

AN INTERVIEW WITH JARVIS COCKER

'I Was So Dissatisfied When Pulp Got Famous—



It Didn't Cause a Revolution'

Owen Hatherley interviews Pulp's Jarvis Cocker about his upbringing, his politics — and what he kept that others might have thrown away.

Jarvis Cocker's first book, *Good Pop Bad Pop* — a collaboration with the designer Julian House — is a celebration of a life collecting mass-produced crap; or rather, of how we live our lives through these apparently trivial waste products. Based on a clear-out of the singer and broadcaster's attic, it is an autobiography through apparently random

items, connected to pop music and pop art, sex and literature, sweet-wrappers and matchboxes, the municipal politics of Sheffield and the Apollo space programme. Owen Hatherley sat down with Jarvis at The Gallery of Everything in Marylebone, London, where he had curated a small exhibition of items from the book.

JARVIS COCKER

You can't really avoid ascribing epochal importance to stuff in retrospect, but this sent me off into a different way of remembering things because I was forced to look at the hard evidence of the things

I'd accumulated. One example is the 'Margaret Thatcher handbag' (a promotional item sold in WH Smith during the 1979 election), I never would have willingly admitted to that.

JUMBLE SALES, YOU COULD SAY, WERE A SYMPTOM OF A THROWAWAY SOCIETY



That's just over there, *The Fantastic Dirty Laughs Sexy Jokes Book*. It's ridiculous to think that you would get some clues as to what sex was about from a dirty joke book, but I would look anywhere for anything I thought would give me some information. Jumble sales were good for that — everything that you're getting has got some degree of biography to it, because it's been owned by someone else. You'd find stuff in the pocket, you'd find clues as to who had it before. You

would get these crazy seventies shirts. Intake, where I was brought up, is a very bland suburb of Sheffield, so the fact that things like that had somehow found it into places like that fired my imagination. And it was cheap.

I don't know whether it's a good thing or a bad thing, but jumble sales, you could say, were a symptom of a throwaway society, where people just have things and don't really attach too much importance to them.

OWEN HATHERLEY

Running through *Good Pop Bad Pop* is this idea of the importance of rubbish — this 'psychic lint' as you describe it. You make some grand claims, that collecting this stuff in a jumble sale in the mid-eighties meant that you were living on consumer society's off-cuts, then you could somehow opt out of it or resist it.

It's quite unfiltered, which is an unusual way to look at the past now that everything is so curated. There's old Lemsip packets and... what was the name of the sex jokes book?

One of my favourite things in the book is this sheaf of notes you made in hospital — after you'd fallen 30 feet from a window at a party — on the other patients. It's about who they were and what they were up to.

I would have probably run a mile from those guys. They were the kind of guys who would be drinking in a pub and take the piss out of whatever I was wearing.

But at that time, you know, we were all in bed wearing pyjamas. So that was a leveller (laughs).



There's this phrase from Peter Gay's book *Weimar Culture* — 'the Outsider as Insider' — which makes me think of how your work deals with class. When you're a kid in Sheffield, you're called Jarvis, your sister's called Saskia, and you're wearing Lederhosen. The experience of being in the hospital forces you to confront this, because you're sat there with the people who might kick your head in on a night out in Sheffield and you're chatting away with them and lending them your Scott Walker tapes.

Yeah. I was considered posh in the area of Sheffield that I lived in, because my granddad had bought quite a big house, which really didn't fit in the area, most of which was terraced houses. I guess this house was left over from when it had been more rural. It was quite a big, impressive stone-built house. It's also important that my mum went to art college as well. We had a lot of books. I think that does give you the ability to circumvent the class question a bit, because it gets you away from the cliché. Because there was no way I was going to want to grow up to be a miner or work in a steelworks. It was shitty, you know, and people died really young. There's this kind of *romance* about the working class that I think is misplaced. It comes from people who have never experienced it as a kind of brutal lifestyle. You're basically a component in a machine, like a washer or something that would wear out if it was used a lot. People wore out, and were dead long before the natural course of their life. But then, in the areas where the industry was, it did provide a community, and now those places are adrift.

There was a book that came out in the eighties, *Survivors of Steel City* by Geoffrey Beattie. He's trying to document the

effects of Thatcher's Britain. People were in shock, this city was working and then suddenly everything closed down. Everybody's thinking, 'what the fuck are we going to do with our lives now?' He follows various people, and the one that always stuck in me mind was this guy who's got a Rolls Royce and he goes to Josephine's Nightclub, which was a posh nightclub, and tries to pick up women. But he always has to ask them where they live because he can only afford a gallon of petrol. They can't live further than twelve miles away. But then the second part of the book really made me angry, because he tries to fit it all into a sociological study. But it's too nuanced — you can't apply these blanket things, or say 'oh, that's a working class area'. One of the roots of 'Common People' was my mum saying that certain people who lived in our area were 'common'. People are always differentiating themselves from other people.

I was up in Sheffield recently for the book, and David Blunkett was in the audience. I read a bit from this pamphlet that had been put out when he was head of the council called *Sheffield: Building From The Bottom*. Unfortunately, I haven't got it here. Actually, I'm just going to see if it's in this drawer (rummages). Here. It's good,

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because it's saying that the policies of Sheffield City Council at that time were to try and counteract what was going on in the country at large with Margaret Thatcher. They were showing that you could approach things in a different way. Sheffield at that time had these cheap bus fares, 10p for adults and 2p for kids.

That's a very literal kind of social mobility, because if you give people the ability to move around, you've got the freedom for that not to be a thing you even have to think about. You give people an infrastructure that allows them to decide what to do with their lives.

'Inside Susan' is about this, isn't it? Driving past on the bus looking at Sheffield?

Yeah. A lot of my songs come from buses. I love bus journeys. They're great for just observing people, talking to people, seeing

what people are up to, and knowing the city really well, because you're looking out the window and seeing it.

There's a lot about the space programme in the book, which was important to you growing up. NASA memorabilia and space comics and the 2001 soundtrack...

I suppose Jeff Bezos is living it now. He's sending his cock into outer space. And Elon Musk. The space race is back in a certain way, but the toxic version of it.

Those are the twin poles that I've oscillated between: wanting to escape entirely, to go into outer space and have nothing to do at all with normal life, and then, looking at the dust in the corner in rooms and seeing

a universe in that. I think that's why I decided to do music, because if you hear a song that you like, then it does take you to another world. That's also why I had trouble when Pulp did break through and got popular, because it was like, 'this is my ticket to another dimension.' That probably explains why I was so dissatisfied when Pulp got famous. Because it didn't cause a revolution.

WHEN YOU SEE FOOTAGE OF THE INTERNATIONAL SPACE STATION, IT LOOKS LIKE AN AMAZON WAREHOUSE



If you were offered a trip to space now, would you take it?

I don't know whether I would. When you see footage of the International Space Station, it looks like an Amazon warehouse. It doesn't look nice. But I'd still like to look at the earth from space. Because

the earth is where it's at. The only people who want to go and colonise these places are massive jerks. Living in space with loads of complete nightmares. No, that would be horrible. ♦

Owen Hatherley is the culture editor of *Tribune* and is the author of *Modern Buildings in Britain*.

Jarvis Cocker is a musician & broadcaster from the north of England. He formed the band Pulp in 1978 whilst at secondary school.

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