



CONSEQUENCE OF SOUND

# A Hitchhiker's Guide to Damon Albarn

A road trip from Blur to Everyday Robots

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BY [LIOR PHILLIPS](#) ON APRIL 24, 2014, 8:38AM

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There's a tendency to view [Damon Albarn](#) as a bit of a smart-ass. You don't have to burn deep into his extensive and diverse career (spanning 25 years) to see why people might form that impression. From a distance, it feels a bit blurry when you look at it all mashed up together like that, but when you begin to compartmentalise each spark Albarn has kindled, he sure as heck doesn't waft around a room like the musical equivalent of a scented candle.

His fire is fueled by something other than a microphone and album sales, so it feels rather serendipitous to take a trip across Albarn's musical journey ahead of his [upcoming debut solo release, \*Everyday Robots\*](#). The album is about the most personal emotional punch he's ever thrown, and for a man with a driving force comprised of irony, cloaked artistic exercises, and unmoored raw emotions, he's managed to keep momentum.

So, today we're sticking a thumb out and hopping back into his roadworthy catalogue. Consider it a road trip from Blur to *Everyday Robots*, passing the most interesting roadside attractions between.

My advice to you is this: put your life goals on ice and plump up those cushions because we're hoping this will cause you to writhe in your lounges, inhale huge breaths of air, and unleash a collective, "HE WAS IN THAT BAND?"

## BLURLIFE



It's 1990 and we pick up fellow guitarist Graham Coxon, Bass player Alex James, and drummer Dave Rowntree, change the band name from Seymour to [Blur](#), and immediately plunge ourselves into their first and least favored album, *Leisure*. Clinging to the shoegaze-haze of the late '80s, this is where Albarn solidified the classic '90s Britpop *lean-and-glare, floppy-hair-stare*. Tracks like "She's So High", [the video for which](#) showed Albarn in that iconic Penguin Books t-shirt, and "Sing", made famous after it was [featured on the \*Trainspotting\* soundtrack](#), allowed us to feel the clutch of the drugged-up teen culture happening in Britain.

*This is the point where we get a puncture.*

Instead of working with the same tools used on their debut album, the band unraveled the British flag and towed us toward their "Life" trilogy, a succession of three Blur albums (*Modern Life Is Rubbish*, *Parklife*, and *The Great Escape*) revolving around British ideals. The first yank was in *Modern Life Is Rubbish*, significant for tearing those ideals away piece by piece – the introductory toe dip into the foggy pool of British pop – realised in the song ["For Tomorrow"](#).

It paved the way for *Parklife*, a smug and contentious album that became the most culturally significant they would produce. The melancholy ballads "Badhead" and "To the End" stick out first, Albarn, for the first time, leaving an impression that personified a more personal space. Actor Phil Daniels narrates lines like "Who's that gut lord marching/ You should cut down on your porklife mate/ Get some exercise!" on the title track, each of his statements shadowed by an ongoing chorus of "Parklife". This gave rise to the famous feud at the 1996 BRIT awards show where Liam Gallagher got punny and shouted, "*Shite-Life*", to which Noel clammed on, "*Marmite*". The album frontrunner still stands in the highly funky, up-tempo, synth-inspired ["Girls & Boys"](#).



As we whip around the windy road of the Oasis/Blur fiasco, it all finally comes to a head during the most typically blur-chiming “[Country House](#)” track when Albarn references Oasis: “Now he’s got morning glory/ Life’s a different story.” Buoyed by a familiar sense of balladry on “Yuko and Hiro” and common playfulness during “The Universal”, Albarn and co. create an ode to *A Clockwork Orange* and *2001: A Space Odyssey* by emptying the metaphorical cubbyhole of all its drugs and tackling the issue many fans faced from using Prozac. This is when the British press billboarded the feud and overexposed the bands’ respective lead singers. Unfortunately, when it finally simmered down, Oasis seemed to have lost their artistic resolve, and Blur crashed into the proverbial wall of Britain’s press.

Oh, Queen Britannia and her Royal Media Fuckery! Thankfully, Blur fled the British music scene and began to grasp American alt-rock instead, driving the sound of their self-titled follow up album, *Blur*, with a harder power. Singles like “[Song 2](#)” ignited a grittier sound that, still to this day, force us to sing the first instrumental bars, and who didn’t fall into the pits of the famed mondegreen “I got my head shaved / by a chomboche”?

As the road started narrowing, Blur released *13*, their most underrated album, in 1999. It’s all about Coxon now as he moves from behind the guitar to the front of the stage, singing the backing vocals on eight-minute heartbreaker “Tender”, lead vocals on the impeccable “You’re So Great”, and then out of nowhere, like an oasis, *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* directors Hammer & Tongs direct one of the band’s most memorable videos “Coffee & TV” (which Coxon takes the lead on again). The video’s anthropomorphic dancing Milky the milk carton character hit the streets, and Blur hit a stride with the song pivoting as Coxon explodes into the chorus.



Perhaps reaching a much needed rest area, the four band members [invite us into their private lives](#) on *13's* "No Distance Left to Run", where we stay overnight and get to watch them sleeping and crooning, "It's over/ You don't need to tell me."

Before they took the nearest exit in 2003, the band released *Think Tank*. It seemed as though the ride was over for good...

#### GORILLAZ 3D



*Slam on the brakes... We've hit a fork in the road.*

When Blur began aping the sounds of the American alternative rock scene, this wasn't a coincidence, because a year earlier Albarn had invented the virtual pop group [Gorillaz](#) with Jamie Hewlett, a comic book artist. Music differs from visual art in that it manifests over a space of time. But throughout the four-album Gorillaz discography, the tones and timbres unfolded in such progressive sounds that our minds were led to make predictions in a space of virtual reality.

Their self-titled album, with its angular percussion, rasping bass, and a theatrically disjointed structure reminiscent of groups like Der Plan and genres like French pop noir and discreet funk, allowed Gorillaz to practically sprint up the ranks. But, whichever Albarn you prefer, 3D (Blur) or 2D (his pseudonym in Gorillaz), he's always generating a certain message, a clear commentary. Compared to Albarn's complacent "Parklife" bravado, it feels like his wrath faded slightly when the animation began. It's also not surprising that these songs were written in tandem to the release of Blur's *13*. "[19-2000](#)" addresses how times were changing during those years, and the trip-hop "Clint Eastwood" lyrically looks forward as Albarn sings, "I'm useless but not for long/ The future is coming on."



We're now being chauffeured almost, hovering above ground atop a force created by the general hum of Gorillaz enthusiasts. The group's second album, *Demon Days*, raised the plains, with single after single fueling their climb onto "Best of 2005" album lists, including *Mojo* and *SPIN*s. Collaborative input harnessed the record together tightly, with guests like Roots Manuva, De La Soul, Neneh Cherry, and two gospel choirs punctuating beloved tracks like "Feel Good Inc." and "Dirty Harry".

As if someone let out the air in our tires, we find ourselves "On Melancholy Hill", a personal favorite of mine that burrows into an emotional valley within all of us. It's a bittersweet respite from the rest of 2010's *Plastic Beach*, which tackles concepts of pollution and waste, as evident on the title track with Snoop Dogg kitted out in full *Pirates of the Caribbean* gear, plus a top hat. Each note makes the suspension jump up and down, as befits the Dogg.

The speedometer pin cranes down to zero, and we've stopped to listen to their fourth album, *The Fall*. "Revolving Doors" solidifies the comforts of Albarn's masterful balladry and galvanizes his hypnotic vocal delivery. A track enthused with ukulele (an instant "feeler"), it cements the band into a roadside attraction worthy of revisiting often.

## THE SUPERGROUPS



Let's quickly travel back in time to 2007 when Albarn found the right coordinates between Gorillaz' *Demon Days* and *Plastic Beach* and managed to navigate toward his first supergroup, [The Good, The Bad & The Queen](#), which included The Verve's Simon Tong, The Clash's Paul Simonon, both of whom featured on *Plastic Beach*, and Nigerian drummer Tony Allen. The sheer weight of their combined talent should have propelled the group to dizzying heights, and even the thought of seeing each member individually could satisfy any music lover's craving, but, they haven't released any new material since 2007. Oh, did I mention Danger Mouse produced them, too?

[Rocket Juice & The Moon](#), despite being a name I would happily give my unborn child, boasts a membership that evokes an almost boyish snigger that crinkles the eyes. This is a genuinely unique combination, genius in fact. A funk venn diagram of Albarn, Tony Allen, and Flea from Red Hot Chilli Peppers. To call their self-titled album funk may be shortchanging the effort somewhat, with rolling rhythms that awaken African funk, but in the future. A space-agey beat clangs its heels on corroded bass lines and [techno mash-ups](#) like "Poison" and "Hey, Shooter" with Erykah Badu lending vocals.

## MUSICAL LANDMARK

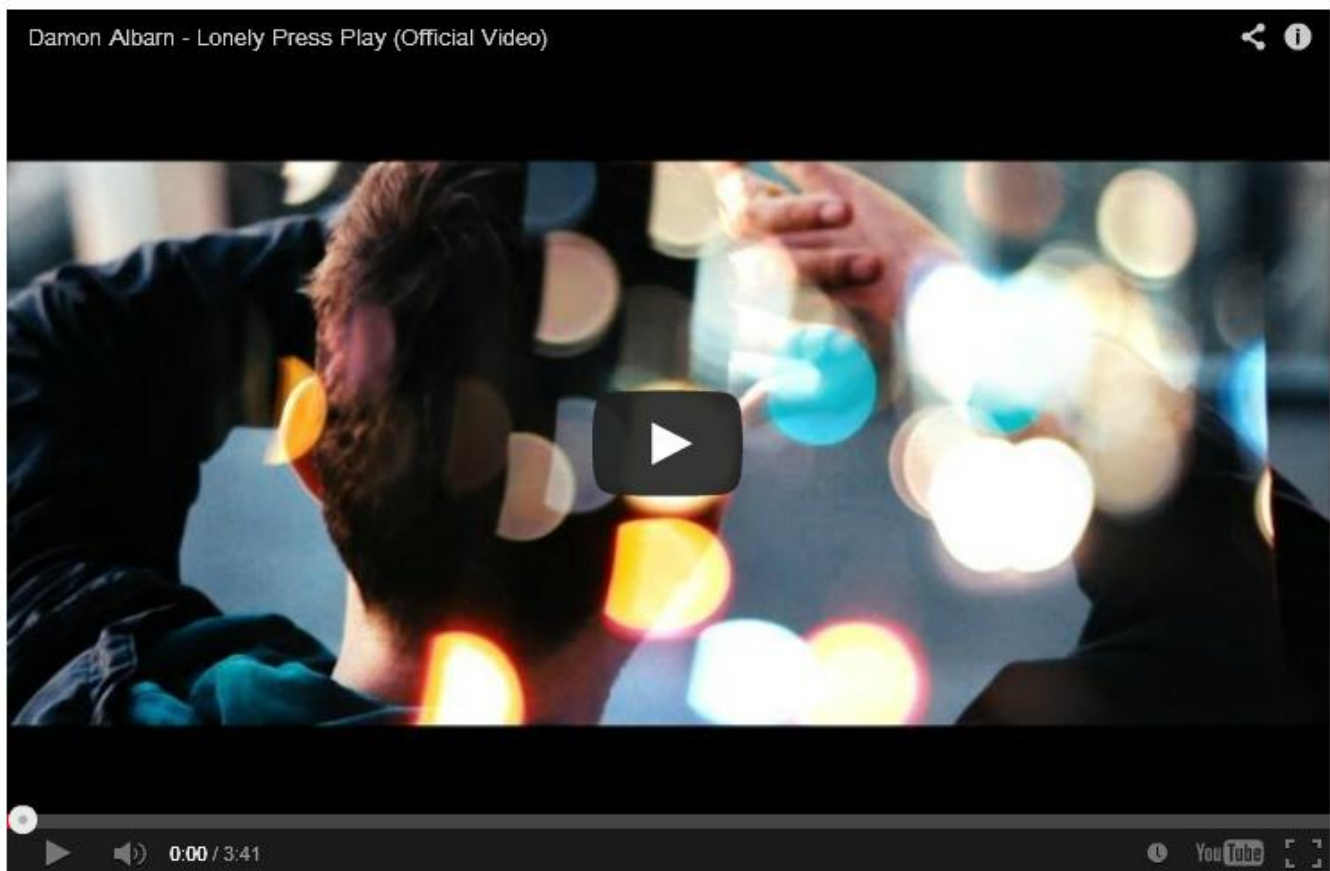




Under a deceptively sparse veneer, Albarn has now hit cruise control, rolled his window down, breathed in the air around him, and taken this moment to reflect. A well-timed departure.

Thematically, *Everyday Robots* is his first solo attempt to crawl across his entire emotional terrain — from grappling with his childhood growing up in Leytonstone to traveling to Tanzania. It's a refreshing, richly dense, heart-stopping moment of quiet panic, slow-burning over acoustic plucks and fluttering with washes of uncanny ease. We've seen this many times before, but the best Albarn material nearly always contains antagonistic chanting, somber sentiment stripped down, which he achieves again on "Hollow Ponds".

His tricks are fewer and farther between, whether that's a product of age or epiphany. It turns out the less riotously he behaves, the more obvious his talent becomes. "Heavy Seas of Love" sounds more like Albarn relating to events instead of trying to craft them, and there's something to be said for his fascination with social commentary and how affected we are by the technological landscape. Overcast in parts, Albarn videoed "Lonely Press Play" on his iPad, the track an ironic climb up melancholy hill I'm only too happy to experience again.



Taking a trip down the rabbit hole with Damon Albarn playing in the background makes one thing clear: diversity has always been his sole consistency, and in that respect, I hope he never stays the same.

A bona fide vagabond traveling across the world of musical artistry, as if he were standing in front of a spinning globe, eyes crinkled into slits, ready to go wherever his pointed finger lands. His work, quantitatively and qualitatively, is so vast that to even begin mapping out the numbers (7 Blur albums, 4 Gorillaz, 4 collaborations, 28 guest appearances, 4 theatre soundtracks, countless EPs and live records) seems like a daunting task. However, when all is said and done, traveling through his work of the past 25 years may end up being a relatively short distance compared to where Albarn's nonstop journey toward creative enlightenment ultimately leads him.