

Whatever happened to the New Lads?

Fond of football, beer and bucket hats, the lad defined the '90s – and now the bat signal has gone up for a reunion. And yes, it was all terribly sexist at the time, but was it actually worse than what has followed, asks Pat Carty

Whatever happened to the likely lads? If you're old enough to remember the 1990s, then I'm afraid at this point you are officially getting on a bit. It's now 31 years since Oasis released their debut single, *Supersonic*, in April 1994. Thirty-one years before that, The Beatles were still wearing suits and celebrating their first UK number one with *From Me To You*.

The rise of Oasis and the other bands who were, unfairly or not, classified by a music press who never met a collective appellation they didn't like as 'Britpop' was associated with its own youth movement of sorts: Lad or – if you wanted to be a bit inappropriately grand about it – Laddism. What was that all about?

The perceived wisdom at this remove is that Lad was a bit of a media creation. Indeed, the term New Lad was first coined by an Irishman, Sean O'Hagan, in an article in *Arena* magazine in the early 1990s. O'Hagan reckoned that these New Lads grew out of the New Man idea, which was – in his words – “a sensitive, caring, emotionally balanced, non-sexist, non-aggressive male”.

This notion, as admirable as it is, was a bit hard to live up to all the time, so O'Hagan's New Lad – a number he counted himself among – “aspires to New Man status when he's with women, but reverts to Old Lad type when he's out with the boys”.

If this sounds particularly middle-class, it's because it was. But Lad evolved from

O'Hagan's realistic summation of maleness into something else. The 1990s was still a time when magazines – and lifestyle magazines in particular – sold in huge numbers, before the internet took over and ruined everything. Publications like *FHM*, *Maxim* and *Loaded* all hawked a beer and babes (although never full nudity, so they weren't restricted to the top shelf of the newsagents) way of life.

Was this a reaction to feminism? I'm not sure that much thought went into it. *Loaded*, launched in 1994 and “dedicated to life, liberty and the pursuit of sex, drink, football and less serious matters”, used the tagline, “For men who should know better”, so irony was at least being aimed at – although one suspects the Liam Gallagher of the 1990s probably thought irony was something the missus did with his shirts.

Speaking of Gallagher the younger, it was he who inspired the look of the beery, leery Lad. There was a problem with this though. Liam Gallagher was – and is – a very good-looking man with presence to burn, so a bucket hat, a tracksuit top, and even the parkas and anoraks he favours always look good. On him. On lesser mortals, an anorak looks like an anorak.

If you need further evidence to back up the veracity of this claim, do a Google image search for “Wellends”. The results show you a variety of men – who really should know better – attempting to ape the tonorial achievements of Paul Weller, whose re-emergence as a solo artist coincided with Britpop and, by extension, Liam Gallagher. The results are unfortunate

as, in many cases, the raw material just isn't there. I'm only allowed to laugh at the afflicted because I have a few flesh-coloured highlights myself.

Musically, Lad-soundtracking Britpop was refreshing for some of us. Rock, as opposed to the actual charts, had been dominated by grunge, the slightly depressing sound of plaid shirts and distorted guitars that emerged early in the decade from Seattle, clutching old Neil Young records to its collective heart.

I never really “got” Nirvana's mega-selling 1991 record, *Nevermind*. By the time they released *In Utero* in 1993, I'd relocated to America, where grunge was even more prevalent. I gave it a go to see what I was missing, but – no matter how hard I tried – songs about eating your cancer and screaming about Tourette's were not my cup of tea, pennyroyal or otherwise.

Sometime late the following year, when I was working in a record shop in Greenwich Village, a friend slipped me the *Definitely Maybe* CD by a British band called Oasis, a name so unfamiliar to me that I thought it might have something to do with the clothes shop.

This was much more my thing, and you could play entertaining games of spot the riff – that's T Rex and there's Faces – and guess the melody. Noel Gallagher, a songwriter I've compared elsewhere to a “magpie in a jeweller's”, can't have been too surprised when Coca-Cola filed a lawsuit against him for ‘borrowing’ from *I'd Like to Teach the World to Sing (In Perfect Harmony)* for the band's second single, *Shaker-maker*.





Glory days – Oasis singer Liam Gallagher, main and inset with Damon Albarn, inspired Laddism, which is better than the era of Andrew Tate, above. Pat Carty, right with his dad in 1995, embracing Britpop's iconic shaggy hairstyle



When I moved back to Ireland in 1995, Britpop was the only game in town. Blur had gone from potential one-hit wonders to superstars. Their second album, *Modern Life is Rubbish*, saw them embracing their Englishness by opening up to the influence of The Kinks, XTC and others, and was one of the records that kicked the whole thing off.

Supergrass conquered the charts right out of the traps with their infectious single, *Alright*, and Pulp – perennial also-rans – had finally struck gold with their ubiquitous classic *Common People*, which summed up the middle class's wholesale appropriation of Gallagher's working-class attitude: "They're laughing at you and the stupid things you do because you think that poor is cool."

The second Oasis album, (*What's the Story*) *Morning Glory*?, would eventually wipe the floor with all competitors, in commercial terms at least. The battle of Britpop – where the Gallagher's *Roll With It* and Blur's *Country House* competed for the number-one spot, and made the nine o'clock news – was exciting despite the fact that both bands have released many far superior singles. Blur won the battle but lost the war, as Oasis were embraced by millions. Damon Albarn and company were always viewed with suspicion by the Gallaghers and their followers because, God help us, they appeared to have read a few books.

I was as caught up in this as anyone else, as I was still in the first half of my 20s. Visiting Fermoy with my father in August of 1996, I decided to hitch into Cork for one of

the two Oasis shows at Páirc Uí Chaoimh. I bought a ticket somewhere, because such things were somehow easier to procure – and a damn sight cheaper – back in those pre-internet days.

Arriving at the concert suitably late, although before Oasis actually came on, I found myself at the back of the stadium, which wouldn't do at all. I was, back then, committing a serious crime against fashion by sporting a ponytail – a transgression I couldn't even think about now for reasons alluded to earlier. I was also wearing a blazer. This rigout must have given some sort of air of authority, because when I approached the barriers, staff simply let me through until I ended up in the pit.

Oasis were phenomenal. I can still recall the power of the encore's *Champagne Supernova*, and the glorious feeling throughout of being there then, wildly alive in the swaying melee of youth as a glowing, care-free human being whose disappointments were still up ahead.

Women were present and lots of them – women for whom the concurrent message of the Spice Girls was, perhaps, a bit manufactured – but young men felt, rightly or wrongly, that the celebratory manifesto was directed squarely at them, the lads.

When Oasis finished, and I came down off my cloud, I did the logical thing and approached the backstage area to see if my luck would hold. I looked nothing like U2's Adam Clayton then, and even less like him now, but I told the gatekeeper I was his brother, there as part of Principle Management's party, and gained ingress.

I think I managed to swiftly quaff two drinks before skyscrapers of men appeared to inform me that I wasn't supposed to be there. What could I do but agree and promptly leave before their politeness faded?

Hitching a lift back towards Fermoy was no easy task at that hour, but eventually a young man pulled over. As we drove north, he said he knew a place for a late drink just off the main road if I was interested. Unhesitatingly, I said yes.

The rest of the night is a bit of a haze, but I do clearly remember being asked by someone where I was off to next? When I told the inquirer I was eventually heading to Dingle, he immediately offered me several hundred pounds "guaranteed" if I agreed to "take out" Fungie the dolphin as he was attracting too many tourists to Kerry, and Cork was missing out on their holiday money. Laddish behaviour? Maybe. Surreal? Definitely.

There is, of course, nothing new under the sun. The young have always enjoyed gathering together, having at least a few drinks, and getting loud. It's an activity that's not exclusive to any particular class, and has been consistently reflected in the arts.

Just to give one highbrow example, what was Shakespeare's Sir John Falstaff if not a bit of a lad. Alright, he was a knight, which makes him a bit suspect from a class point of view, but he consorted by choice with the lower orders. Given that he was overweight and inebriated as frequently as possible, one could easily imagine his gait as having a Gallagher-like character. Plus, he was fond of a bit of shouting, wasn't above rubbing up against royalty – who eventually reject him, which makes Falstaff almost working class by default – or a bit of larceny, and had an eye for the opposite sex.

The romantics, as exemplified by proto rockstar Lord Byron, were also hell bent on bouts of being out of it between putting quill to parchment. And if your literary and artistic movement earns the name Decadent – as the one that spread out from France in the late 19th-century (think Oscar Wilde) did – while espousing aesthetic hedonism, then of course it had some Lad in there somewhere.

If that sounds too fanciful, then I direct you to Charles Baudelaire's *Enivrez-vous*,

the first line of which, roughly translated, offers concise advice: "You have to be drunk all the time, that's all there is to it."

Now, I'm not suggesting that either of the Gallaghers ever perused a copy of *Les Fleurs du mal* or anything similar, but that poem certainly has more than a hint of *Cigarettes & Alcohol* about it.

You grow up and you calm down, as The Clash once told us, so Lad eventually faded away. The magazines stopped selling once the internet started giving the same content away for free.

Oasis carried on, although that tour I saw them on – which included their triumphant appearances at Knebworth – was their high watermark. There were more albums of varying quality (2005's *Don't Believe the Truth* has a lot going for it) before they fell apart because Liam and Noel couldn't be in the same postcode without a row kicking off.

It would seem that the only white lines Liam Gallagher has anything to do with these days are the ones he sees when he's out running. He's settled down, loves his dog, and eschews the backstage party because he couldn't be bothered.

The Oasis reunion tour would appear to be about getting paid as much as anything else (divorces are expensive) and it's been said that the contracts include a stipulation that the shows must be performed before the money ends up in Gallagher's credit union account, so the chances of him going bananas and missing a gig are slim.

For the old New Lads in the audience, it's an opportunity to put those daft hats back on and relive the halcyon days – but only for an hour or two because the babysitter has to be let off, and the prospect of work in the morning has to be faced up to. They're getting on but they're hardly at retirement age just yet.

Perhaps they're besuited business folk or bored IT drones reading Irvine Welsh's new skirt-chasing novel, *Men In Love*, during their lunchbreak, letting it take them back to a time when "people had lives", as Welsh himself recently put it, before technology caved our heads in. Perhaps they're even freelance journalists.

Wherever they ended up, the Oasis reunion was like a bat signal, calling them out of the shadows to don their Lad outfit for one last adventure; one last moment of belonging.

Viewed through the prism of nostalgia, Lad doesn't seem so bad at this remove – at least the parts where people enjoyed a communal experience in a field, one arm around their best pal, the other clutching a beer, roaring along to the Oasis cachet of anthems. What's a wonderwall? What is it that Sally can wait for exactly? None of that matters a jot.

Lad wasn't without problems. "Anti-intellectualism" is a laughable stance in any age, and it was all inherently sexist. Thankfully, the world has moved on to a point where such behaviour is quite rightly called out.

But was it all preferable to the toxic masculinity that blights today's society? Was it not healthier for young fellas to be waddling down the street in that strange manner, and enjoying some lager-soaked companionship, rather than being solitarily glued to a screen, taking in the 'philosophies' of the likes of Andrew Tate?

The rise of the internet and the resultant splintering of the culture means that Lad and Britpop, and everything that went with it, was probably the last such mass youth movement – if you could even call it that.

I'm not saying we should forgive Lad all its sins, but there doesn't seem to be much harm in them having an hour or two back in the sunshine before they return home and get on with paying the bills.

And if any editors would like to commission this old veteran to report back from Croke Park, I am available.

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