

Twee as Fuck

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Indie pop is not just "indie" that is "pop." Not too many people realize this, or really care either way. But you can be sure indie pop's fans know it. They have their own names for themselves (popkids, popgeeks) and for the music they listen to (p!o!p, twee, anorak, C-86). They have their own canon of legendary bands (Tiger Trap, Talulah Gosh, Rocketship) and legendary labels (Sarah, Bus Stop, Summershine). They have their own pop stars, with who they're mostly on a first-name basis: Stephen and Aggi, Cathy and Amelia, Jen and Rose, Bret and Heather and Calvin. They've had their own zines (*Chickfactor*), websites (twee.net), mailing lists (the Indie pop List), aesthetics (like being TWEE AS FUCK), festivals (the International Pop Underground), iconography (hand drawings of kittens), fashion accessories (barrettes, cardigans, t-shirts with kittens on them, and t-shirts reading TWEE AS FUCK), and in-jokes (Tullycraft songs and the aforementioned TWEE AS FUCK)-- in short, their own culture. They're some of the only people in the world who remember that Kurt Cobain used to kind of be one of them, and they've been wildly generous about the moments where one of their private enthusiasms-- like, say, Belle and Sebastian-- bubbles up into the wider world of indie music.

As of the mid-1990s, there were a hell of a lot of kids like this in America: Happy pop geeks in love with all things pretty, listening to seven-inch singles released on tiny labels, writing songs about crushes, and taking a good deal of pride in the fact that everyone else found their music disgustingly cute and amateurish and girly. This is the story of how they got there-- a partial history of the indie pop project, and a beginner's guide to what it meant.

Part One: Great Britain, Anoraks, and the Trouble With "Pure, Perfect Pop"

Let's say it's 1977. You live in London. And with punk going full-steam-- in this new scene that's abandoned sophistication and chops, this scene that insists *anyone* can start a band-- you start thinking: Why not me?

Only there's a problem. Punks act certain ways: They're loud and angry, or else they're arty and clever. They yell and make unpleasant noises and put safety pins through their bodies and belongings. And you...well, sorry, but you're actually pretty normal. You have a schoolboy voice and you'd feel stupid spiking your hair or pulling on bondage trousers. The punks sneer at most everything that came before them, but you don't sneer much at all, and you certainly don't see any reason to stop loving the Kinks and Syd Barrett. Truth is, you make a terrible punk-- so what are you going to do?

If you're Dan Treacy, you and your friends rename

yourselves after talk-show hosts and start self-releasing your songs as the Television Personalities. Eventually, you release an album called *And Don't the Kids Just Love It*, which sounds like a trio of 10-year-olds got together in a basement, dropped some microphones on the floor, and played do-it-yourself. They're 10, so even when they sing something hard and serious and real-- "Hear my father shouting at my mother in the room next door"-- it comes out in vulnerable voices and rudimentary guitar figures, and when they play pop it comes out as an unselfconscious la-la-la. If you're Dan Treacy, you do something along those lines, something that in the face of so much sneer seemed completely punk. In the process, you lay some of the groundwork for one of the most misunderstood, written-off, and generally just forgotten threads in the history of the music this website covers.

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In the beginning, "indie" and "indie pop" basically was the same thing. As early as 1978, the sound of punk wasn't nearly so important as the spirit of it; for a lot of British kids, the whole notion of being in a band had changed. You didn't need to know how to play your instrument well, or have a great singing voice. You didn't have to wait for a big record company to discover you and pay for fancy recordings of your songs; you and your friends could record and release them yourselves. Music didn't have to come from pop stars on television-- it could come from the kids across town. These ideas are now eye-rolling

clichés, but at the time, they were still fresh-- and as punk and new wave faded off in their own directions, a whole legion of do-it-yourself guitar bands started popping up.

These days, we remember only a handful: Pop crossovers like the Smiths, "post-punk" gems like Josef K and Orange Juice, and anything else that fits the big-picture story of how we got from punk to the present. For those bands, indie was a means to an end-- a way of making and selling records on their own. For a lot of their peers, though, indie was something more: It was their scene, and a revelation, and a liberation-- a trick to play, and a way of rejecting some of the things the world had taken for granted for the past couple decades.

One of those things was the idea that rock music was supposed to be cool-- "cool" meaning sexy, tough, arty, fiery, or fantastical. In indie, a lot of undramatic kids saw an opportunity to make music as themselves, for themselves: regular middle-class white kids in plain clothes, not especially sexy, not exactly musically brilliant, and more often sad than angry. As the 1980s wore on, the music they made began to seem more and more like an outright celebration of those details-- and a little bit of a raspberry blown at the larger musical world, which (sensibly) went right on preferring something more interesting than average white kids playing simple pop songs. The charts had "cool" covered-- these kids, in their basements and bedrooms, were trying to hand-craft a mirror-image of it, a pop world where *they* were the

stars.

The bands at the root of indie pop were the ones that latched onto those concepts most rabidly. For their musical cues, they looked to the quaintest, least-cool roots of youth-culture music: girl-groups, 1960s guitar jangle, bubblegum chirp, rainy-day balladry. Their lyrics toed the lines between schoolboy earnestness and arch, bratty simplicity. Their guitar playing revolved around elementary chord strumming, and their production ranged from no-frills to downright primitive. Their performances were so amateurish that the word "shambling"-- as in "shambling along"-- became one name for the scene. Their fashion sense was deliberately plain, like children dressed by their mothers: stripy shirts, librarian skirts, and enough anoraks (parkas) to make that word a genre name. Their gender politics weren't just egalitarian: If anything, they celebrated the girly and the sweet, so much so that the word "twee"-- pronounced the way a baby might say "sweet," and meaning cloying, or overly precious-- became the biggest insult leveled at them.

The idea, weirdly enough, was adorable and ideologically radical at the same time. Pop was glamorous.

Underground rock, through the punk and post-punk years, had been gritty and serious. This stuff was looking for something else-- something more like the charm of watching children put on plays in their backyard, where anyone can be a star, where construction-paper props turn big gestures into something small and pure, and

where the whole endeavor feels like a beautiful, private gift. Such was the case with the Pastels, a Scottish band that defined the hip end of "anorak": Their lazy melodies, lackadaisical strum, and naive attitude transformed the idea of the rock band into something casual, intimate, and free from the pretense of cool. Scotland, far from the London-centric pop universe, embraced that just-some-kids-in-a-basement aesthetic like nowhere else.

And then there were the bands the Pastels inspired, like Talulah Gosh-- two Oxford girls who named themselves after a (made-up) celebrity, recruited brothers and boyfriends as their backing band, and went about pairing girl-group tra-la-la harmonies with shambling punk backgrounds. A few years later came Kurt Cobain's beloved Vaselines, who turned anorak attitude in a snotty, aggressively amateurish direction. There were the Marine Girls, who produced two albums of primitive pop sketches, inspired by the drumless minimalism of Young Marble Giants. And, of course, the Television Personalities, who went on making their scrappy neo-psychedelic pop, sounding sweeter with every record. Even the wider world got its doses of twee sound, from the fluffy pop of Aztec Camera to the stylish bounce of the Railway Children.

The bulk of indie, though, was still all about that 60s-styled guitar jangle. And in 1986, that style got its moment in the sun, with the *NME*'s C-86 cassette compilation. Tracing the musicians who appear on this tape is a pretty

good way to see just how important this strain of indie was, for a moment. In and around anorak stalwarts the Pastels and the Assistants, you'll find McCarthy (the terrific Marxist pop group that would morph into Stereolab), the Wedding Present (soon to become the face of straight-up indie popularity), and even Primal Scream (a cute little Scottish band that would soon become, well, Primal Scream). It was Stephen Pastel's label that would help launch the Jesus & Mary Chain, and over the next few years even My Bloody Valentine would dip a few toes in this scene.

And then something happened: indie became cool. Between C-86 chic and a backlash against it, between the massive popularity of the Smiths and the lovable hyperspeed rock of the Wedding Present, British indie became what American indie is today-- the fashionable music-of-choice for a certain sort of mostly-white, mostly-educated, mostly-middle-class young people, the sorts of kids the British call "student types." And if indie was becoming stylish, forward-looking, and ambitious, what would become of its twee side, the side that prized exactly the opposite?

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Enter Sarah Records, the Bristol label and fanzine founded by indie devotees Matt Haynes and Clare Wadd. Sarah clung to the details of indie, releasing 7" vinyl singles-- an inexpensive, personal format-- in hand-assembled

packages. More importantly, the music it released devoted itself even more fully to everything the new, stylish indie was coming to abandon. Their first stars, the Field Mice, were willfully starry-eyed and defiantly wimpy; the bands around them embraced all forms of sweetness, earnestness, simplicity, and comfort. The Sarah aesthetic was another "radical" rejection of the whole notion of trying to be cool, trying to be tough, trying to be sexy, and-- maybe most importantly-- trying to be masculine.

"The whole record industry is still relentlessly male," Haynes told the *Bliss Aquamarine* zine in the early 90s. "Sure, the press will pay lip service to riot grrrl, but you just have to look at how eagerly they fall in love with Primal Scream's new we-are-the-lads, booze-drugs-and-chicks image to realize how superficial it is." Talulah Gosh, he said, "were loathed to an absurd, hysterical extent by people who basically couldn't handle the idea of women being in a band and yet not conforming to stereotypical 'rock-chick' roles or simpering at the mic-stand in various states of undress...So they were labeled cute and twee...People who use 'cute' and 'twee' as insults because they're uncomfortable with us being un-rock'n'roll and non-macho say more about their own insecurities and traditional reactionary attitudes than they do about us."

The best analogy for Sarah's position, interestingly enough, comes from the 60s. If indie was the stylish music-of-choice for those "student types"-- a bit like

listening to the Beatles back in the 60s-- then following Sarah was a little like listening to folk music: It was soft, idealistic, intimate, and supposedly made by people Just Like You; its system of fanzines and singles was like some sort of private gift culture. When Bob Dylan went electric in 1965, folk purists complained that their boy was becoming "just another pop group," destroying the intimacy of folk performance. And when, in the early 90s, certain Sarah bands started dabbling in dance and noise, the label's trainspotters came out with the same complaints: That their scene-- simple, pure, and private-- was being ruined.

Matt and Clare were quick to point out that liking cute things didn't mean *only* liking cute things: "That's like saying Agatha Christie only liked whodunits because that's all she wrote," said Haynes. If that sounds as defensive as his reaction to the "twee" label, well, you've stumbled onto the biggest problem with Sarah: wasn't this stuff just reactionary, frightened, backward-looking pap; comfort music for prematurely old geeks who couldn't handle anything actually daring? Didn't their smoothed-out take on 60s pop mostly just cut out the parts that came from black people? Wasn't this stuff basically conservative-- lame white boys with no new ideas, holing up in their own closets and writing songs about how girls didn't like them? And why should anyone be interested in celebrating how pathetic they were?

There's a level on which those accusations is spot-on-- or

at least as spot-on as they'd be about preferring the Decemberists to noise bands. For a lot of people, this music only really worked during those awkward teenage years where it genuinely helps to hear some kindred sappy spirits; as they got a little older, they turned their backs on it, digging into more progressive scenes like rave and avant-garde rock. But as part of a balanced musical diet, plenty of Sarah's records feel essential, like a bunch of children, virgins, and librarians have distilled all the sweetest pop of guitar-pop into a sparkling dream. And musically, these bands aren't incredibly different from listening to vintage American country music: They share the same simplified guitar strum, straightforward melodies, laid-back comfort, and stilted sad-song lyrics. Certain Field Mice songs can read like Patsy Cline for English schoolboys.

And the Field Mice are a good example of how it worked. Fans wound up calling this stuff just "pop," flat-out, as if what was on the radio *wasn't*, and listening to the first singles from this band-- just two guys and a drum machine, guitars strumming casually under melodies that are nothing but breathy hooks-- it makes sense: What part of this can you consider anything *but* pop? Hence the go-to expression of the Sarah fan-- "pure, perfect pop"-- and the famous, telling complaint: "In a perfect world, this would be on the radio." It's easy to understand. A song like "Emma's House" makes all-pop simplicity seem like the rarest and most beautiful thing in the world; for the

four minutes you're taken by its earnest strum and puppyish melody, it seems silly that anyone would try to do anything else. The same could go for the jangling guitar-pop of the Sea Urchins, or the cosmopolitan acoustic comfort of Blueboy, or-- critically-- the chirpy bounce of Heavenly.

Plenty of people will tell you Heavenly were the greatest indie pop act of all time; some people would remove the "indie pop" qualifier. The band was a reincarnation of Talulah Gosh, with almost the same lineup; its style was a reinvigoration of anorak style, twee girl-group harmonies, and peppy pop-group energy. With Heavenly, though, the performances were remarkably tight, with guitarist Peter Momtchiloff playing impossibly twisty pop lines; their melodies and harmonies were precise and catchy, sophisticated and wistful. Most important of all, they matched elegant pop sing-alongs with sharp content, in lyrics that took indie-kid life with a sometimes-cutting seriousness: Their *P.U.N.K. Girl* EP is so bouncy and full of hooks that it can take a while to notice it's kind of a concept record about date rape. It didn't hurt that the band members were just the type indie pop kids love to make hearthrobs out of: three nice boys in stripy shirts and two cute, smart girls with barrettes in their hair. Heavenly could be the indie pop litmus test: If you don't find it hard to resist a song like "Tool", and if you don't find singer Amelia Fletcher singularly adorable, this stuff probably isn't for you.

Through the early 90s, England's indie pop influences bled out in a lot of new directions. Bands like the Jesus & Mary Chain and My Bloody Valentine had spent the late-80s blasting indie's 60s pop aesthetic with noise; once *Loveless* sparked the shoegazer trend, plenty of indie pop bands followed suit. On labels like Cherry Red, bands like the Charlottes and Blind Mr Jones went as dreamy as they could manage; the singer of Secret Shine played Sarah Records' 1995 farewell party in a handmade t-shirt reading "My Bloody Secret Shine." The Field Mice picked up on shoegaze and dance music both, working their way into a sugary stew of sound. The grace and comfort of "pure, perfect pop" carved out its own spot in mainstream indie, too, thanks to bands like the Sundays. The peak of twee had come and gone, and what had largely faded was the sense of primitivism-- with everyone trying so hard to be dreamy-pretty, production values and good musicianship and sheer ambition had to come back.

The primitive spirit-- the rebellious fuck-you-I'm-twee aesthetic-- was shaping up elsewhere, as the indie concept ran its own course in America.