Quantick, 1996, p. 95). Both the negativity towards politics and the reluctance to be too serious about this are also demonstrated by the magazines, especially *Loaded*, which on one occasion quoted a British citizen: “Fuck the pope! Fuck the government! Fuck the Royal Family! Fuck the church! Fuck the army! Fuck the navy! Fuck the air force! Fuck the NHS! Fuck the social services! And, while you’re about it, fuck the fucking rest of the fuckers!” (Wilde, 1997, p. 70). The outbreak had nothing to do with the article per se, an interview with the British girl band All Saints, but was expressed by a woman outside the band’s studio. Even though the comment was neither by an artist nor by any of *Loaded*’s reporters, it was still there to be read by *Loaded*’s audience. It also displayed both the typical criticism towards various aspects of society and the tendency to be unserious and rather mocking when talking about politics. Among the few more serious comments about politics, though, was a reply by Geri Halliwell, better known as Ginger Spice from the British girl group the Spice Girls, to the question of what she would do if the world ended tomorrow: “It

will have to be something I feel passionate about. I love writing but then I'd like to do something, *dare I say it, political*" (Deevoy, 1997, p. 50; my emphasis). These examples thus illustrate the reluctance to be serious about politics that was very often seen in the magazines.

Nevertheless, despite people's criticism towards the political sector and Labour's policy U-turn, these were not the only reasons why "Cool Britannia" failed to become a success. Already before 1996, Britpop's popularity had started to fade. British music was losing its celebrated position, partly because Britpop was being hyped up to the extent that it became boring and lost its value and originality, but also because of technological developments, such as the Internet. This was discussed in another *NME* special later in 1998, the "Burning Issue", which presented numerous articles about the state of the music business in Britain and discussions about "[w]hy British music [was] going up in smoke" (Alexander, Long, Sutherland, Smith, Thompson, & Willmott, 1998, front cover). At the time, British music's popularity declined, record sales went down, and gigs and festivals were cancelled due to poor ticket sales. *NME* reporter Steve Sutherland argued that one of the reasons for this decline was that bands at the time did not "have the balls to see it through". Instead, they did what bands before them had done and "search[ed] out excuses to quit as soon as the so-called pressures of fame started to bite" (Sutherland & Mulvey, 1997, p. 40). The records released did not do anything new, and people got bored with music since it only was seen as reproductions of previous acts.

Another obvious reason for music business's decline was technological development and the increased spread of music on the Internet. Record labels and retail outlets became redundant as the Internet revolutionized buying, selling and listening to music. The fact was, however, that British music had lost much of its glory and interest experienced in the mid-1990s Britpop heyday, and *NME* questioned why: "What the hell's going on? Only yesterday we were basking in the glory of Britpop and everyone were saying we were the centre of all things culturally fab. Cool Britannia. Remember?" (Alexander, Long, Sutherland, Smith, Thompson, & Willmott, 1998, p. 17). Based on the reporter's wording, "Cool Britannia" was referred to as a culturally fabulous phenomenon. Even though Britpop once again was given more attention than "Cool Britannia", the latter was conceivably part of

something positive, a cultural domain the British people were proud of and felt they were the center of. Even if this case portrays “Cool Britannia” as something positive, it is still presented as a phenomenon that never really became firmly planted in British society. This is confirmed by Sutherland’s argument that 1997 did not “produce a neat youth culture bracket to encapsulate its best and brightest” (Sutherland & Mulvey, 1997, p. 40).

Britpop’s downfall was also caused by a rather controversial issue. After being in the limelight for a while, Britpop and the focus on everything British were increasingly criticized for moving towards the border of jingoism (Cavanagh, 1996, p. 37; Unknown, 1997e, p. 34). The increased emphasis on Britishness and pride in national values led Britain closer and closer towards what suspiciously resembled nationalism. Allegedly, Blur initially proposed calling its second album *British Image No. 1 or England versus America*, which, according to *Q* magazine, made it involved in a “mini-jingoism controversy”. Despite people being proud of British success, even the musicians themselves became critical of the step towards nationalism. Edwyn Collins, Scottish alternative rock musician, said, for example, that the only criticism he had of Britpop was its jingoism (Anonymous, 1997e, p. 34). Martin Cloonan states that British music in the mid-1990s often was characterized by xenophobia and anti-Americanism, but that this tradition had been more or less apparent in Britain ever since the early 1950s. Arguably, these tendencies had existed in British society for a while, but they became increasingly evident with the 1990s emphasis on the British.

Moreover, the magazines associated the 18-year-long Tory rule with nationalism as well. For instance, *The Face* claimed that “Britain in 1995 was a nation desperately in search for a new identity” as people at the time had started to realize that it was nationalism that had scarred British foreign politics (Anonymous, 1996b, p. 73). Another example is found in *NME*, where the Tory government is referred to as “18 years of racism, homophobia, nationalism, xenophobia, arrogance greed, sleaze and snobbery” (Alexander, et al., 1998a, p. 28). Nevertheless, there is reason to believe that neither the Tories nor the accusations of jingoism were what made the Britpop ship sink. In addition to the other reasons discussed in the “Burning Issue”, former managing director of A&M Records Osman Eralp, compared Britpop and everything around it to the disco boom in the 1970s (Alexander, Long, Sutherland, Smith,



Thompson, & Willmott, 1998, p. 18). According to him, the bubble burst when the movement became so hyped up that it entered the zone of boredom. In other words, since Britpop already was being criticized and on its way down when people tried to promote “Cool Britannia”, this would leave its marks on and influence the success of the latter phenomenon.

The question is whether it was too late for the phenomenon of “Cool Britannia” to stand a chance to become successful and an all-encompassing characteristic of British society. Alan McGee claimed that Tony Blair was a brilliant and pragmatic politician who, together with his leading adviser, MP Peter Mandelson, would align himself with whatever was current and made the most sense. “[I]t’s called being clever” (Yates, 1998). Moreover, concerning Labour’s policy revision, McGee gave the “New Deal” “a cautious welcome” (Smith, 1998a, p. 4). In other words, Labour’s cool image was seen as only skin deep and “Cool Britannia” as nothing more than just another strategy. Additionally, the *Economist* also claimed that people were already sick of the term “Cool Britannia” by March 1998, before *NME* published its “Betrayed Issue” (Anonymous, 1998c). The same article stated that Labour tried to renew Britain partly as a reaction to polls that suggested that foreigners saw Britain as a backward-looking country. This is why Tony Blair in his speeches used numerous success stories, like those from the creative industries, to show how Britain was innovative, hi-tech, modern, and culturally updated. However, as the *Economist* pointed out,

there is a danger in putting ‘creative’ industries and youth culture at the center of a government-sponsored effort to change Britain’s image. These are things that depend on fashion and spontaneity. But few things are less fashionable or spontaneous than a grinning politician in a suit. (Anonymous, 1998c)

People argued that Blair overdid the ambitious youthfulness, which conceivably was one of the reasons why “Cool Britannia” did not succeed. Culture did not like being exploited by the political sector, at least not when it did not receive anything good in return. Mark Leonard, member of Demos, “a think tank stuffed with eager young Blairites” (Harris, 2004, p. 355) and writer of the acknowledged report “Britain<sup>TM</sup>” from 1997,<sup>10</sup> claims that the “Cool Britannia” debate was “never about being cool, or

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<sup>10</sup> “Britain<sup>TM</sup>” discussed the need and wish for a re-branding of Britain.



even trying to be cool” (1998). At first, people criticized the government for not taking musicians, fashion designers, film stars, and other cultural icons seriously. Then, as seen in this thesis, when it *did* try to address the cultural sector more, it was criticized for “trying to bask in the reflected glory” of these groups. Leonard argues that no matter what the politicians did, the cultural figures’ response was to be antiestablishment and attack the government, a behavior hyped up by the media (1998). This was not the first time the mixing of culture and politics had been unsuccessful, as the same tendencies had been seen in the 1960s in the relationship between Harold Wilson and the Beatles.<sup>11</sup> History seemed to repeat itself, which might be another reason why people were reluctant to believe in “Cool Britannia”. They anticipated that it would not become a success in the first place and therefore nothing to put their money on. The question is whether British youth culture will ever become tolerant of the political world and the establishment trying to join in on the party. Louise Wener, one of the few female Britpop stars and front woman of the British band Sleeper, was critical towards musicians hanging out with politicians, arguing that music was for breaking *out* of the establishment: “For God’s sake, politicians slaughter people for a living” (Harrison, 1997, p. 70). In short, she represented people’s opinion that the two sectors should be kept separated.

Following this, the four magazines reflected how Britain seemed to become more pessimistic again in the post-Britpop period, similar to what it had been previous to the glorious Britpop years. By the end of 1997, Bobbie Gillespie proclaimed that “Britain at the moment [felt] claustrophobic, pregnant with violence, run-down, edgy, paranoid and no sense of communality” (Anonymous, 1998b, p. 65). He described the country as hard, gray, industrial, and a place where there was no sunshine or smiles (Moody, 1997, p. 37). Damon Albarn was also quite pessimistic about British society. He claimed that perpetual insecurity had characterized the 1990s and that the British people were powerless and confused “by politics and work and sex and even things like morality” (Albarn, 1997, p. 169). Furthermore, he wrote that there were no politics in Britain at the moment, that people’s beliefs in what they could achieve were dismantled, and that their psyches were in a terrible state those days. Albarn even called the 1990s an “end-of-the-century social and mental breakdown” and

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<sup>11</sup> The “Betrayed Issue” pointed to how the Beatles went back on their initially good relationship with Harold Wilson when he supported the United States in the Vietnam War (Alexander, et al., 1998a: 28).

proclaimed that the new millennium equals a new start idea was hype (1997, p. 169). This feeling was also reflected in *The Face* in 1998 as it portrayed 1997 as the year Britain woke up after the “95’s we’re-magic-us Britpop froth-fest when Britain boomed and everyone felt ‘Alright’”. By then the people was faced with the “hoary old ‘Millennium Madness’” that meant mortality was inching closer and closer and everything they knew made less and less sense (Patterson, 1998, p. 118).

Negativity and pessimism slowly came back to characterize British society, but the question is whether the optimism seen previously in the mid-1990s was genuine and real, or whether it was only a short period of superficial hope and positivity reflected in the media. Despite the many optimistic views and comments seen in the mid-1990s, some people still expressed negativity and pessimism towards British society. For instance, Karl Hyde and Darren Emerson from the British electronica group Underworld said in March 1997 that the British were a very oppressed and rotten society and that they were brought up to be uptight (Davis, 1997, p. 103). Stryker McGuire, the author of the *Newsweek* article “London Reigns”, had in 1996 celebrated “Cool Britannia”. In 2009, McGuire wrote another article about the phenomenon, “This Time I’ve Come to Bury Cool Britannia”, in which he commented on pessimism’s return to British society: “How different everything is today. Optimism is a thing of the past (‘We just don’t do hope here, do we?’)” (McGuire, 2009). He argued that Britain after the mid-1990s had seen depressed and complicated times. What is interesting is whether this pessimism, which arguably had pervaded British society more or less over several decades, was one of the reasons why its people tended to criticize politicians and society so much also in the 1990s. Conceivably, “Cool Britannia” could have been doomed to fail simply because of the critical mentality that was seen in parts of British culture in the first place.

Overall, the alleged glory of the mid-1990s and the “Cool Britannia” moment did not succeed in becoming an embedded and lasting part of British society. The relationship between culture and politics, which at first appeared so splendid and rewarding, was disclosed as unbalanced and exploitative. Among other reasons, the politicization of culture and the Labour policies’ failure to live up to the “Cool Britannia” image led to the phenomenon’s fall.

## **Conclusion**

The phenomenon of “Cool Britannia”, even if it is challenging to define properly, was mostly associated with Tony Blair and New Labour around the 1997 General Election. At this point, British culture boomed and experienced a peak in popularity and success that had arguably not been seen since the 1960s. Tony Blair and his new Labour Government sought to re-brand Britain based on this cultural growth and gave this re-branding exercise the name “Cool Britannia”. Ideally, this phenomenon was supposed to encapsulate a range of different cultural developments, including most famously Britpop.

The comments on “Cool Britannia” in the magazines suggest, however, that the outcome of this strategy was not what the politicians had initially hoped for. First of all, neither the cultural figures involved nor the magazines appeared to embrace “Cool Britannia” as a phenomenon, as seen from the lack of references to the notion in the magazines. They did, on the other hand, discuss issues that were “culturally fab”, but these were never seen as part of one superior, all-encompassing phenomenon.

Arguably, the way the notion had been promoted by and presented as a part of the political world may have led the magazines and musicians, and other actors within British youth culture, to refrain from embracing the phenomenon because they wanted to dissociate themselves from the political sector. Furthermore, the magazines did not discuss “Cool Britannia” until after the Labour Government had made a U-turn regarding the policies it had initially promoted, thus after it had failed to become a success. Therefore, “Cool Britannia” seemed to be only a constructed term, which politicians tried to use to associate themselves with the cultural and social changes of the mid-1990s. Apparently this served to strengthen Britishness and British national identity, but evidently it was the case that it was used to promote themselves around the election. Nonetheless, New Labour’s exploitation of the cultural sector never saw any long-term success – rather the opposite, as seen from the reactions of the cultural sector and the media. People thought that New Labour’s cultural focus had been hyped up around the general election, and it was seen as having been used opportunistically when the party seemed to abandon “Cool Britannia” shortly after the election. It may be argued that because of this, and because of the lack of comments

and promotion of “Cool Britannia” by the politicians themselves (in the magazines), they did not actually believe in it and therefore did not fully commit to it either.

What can be concluded from this thesis is that the reasons why “Cool Britannia” failed to take root are complex. First of all, Labour’s policy U-turn clearly did detain the phenomenon from becoming firmly established in British society. Second, the phenomenon arguably tried to embrace more aspects than it should. As pointed out in *The Guardian*, ‘Cool Britannia’ appeared as an artificial construct, which had such a wide reach that it was impossible to label (Ravenhill, 2008). Third, the politicians might have been too late in grasping the opportunity to play on the cultural upswing, as the culminating point possibly had been passed already. This was seen in how Britpop was at first discussed with pride and positivity before people became more critical of it. Fourth, there is a possibility that the cultural sector and the media can be blamed since they did not help promote “Cool Britannia” per se, as opposed to what they did with Britpop. Hence, a lack of support from and cooperation between the three parts arguably caused the phenomenon to fail before it had time to really take root. Fifth, history tends to repeat itself and we know that most cultural developments only remain fashionable for limited periods of time. When things become popular and mainstream they are known to quickly fall out of fashion and become “uncool”. Sixth, the tendencies of nationalism discussed in relation to Britpop could have prevented people from promoting “Cool Britannia”, in order to stop further development of the so-called jingoism. Lastly, the reluctance to engage too much with or be too serious about politics by the cultural sector illustrates how popular culture and politics repeatedly fail to mix deeply and substantially. In other words, initial curiosity was never converted into firm interest. However, what is confirmed by this thesis is that the political sector can have an impact on the cultural sector and vice versa.

Additionally, based on the analysis of the magazines it is clear that people interpret these types of cultural phenomena very differently. Some saw Britpop as an exciting phenomenon to be proud of while others claimed it was overrated and hyped up. Some expressed faith in Tony Blair and New Labour, but others doubted that they would do any good. In other words, the various issues discussed in this thesis did not create areas for mass public agreement in British society. However, there was one

thing that the artists, magazines, and politicians did finally agree on, which was “Cool Britannia”’s failure.

However, based on the few references that were found in the magazines, it seems as if people in hindsight recognized the idea of “Cool Britannia” and saw it as something that could have been both genuine and successful, only something that was never realized. Since the politicians were reluctant to go all out for this marketing strategy after the general election, the phenomenon never amounted to anything but a nice catchphrase. Nevertheless, what is worth keeping in mind is that this is only valid for the phenomenon as a whole. It is crucial not to forget that Britpop, and to a certain extent Britart, did have an important impact and influence on British culture and society in the 1990s. This is supported partly by how media celebrated Britpop’s twentieth anniversary this year, especially on the radio. For instance, BBC Radio 6 featured various shows dedicated to Britpop, such as “Your Favourite Britpop Anthem countdown”, in which “Common People” was voted number one, as previously mentioned (Lamacq, 2014). Several of the newspapers used in this thesis have also been honoring the movement, such as the *Mirror* article claiming that Britpop was “a celebration of British life” (Maconie, 2014). As seen from this, parts of “Cool Britannia” did experience some success, but the phenomenon as a whole never gained any genuine substance or traction.

In retrospect, even if ‘Cool Britannia’ did not obtain the success and substance that some people had been hoping for before the 1997 election, it still had an impact on British society. After all it did contribute to increased political interest. Young people clearly became enthused by the furor caused by Labour’s new policies and the party’s interest in marketing itself as a new and culturally aware political project. Because of the politicians’ increased interest in the cultural sector Britain arguably saw a mutual awakening and discussion increased between these two sectors. Thus, similar to Britpop, no such phenomena will last forever, and even though it was criticized for various reasons the process surrounding ‘Cool Britannia’ still had some value.

Throughout this whole thesis the cultural boom of the 1990s has been compared to the one seen in the 1960s, such as illustrated in the *Vanity Fair* article “London Swings! Again!”. These two periods are separated by only 30 years. To put things in

perspective, in only a decade the same amount of time will have passed since Britpop emerged and left its mark on British youth culture. What will be exciting to see is whether Britain, in ten years time, will see a new cultural boom that will be influenced by and compared to Britpop. In relation to this, it will also be interesting to see if people have changed their opinion on “Cool Britannia” by then.

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## Appendix A

### Circulation numbers for the magazines

Numbers collected by Audit Bureau of Circulations (ABC), found in Willing's Press Guide (UK editions from 1996 to 1999).

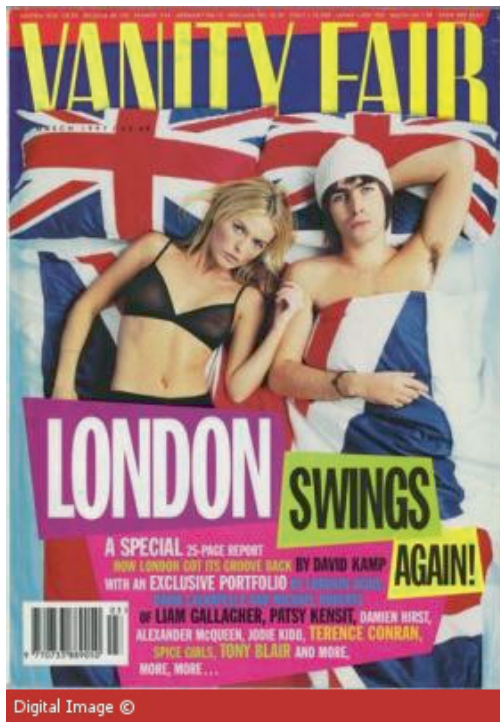
<i>Period</i>	<i>Magazine</i>	<i>Circulation numbers</i>
1995: January - June	<i>The Face</i>	107,192
	<i>FHM</i>	90,607
	<i>Loaded</i>	127,677
	<i>Melody Maker</i>	60,540
	<i>NME</i>	115,827
	<i>Q</i>	215,225
1996: January – June	<i>The Face</i>	112,227
	<i>FHM</i> (July – December)	115,034
	<i>Loaded</i>	238,955
	<i>Melody Maker</i>	55,288
	<i>NME</i>	117,251
	<i>Q</i>	215,057
1997: January - June	<i>The Face</i>	108,195
	<i>FHM</i>	504,959
	<i>Loaded</i>	380,420
	<i>Melody Maker</i>	45,203
	<i>NME</i>	106,792
	<i>Q</i>	182,862
1998: January - June	<i>The Face</i>	46,020
	<i>FHM</i>	753,332
	<i>Loaded</i>	437,205
	<i>Melody Maker</i>	36,027
	<i>NME</i>	86,128
	<i>Q</i>	169,297



## Appendix B

### Figures

**Figure 1** – *Vanity Fair*,  
“London Swings! Again!”



**Figure 2** – *Select*, “Yanks go home!”



**Figure 3** – Tony Blair and Noel Gallagher, party at Number 10 Downing Street (Alan McGee in the background, to the right)



Figure 4 – *New Musical Express*, the “Betrayed Issue”

