

An investor's guide to British pop

BY JOHN CULLEN

Since the dawn of the industrial revolution, British invasions have always caused other nations to shudder. But after centuries of domination, the post WWII era saw Britain's military and economic prowess supplanted by something else — music. In the year 1996, music export earnings eclipsed that of all England's steel mills. Domestic record sales reached \$2.8 billion — more money than what was spent on fruit and vegetables. And to think it all started with four young lads from Liverpool.

Beatlemania, in economic terms, was a fraction of the hype surrounding the current darlings of British press, the Spice Girls. Their 17-million units sold worldwide for the debut album, *Spice*, would have John Lennon rolling over in his grave.

It has been 35 years since the first British Invasion, and have things ever changed. The key to success in the music industry has become

marketing, not longevity. Although the Beatles and the Rolling Stones have shaped the course of rock and roll, something must be said about the flashes in the pan.

It all started with the Monkees. Davey Jones and the boys were auditioned for a TV series about a zany hippie band. The popularity of the show rocketed them to fame and successive North American tours (not to mention having opening acts like Jimi Hendrix). After the public's thirst had been quenched through heavy radio play of "Last Train to Parksville", the Monkees' TV and music career was cancelled. Michael Nesmith (the one who wore the toque) continues to put out albums in a defiant attempt to prove his ability as a musician. Davey Jones was last seen on the Brady Bunch Movie with his tongue firmly planted in cheek.

Flash forward. It's the morning hours of 1998, and we are on the threshold of something very big. The Spice Girls, following in the well-worn footsteps of *A Hard*

Day's Night, will soon release their '5 days in the life of Spice' movie, *Spice World*. It will probably be a moderate success due to one fact: the managers of the sisters Spice have marketed them so well, fans and non-fans will have no choice but to flock to theatres.

The formula works as such:

-5 distinctly different female caricatures to fulfil all male fantasies

-1 catch phrase or ideological belief (everybody scream "Girl Power!")

- 1 / 2 teaspoon of talent

- barely enough spandex and/or rubber (whatever you have in the cupboard) to cover their private parts

-1 very good producer/sampler

-2 dictionaries of over-used pop song cliches

Blend at will.

The formula is better than Einstein's $E=mc^2$. It is completely interchangeable (insert Backstreet Boys here), and the juggernaut of a profit machine. The only thing the suits behind the spice didn't realize is that the girls are not sex symbols for pre-pubescent boys, but rather a rallying cry for pre-pubescent girls.

Either which way, *Les Femmes Epice* have a half-life of nine months. The reason is simple. Their demographic ages quickly and goes through fads like running shoes. In a year they'll be thirteen and kicking themselves for spending \$50 on a concert ticket. To further my argument, how many 20-year-old women are out there emphatically denying that they ever owned a New Kids on the Block CD? I rest my case.

But these statements are far from profound, especially when this audience is supposed to be university

educated. However, the marketing tactics of the music industry are subtler than one may think. Most people blindly accept bands like Oasis, Blur and Bush as serious artists who feel

more records. But some higher power looked down on all of us nay-sayers and granted our wish — smiting them with an eventual denouement. Oasis' new album *Be Here Now* (more aptly titled *Morning Glory II*) has barely sold half of its predecessor's numbers.

And rightly so. The album is rehashed Beatles-lite minus creativity. Their champagne supernova will come sooner than expected.

Other bands chose different routes in 1997.

Bush released an album called *Deconstructed*.

The idea was to cash in on electronica without writing new tunes. And it failed. They should have taken some lessons from the Tea Party, who essentially did

the same thing but actually moved some units. Blur disappeared from view after losing a publicity battle with Oasis for the title, "King of Britpop".

Their self-titled comeback album is a sharp departure from their previous bubble-gum pop, instead loaded with what sounds like

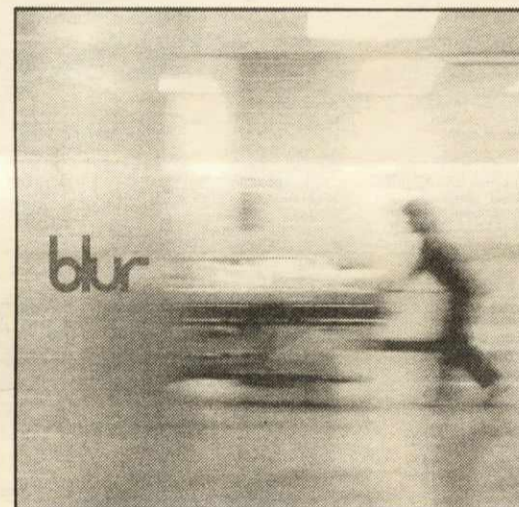
Pavement songs arranged by a Ziggy Stardust-era David Bowie.

Bands like Oasis, Blur, Garbage and Bush have proven a few things. First, current popular music has absolutely no shelf life. These bands will eventually fold, proving that they only last until record companies choose to market



need to express themselves through their music. But the truth is that they are well-crafted corporate entities.

I have spent more hours than I'd care to reveal debating the validity



of Oasis as real musicians. The megalomaniacal brothers Gallagher reached a plateau last year. Anything they said, no matter how ridiculous or offending, sold them

something else.

Grunge was supposed to be the death of empty pop. In 1992, Nirvana led the wave of bands whose job was to stomp out the pesky hair-band weed growing in the garden of rock and roll. Unfortunately, Seattle bands and their ilk became just as mighty in the corporate arena. The success of the Spice Girls, Oasis and the Backstreet Boys proves that weeds are hard to kill. But here's what we have to look forward to in 1998.

Radiohead finally gained the accolades they deserved when they released *The Bends*. Their latest, *OK Computer*, is not only a well crafted album, but promises excitement for the future. The Oxford fivesome are far from burning out.

Roots rock gurus Son Volt and Wilco may not have booking agents knocking down their doors or be the focus of frenzied bidding wars, but the honest strength of their recent albums shows promising years ahead.

The Black Crowes, Eric Clapton, Beck, and the Jon Spencer Blues Explosion are all working on new albums. They may not succeed in weeding the garden, but some of us still have hope.

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