



'We've lost our identity and replaced it with a second-hand view of American identity'

– Damon Albarn

◆ by **matt chittock**

For Damon Albarn, London's calling again. But this time it isn't the hedonistic, Union Jack-garlanded capital of Good Mixers and diamond geezers evoked by prime-time Brit Pop, it's something far more complex. This is the city as symbol of a country already drowning where, he says, 'The tidal wave has come already... both the actual tsunami and a metaphysical one'.

By now you'll already be familiar with the Good the Bad and the Queen's debut record, a strange, melancholy look at what it means to be English in the 21st century. Shrouded in echoey dub and riddled with jarring ambiences, it's a meditation on a country where, as Damon laments, we're all involved in 'a war/ That's got no end in our time'.

Following on from the million-selling Blur and Gorillaz, Albarn has amassed a super-group of musicians who represent a coherent vision of England's past (Clash bassist Paul Simonon, Britpop stalwart Simon Tong) and present (hip-hop producer Danger Mouse), bound together by rhythms (provided by world music star Tony Allen).

The record is saturated in London life, especially what Albarn perceives as the diversity of west London, where he shares a postcode with band-mate Paul. Of course, these days access to his Ladbroke Grove lifestyle only comes with a millionaire rock star's bank balance, but even with David Cameron as a potential neighbour he's still keen to romanticise his exclusive postcode. 'That part of London is incredible when there's a blue sky, the amount of colour in the buildings. Every visible sunrise and sunset brings out everything that I like about that area. I love closing my eyes and imagining what it was like 200 years ago.'

But undercutting his breezy mythologising, Albarn still has an uneasy relationship with life in the country that inspires his best work: 'Britain is this sloppy little island full of mixed people, and I like all that. But we've lost a lot of our identity and unfortunately we've replaced it with a second-hand view of American identity, which is not a model on which this country was built. I don't see it as Utopian. I think we've got to another cathartic moment where we're sick of the promises we were given by the last thing that promised us a better life.'

Albarn has certainly had first-hand experience of broken promises. In one of the weirder cultural


episodes of the Nineties, he had the opportunity to witness the inner workings of the New Labour PR machine first-hand. At the time *Parklife* had established Blur as Brit Pop royalty, and with this success came the overtures of New Labour. Initially Albarn was flattered and, as a lifetime left-winger, he was happy to announce to the press that his vote was going to Tony Blair in the forthcoming election.

Then things got surreal. On the day of a party for Oasis' first number-one single (back when both bands were on speaking terms), Albarn was invited to meet the future Prime Minister. 'I had Alistair Campbell standing behind me,' he recalls, 'telling Tony which areas to stay off. At the end, I left and went for a drink with John Prescott and got absolutely hammered. He made some Philip Pullman-esque predictions about the future and then I left. Before that night, there was a sense of purpose. Afterwards, it got hijacked and turned into a faux celebration. The rest is history.'

From then on, Albarn morphed into New Labour's public enemy number one. While other pop stars queued up to be citizens of Blair's icky Cool Britannia, Albarn vocally denounced the party's policies, joining Ken Livingstone to protest against university fees and supporting the Stop the War Coalition.

Unlike many other pop stars who got involved in the original flush of opposition to the Iraq war, Damon is keen to keep it on the agenda. 'We've allowed our government to make some horrendous decisions on our behalf, which we instinctively knew were wrong, yet we let happen anyway.'

While the woozy modern blues of TGTBTQ may include images of a damp English cityscape, the songs are shot through with the dust of Iraq. 'While this country's at war, every record I've ever made has had references to it,' Albarn says. 'I feel it needs to be constantly addressed because I don't believe in war. I've always been into the vein of writing songs which have political and social issues inside them, but that feel like love songs.'

Despite the Dickensian gloom that pervades the group's music, whether he's writing about binge-drinking, global warming or far-off wars, Albarn still has a sense of hope about the future – a belief that solutions can still be found. 'We have a collective responsibility not to slag people off but to try and understand them,' he adds with a glimmer of light-heartedness. 'The world is not full of cunts.' 

The Good, the Bad and the Queen are on tour nationwide. For more details, visit thegoodthebadandthequeen.co.uk