

BEIN GJAF RVIS.

He's the... well, you know who Jarvis Cocker is. Or you think you do. Ahead of the Pulp hero's new book documenting his early years, **Hamish MacBain** talks to him about pop, politics and *Naked Attraction*

Typical. You spend ages researching the perfect, quiet Shepherd's Bush café in which to meet Jarvis Cocker on a Monday morning. You find a quiet, tucked away table and order coffee. But then, when Jarvis Cocker — long, done-up overcoat, casual trousers, those NHS specs — turns up, bang on time, having walked from his home nearby, the speaker just above the away-from-prying-eyes spot you have carefully selected for him to sit in suddenly starts blasting out The Verve's 'Bitter Sweet Symphony', from all the way back in 1997.

'I don't mind, but it's a bit... distracting,' he smiles, as



PHOTOGRAPHS BY DEBRA HURFORD BROWN

I reassure him that I haven't orchestrated this situation and we make our way into the garden.

It is distracting. It's also quite amusing because, ostensibly at least, Cocker is not here to talk about the halcyon days of the Nineties, or to announce that Pulp are reforming to headline a package tour also starring Shed Seven and Sleeper. God, no. He is here because he has written a book. And in this book there are two words that, in the manner of 'c***' or 'f***' in this family-friendly magazine, are starred out. The second of these two words, which we will get to in a bit, begins with a T. The first is Br*tpop.

'It's not an accident,' he says, when I later bring this up. 'That was because I thought, "Okay, I'm writing a book. Finally got round to it." It's like that's your kingdom, your domain, and those two things, particularly the T word, I didn't want to pollute the book.' Of the B-word — 'They tried "Lionpop" at first' — he notes that 'even at the time I was quite vocal about how much I hated the term'.

Many did, I say, mentioning a notorious Pulp-featuring magazine cover from 1993, which, backdropped by a Union Jack, screamed YANKS GO HOME!. I think probably all the groups who were lumped into it were quite horrified, because it's just that kind of jingoism thing, which wasn't what anybody was about. Some people like their flags — you walk around and there's a lot of Ukrainian flags — but basically the Union Jack still is kind of associated with right-wing stuff, isn't it? It's not a nice thing to be associated with.'

Right, sorry: enough tangential polluting of this interview. For now. We should instead talk about Jarvis's book — I'm going to break with editorial convention from here on in and call him 'Jarvis' rather than 'Cocker': as one might with Cher or Beyoncé — because Jarvis's book is, to accidentally invoke the Nineties one last time, absolutely fabulous: at once very witty, self-deprecating ('Credibility. Blown,' concludes one chapter) and moving. It is called *Good Pop Bad Pop*. Rather than 'a memoir', it is 'an inventory'. Particularly in the context of a man who I — and you/anyone sentient — consider to be a cultural icon, I really don't want to use words like 'quirky' or 'eccentric', but... well, look, I'll just quickly outline the concept (also a horrible phrase).

The tiny space to the right that you can see Jarvis cramped into is a loft. Said loft belongs to a London-based friend of his, with whom he stayed for a while before departing the capital. In it, for 20 years, was a lot of Jarvis's stuff: the accumulated belongings of a self-confessed hoarder. The time came to clear it out. He had a book deal. And so Jarvis hit upon the idea of telling his story, of out-

lining his creative journey through the (many, many) items he had at the time felt worthy of saving. Now though, he will be more brutal: for each item — whether a still-sealed bar of bath-size Imperial Leather soap or manifesto-filled school exercise book — it's 'KEEP' or 'COB', the latter being Sheffield for 'throw away'.

In the process, Jarvis found 'that the rubbish in some ways said more. There were lots of bits of writing and stuff up there, some of it on envelopes, some of it actually in notebooks. But I found that I didn't really look at that so much. Whereas the actual general debris, things that were just in a carrier bag that got thrown in there, I found that they kind of brought memories back more. And I think that's the thing about pop culture, isn't it? It's like the way a song will come on the radio and immediately take you back to a certain place, maybe where you first heard it or a significant moment when that was on.'

As a reader, the place you are transported back to is the early Seventies. To the young Jarvis living with his single mother and sister — his father, a DJ, took off for Sydney when his son was seven — in working-class Sheffield: an era that, in 2022, feels as unimaginably different as the 1920s must have seemed back then. Instead of Netflix, there is a bulky TV — 'I wanted to be *in* the television, rather than *on* it' — with a slot on the side to insert coins. Rather than vintage stores, there are jumble sales; a musical outlook pieced together not by Spotify's like-this-try-this algorithm, but chance encounters with The Fall, Barry White or Scott Walker. The young Jarvis learns about sex not from Pornhub but via the Sexy Laughs *Fantastic Dirty Joke Book*, and is subsequently moved — in the absence of Google — to look up 'masturbation' in the Oxford English Dictionary.

A simpler, better time? 'Oh, I don't... do I bother going on about the internet here? I try not to,' Jarvis says. 'Everybody goes on about the internet. It's not our generation who are going to work it out. We can be useful because we're the bridging generation, aren't we, so we've got a foot in both worlds. But I don't think we'll... we'll always be comparing it, whereas [this generation] have got nothing to compare it to, so they'll find a way to navigate it. That's my optimistic view of the future.'

Besides, he continues, the arrival of television was 'probably worse than the internet, really. It used to be that television was "the drug of the nation" or whatever, and now that seems really quaint, because we were brought up with it. But it must have been weird. Just imagine living in a world without telly and then suddenly people are just kind of sitting in rooms looking at the corner, not talking to each

other. At least with the internet you're choosing where you navigate to. Telly, you just turn it on and you just stare at it. That's what I do. At anything.'

Later — to labour my somewhat hackneyed theme a little further — there is, in place of going viral on TikTok, Pulp's first John Peel radio session. But before that, in lieu of Twitter, there are hand-written pages headlined 'PULP FASHION' ('plain coloured shirts; rancid ties; hair = shortish (not skinhead); jackets made of strange materials (eg polythene, wood); silly socks') or 'THE PULP MASTER-PLAN'.

It's quite striking how stringently these principles went on to be adhered to, I say. 'Yes. I'm kind of glad that... I was quite pleasantly surprised that my ambitions were to change the world rather than just say, "I'm going to get really rich and live in a massive house with about 25 cars." This kind of megalomaniac idea that we're going to basically make Apple or something like that: have a multimedia conglomerate that's going to protect culture or whatever.'

Jarvis's journey to stardom ended up not being as swift as that of, say, a Gallagher or an Albarn. Post- that initial Peel session, there was a long, decade-plus wait before Pulp finally broke through with 'Babies' and ultimately 'Common People'. 'Sometimes people come up and ask me for career advice,' he smiles. 'And the first thing I always say is, "Well, I'm not a good person to give that advice, because it took 12 years before we ever had a hit record. So is that the kind of career you want to have?"' This, though, he thinks, is a good thing. 'If you feel compelled to do it and you can't stop yourself from doing it, then that's it. You haven't really got a choice. Although that can be a pain, if it's harder to make a living in it, it's also quite good to feel like

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you've got a calling. It simplifies life quite a bit. Rather than that kind of horrible scrabbling around — “Well, maybe I could work on P&O Ferries, maybe I could be a writer, maybe a landscape gardener” — it's good to have something that you just can't help but do.'

Good Pop Bad Pop concludes, long before the Br*tpop era, in the early Eighties. That second starred-out word, the T-word, rhymes with 'catcher' and is the surname of the first female prime minister of the United Kingdom. 'I lived through the period in which she existed, and it was horrible, so I just don't want her around [in the book]. I was talking to someone about this the other day: there was a biopic of her a few years ago and it was on the side of buses and it was horrible, because you'd just suddenly see this bus go past and go, "She's back." It was like a nightmare. A Freddy Krueger kind of nightmare.'

Who does he think is worse, M*ggie or Boris? 'I think the thing is that she... she was like a revolutionary basically, a right-wing revolutionary, just totally changed the land-

scape of the country. Boris Johnson is really just kind of carrying on in her vein, but she did the heavy lifting and he's just trying to take it through to another level. I don't know what the f*** the level is that he's trying to take it through to. It's like, "Look, you can be the biggest c*** in the world and they'll still keep you in office." I don't know. "Look how much I can take the piss out of everyone and still be in charge."

Is Boris not more sinister in some ways, though? With the whole bumbling... 'But it's a similar thing, that the party faithful or the people who like him really love him. They aspire to be like him. "*Donnez-moi un break.*" I heard him saying that and I'm just thinking, "F*** off." And of course he's still current, so that's, I don't know — depressing.'

Does Jarvis still vote? 'I do still vote, yes.' For Labour? 'Yes. But I don't like Keir Starmer, really. I think Angela Rayner should be in charge. She seems... she's just got a bit more of something about her.'

I wonder whether Jarvis takes much of an interest in

modern-day pop music. 'No. I've zero knowledge. I watched the Brits earlier this year and I really felt like an old duffer. Like, "What the f*** is happening here?" Was there no one you connected with? 'Well, Liam [Gallagher] was on, weren't he? Liam was on, arriving via helicopter. That was alright.'

I ask what kind of music Jarvis's son, Albert, 19, is into. 'Quite a lot of drum'n'bass. Him and his mates are into... well actually, they prefer when it was called jungle. Drum'n'bass is when it got a bit more posh. They like the early, quite rough stuff. But a feature of this modern landscape, which is quite a good thing I think, is that he'll listen to stuff from all over the place.'

As for TV, Jarvis says he tries to avoid it 'because, as I say in the book, I watched it so much as a kid'. He hears about stuff. 'My mother was telling me the other day about... what is it? *Naked Attraction*? She's been watching that, which horrified me. I thought maybe she'd gone into premature senility or something. There can't be something on telly like that. But there is, apparently. I've not watched it. Honest. But she gave me a full description of it. She loves it.'

And on that note... it's pretty much time to go. Jarvis has to head off to the other side of Shepherd's Bush to record *Private Passions* on Radio 3, where you pick out seven pieces of classical music, 'like a higher end *Desert Island Discs*... although *Desert Island Discs* is already quite high end. I'm excited about it.'

Finally I ask, given that the book ends pre- his properly famous years, whether there will be a follow-up? He must surely be aware that people would love to read about the quote-unquote glory years? Of him getting arrested for wafting his arse onstage at the Brits in front of Michael Jackson? Of Pulp's 'Sorted for E's & Wizz' making the front page of the *Daily Mirror* ('BAN THIS SICK STUNT,' it screamed of the sleeve's instructions as to how to fold a wrap)? Of headlining Glastonbury? Of being part of the unmentionable movement? Of...

'The stuff they've actually heard about?' Well, yes. 'I don't know... then you've got other people's memories of the same thing, which there isn't so much of in this. I think it's good to have done it this way because it's like writing down your plan of what you wanted to be like when you were famous. And I think some of those ideas I did somehow subconsciously carry through to when we did become famous. So it's good. Then you get an idea of why things panned out in the way that they did. But as to whether I'll write more? We'll see.'

A week or so later, on the rainy Sunday just past, I turn up at the Gallery of Everything on Chiltern Street for the launch

of Good Pop Bad Pop — The Exhibition. Well-wishers peruse a reconstruction of Jarvis's childhood bedroom, while Jarvis himself signs books for the likes of director Chris Morris and heavyweight author Karl Ove Knausgård (who buys six copies, because he 'likes heavy books').

'Did you use the "Bitter Sweet Symphony" thing?' Jarvis asks, grinning, when I bump into him. Er, maybe, I say, sheepishly. Sometimes when you're writing something you just need a good beginning. And also an end.

'Good Pop Bad Pop', by Jarvis Cocker, is released on 26 May (£20; [Jonathan Cape](#)); the exhibition is on at the Gallery of Everything until 29 May ([gallevry.com](#)) ✍

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