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Album Artwork of the 1990's: The Decade That Didn't Fit In (1682 words)

This exhibition is a celebration of the artwork that appeared on British and American music albums made in the 1990's.

The previous three decades had seen civil unrest, wars, energy crises, strikes, recessions and mass unemployment. The 1980's is a decade that is remembered for the rise in consumerism and materialism (History.com, 2018). The 1990's has been referred to as the optimistic decade, having started less than two months since the Berlin Wall had come down, 'a symbol of the divisions in the Cold War world' (DW.com, 2009). "Many assumed that the future would be peaceful, ever more prosperous and less susceptible to class politics and rebellion from discontented voters." (Thompson, 2019).

Both music and art have the power to effect moods in varying ways, (Monte Nagler Fine Art, 2015), from joyfulness to sadness, from energising to calmness.

The artwork in the exhibition draws on influences from cultural events and changes, both societally and politically. In the 1990's there were noticeably different music scenes emerging in Britain and America at the start of the decade. In Britain, the rise of the rock-dance hybrid was developing, (Miles et al, 2005, p. 198), from the late 1980's rave scene, whilst in America the grunge scene was building as a reaction against the rock music of the 1980's, with its roots in punk rock.

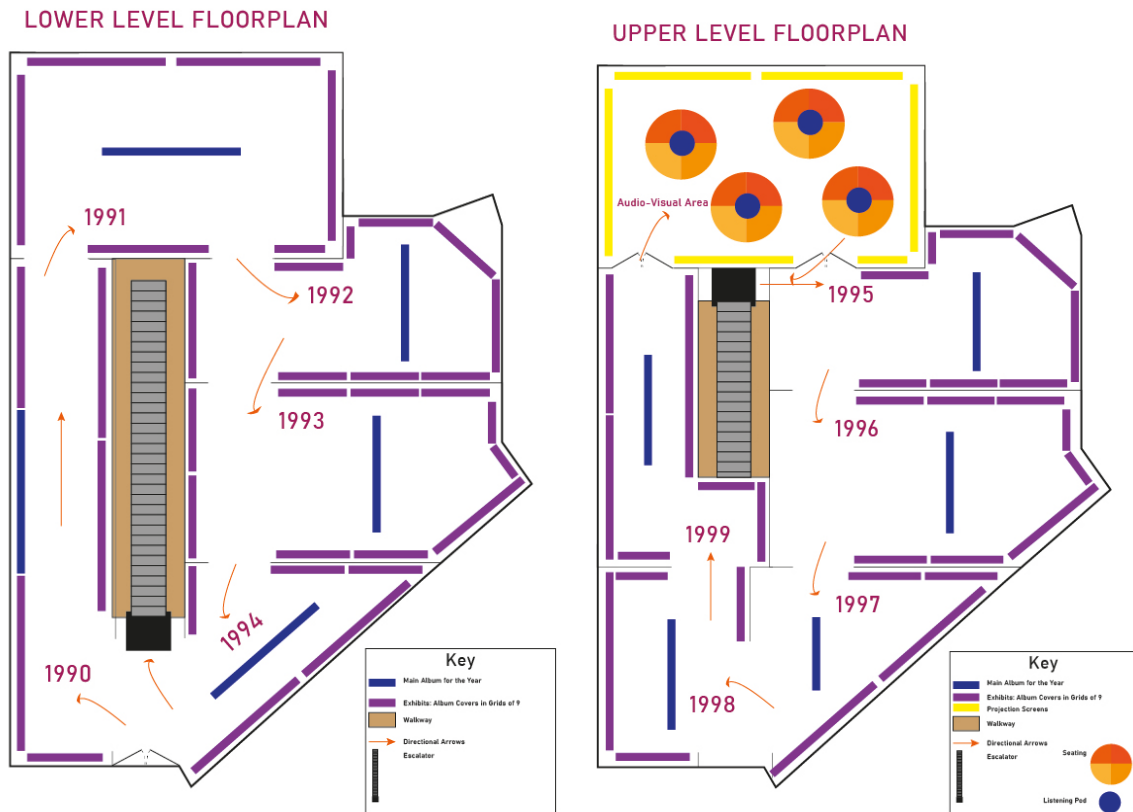


Fig. 1: Wales Online (Year Unknown)

The exhibition is set in a space which was a former major record shop in Cardiff, the *Virgin Megastore* on Queen Street. During the 1990s this shop stocked a huge variety of music in all formats, vinyl, cassette, CD and minidiscs. It catered for a large variety of genres and sold a range of music-related paraphernalia, such as books and posters.

The intention of using a former record shop as an exhibition space is to invoke feelings of nostalgia from visitors. Positive memories can induce feelings of happiness, raise self-esteem and make people feel more optimistic about their future (Hepper et al, 2012, quoted in Cheung W-Y et al, 2013, pp. 1484-1496).

Memories that conjure up feelings of happiness and accomplishments from the past can make us feel a sense of worth in the present and give us an optimistic outlook on the future. (Davis, 1977, quoted in Cheung W-Y et al, 2013, pp. 1484-1496).



Figs. 2 - 3: Venning (2021)

The space is split over two levels with an escalator leading to the higher level, situated in the middle of the space. The lower level displays the years 1990 – 1994. The upper level displays the artwork for the years 1995 – 1999. The escalator is symbolic of the journey through the decade, going from the first half of the decade to the second half. The album cover artwork is grouped together for each year of the 1990s. The artwork is displayed as large grids of squares forming one whole square, reminiscent of a Bauhaus style, portrayed by a balance of geometrical shapes (Richman-Abdou, 2021). Each piece has a description confirming name of the album, artist, year of release, designer and a description of the artwork. The viewer is guided around the exhibit in a circular direction, to reflect the rotation of a record being played but also because a circular direction can be perceived to relate to unity and community (Iron Dragon Design.com, 2018), both of which can be found with a shared love of music.



Fig. 4: Venning (2021)



Fig. 5: Venning (2021)

I have chosen five exhibit pieces to discuss. The first exhibit is *Goo* by Sonic Youth (1990).



Fig. 6: Pettibon (1990)

The cover shows a black and white illustration (Pettibon, 1990). Both the image and typography resemble a frame from a comic strip. It can be said to have been inspired by the Pop Art movement which emerged in the 1950's and became popular in the 1960's. It was a postmodern style of art as it was reinterpreting an older art movement (Wilkes, 2015, p. 350). It rebelled against traditional art up to that time (Tate Museum, year unknown). The Philosopher Jean Baudrillard argued the word post-modern "denotes fragmentation and promiscuous trivialization of values, symbols, images" (Mautner, T, 2005). The black turtleneck clothing is associated with the beatnik style, an 'anti-fashion'. The hairstyles evoke an association with images from the 1960s and recall rebellion. At this time, the Civil Rights Movement and Vietnam war were causing growing unrest in America. Young people were rejecting conservatism and the mainstream (Childers, 2021). The artwork was based on a photograph taken from a newspaper in 1966, of two witnesses to the Moors Murders, Maureen Hindley and David Smith (Long Live Vinyl, 2018). Smith witnessed a murder by Moors murderer Ian Brady and helped dispose of the body. (Engole.info, 2021). It has been noted that "adolescents rarely reject the dominant culture" and instead adapt to the rationalisation of deviant behaviour. Kornhauser (1978, quoted in Thorlindsson and Gunnar Bernburg, 2004, p. 276). It suggests rebellion

from the 1960's which influenced bands like The Velvet Underground, who in turn influenced Sonic Youth. The Velvet Underground also used a Pop Art image on the cover of their eponymous album, a painting by Andy Warhol.



Fig. 7: Image 5: Warhol (1967)

The next exhibit is *Nevermind* by Nirvana (1991).



Fig. 8: Weddle (1991)

The cover shows a photograph of a baby swimming underwater (Weddle, 1991). The photograph has been edited with the addition of a dollar bill being dangled in front of the baby on a fishing line. The artwork is conceptual, as it can be interpreted that people are seemingly indoctrinated to chase after money for the rest of their lives. It can be perceived to being a comment on consumerism. In the 1990's there was an economic boom with the creation of jobs and rapid accessibility of technology. As noted in *The Atlantic* "a period of unprecedented growth- capitalism American-style seemed triumphant" (Joseph, 2002).

At the time *Nevermind* was released, grunge music was becoming popular with an audience who felt disaffected with societal expectations. An audience who was starting to realise they would be unable to obtain the American Dream. It was considered acceptable in highly socialised societies to include a low rate of the less advantaged in the labour force. (Columbia University, Year unknown).

The next exhibit is *Screamadelica* by Primal Scream (1991).



Fig. 9: Cannell (1991)

Whilst America was seeing the rise of grunge music, Britain was seeing the rise of the rock-dance hybrid (Miles et al, 2005, p. 198). In the late 1980's and early 1990's Britain saw a rave and acid house scene developing following high unemployment rates - over 3 million between 1983-86 (BBC, 2013). The media carried multiple images of clashes with the police during the miners' strike and continued into 1990 with the Poll Tax riot. Margaret Thatcher's government reduced the amount of support and services available to young people. "The youth were reclaiming spaces that had been left behind, just as acid house and rave were claiming young people that had been left behind." (Kendall, 2020). The rave scene brought people from different backgrounds together. The artwork for *Screamadelica* reflected this movement. The primary colours of red, yellow and blue stand out in the design. "These colours represent body, emotion, mind, and the essential interdependence and harmony" (Hill, 2013). This can be applied to the rave/acid house scene as affect theory, "the idea that feelings and emotions are the primary motives for human behaviour, with people desiring to maximize their positive feelings and minimize their negative ones". (APA, 2020). The shape echoes the yellow 'smiley face' which symbolised rave and acid house, (see Fig. 10).

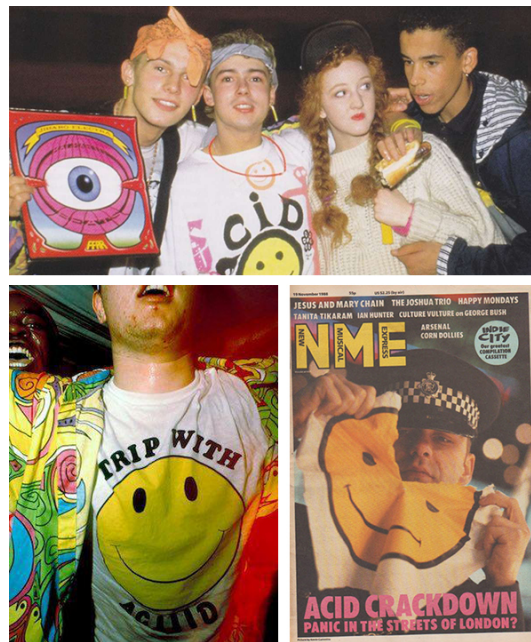


Fig. 10: NME (year unknown)

The next exhibit is *Dubnobasswithmyheadman* by Underworld (1994).

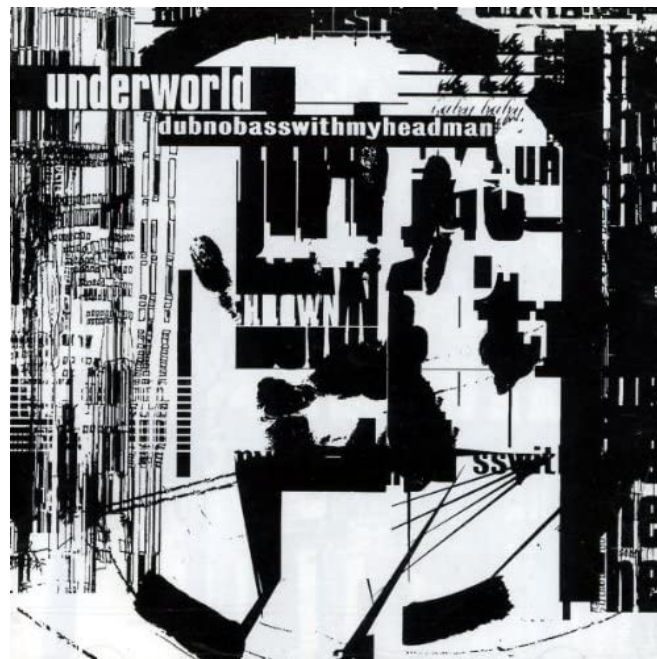


Fig. 11: Underworld and Tomato (1994)

By 1994 the Information Age was starting to escalate. It started to emerge around the 1970's and is seen as a time where information has been thought of as a commodity and become "easily available especially through the use of computer technology." (Merriam-Webster, 2021). Digital platforms

such as *Facebook and Twitter* were starting to emerge with the ability to connect people digitally. (Irvine, 2014). The artwork of this cover is black and white, busy and confusing. It draws influence from the work of American artist Franz Kline, who painted abstract images using black brush strokes on white canvas. Kline believed that the final test of a painting was to ask, “does the painter's emotion come across?” (Artnet, year unknown).

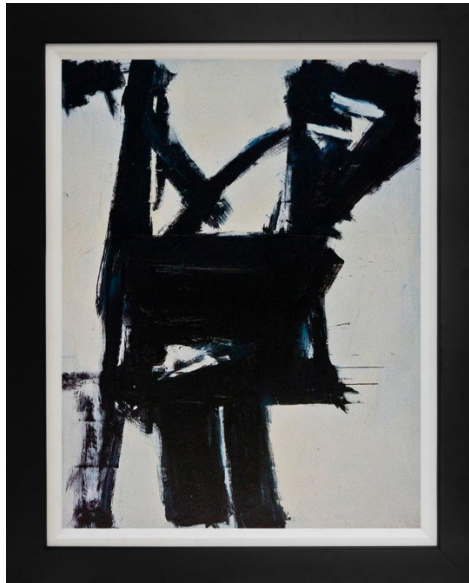


Fig. 12: Kline (1970)

The artwork reflects the music perfectly, cut up beats, fast, no clear narrative. It can be construed as being a digital version of collage rooted in abstract expressionism, as the imagery conveys a chaotic energy with non-traditional art materials overlapping each other (Paul, 2004). Similarly, the 1990s had a chaotic energy, from the end of the cold war in 1991, to the extreme advances in technology. “Value in everything is being questioned.” (Boone quoted in BBC, 2015).

The final exhibit is *Ladies and Gentlemen We Are Floating In Space* by Spiritualized (1997).



Figs. 13 and 14: Farrow (1997)

The artwork for this album is conceptual. It can also be said to be reappropriated, as a pre-existing object has been transformed slightly for a different concept (Artlyst, 2016). When released it came in the form of a cardboard box designed to resemble a box of medicine. The design is a paradox. It could be interpreted as a comment on the hedonistic drug-fuelled music of the earlier part of the decade. When the UK Government passed the Criminal Justice Act in 1994, the Police were given more power to deal with illegal raves. More raids were carried out and the movement was driven further underground. (Datacide Magazine, 2014). Later in the decade this could be construed as medicine to sooth the effects of the drugs. Alternatively, it could simply be an interpretation of “music is medicine for the soul”, a comment made by Spiritualized vocalist Jason Pierce (Long Live Vinyl, 2019). It’s a post-modern design in the sense that it displays “its own artificiality and contradictions.” Hutcheon (1988, quoted in Macey, 2000, p. 308).

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