

## = Modern Life Is Rubbish =

Modern Life Is Rubbish is the second studio album by the English alternative rock band Blur, released in May 1993. Although their debut album *Leisure* (1991) had been commercially successful, Blur faced a severe media backlash soon after its release, and fell out of public favour. After the group returned from an unsuccessful tour of the United States, poorly received live performances and the rising popularity of rival band Suede further diminished Blur's status in the UK.

Under threat of being dropped by Food Records, for their next album Blur underwent an image makeover championed by frontman Damon Albarn. The band incorporated influences from traditional British guitar pop groups such as the Kinks and the Small Faces, and the resulting sound was melodic and lushly produced, featuring brass, woodwind and backing vocalists. Albarn's lyrics on *Modern Life Is Rubbish* use "poignant humour and Ray Davies characterisation to investigate the dreams, traditions and prejudices of suburban England", according to writer David Cavanagh.

*Modern Life Is Rubbish* was a moderate chart success in the UK; the album peaked at number 15, while the singles taken from the album charted in the Top 30. Applauded by the music press, the album's Anglocentric rhetoric rejuvenated the group's fortunes after their post-*Leisure* slump. *Modern Life Is Rubbish* is regarded as one of the defining releases of the Britpop scene, and its chart-topping follow-ups *Parklife* and *The Great Escape* saw Blur emerge as one of Britain's leading pop acts.

## = Background =

Blur's baggy-inspired debut album *Leisure* (1991) was a UK Top 10 charting record that, according to the NME, made the band the "acceptable pretty face of a whole clump of bands that have emerged since the whole Manchester thing started to run out of steam". However, as the baggy scene soon began to fade, Blur were "according to *The Guardian*" "[s] wiftly exposed as bogus trend-hoppers, [and] they duly caught the wrath of the Manchester backlash". Further, following their fall from public favour, the group found that they were £60,000 in debt, mainly due to mismanagement. Blur hired new manager Chris Morrison and, to recoup losses, were sent by their record label Food to the United States as part of the Rollercoaster tour. To coincide with the start of the tour, Blur released the "Popszene" single; the new release showcased a significant change in musical direction, as Blur traded their shoegaze-derived sound for one influenced by 60s British guitar pop. However, the single failed to break into the UK top 30 which further diminished Blur's profile in the UK.

The 44-date tour of the United States left Blur in "complete disarray", according to writer David Cavanagh. Dismayed by American audiences' infatuation with grunge and the lacklustre response to their music, the group frequently drank, and members often broke into fist fights with one another. Homesick, the tour "instilled in the band a contempt for everything American", Cavanagh later wrote; frontman Damon Albarn, who "started to miss really simple things [about England]", listened to a tape of the English pop group the Kinks throughout the tour. Upon their return to England, the group discovered that the attention of the music press had shifted to Suede. The newcomers' success displeased Blur who, in Cavanagh's words, "were inclined to feel that every record Suede sold was an affront to human decency". After many poor live shows, which Blur members often performed while drunk, in particular one at a 1992 gig that featured a well-received performance by Suede on the same bill, Blur were in danger of being dropped by Food.

## = Recording =

"Suede and America fuelled my desire to prove to everyone that Blur were worth it", Albarn told *Mojo* in 2000, "There was nothing more important in my life." Albarn felt the popularity American

grunge music was enjoying in Britain at the time would soon run out of steam , and argued that Blur would embody a renaissance of classic British pop on their next album . Although the singer felt Blur had finally found their musical identity , not everybody was convinced with Albarn 's new British @-@ centric manifesto . Food Records owner David Balfe , in particular , strongly disagreed , and got into fierce arguments with Albarn over the proposed change in Blur 's image . After the still @-@ sceptical Balfe finally relented , Food warily gave Blur the go @-@ ahead to work on their second album with Albarn 's first choice of producer , Andy Partridge of XTC . Blur and Partridge began work at The Church , a studio in Crouch End owned by keyboardist Dave Stewart . However , the pairing didn 't work out . Bassist Alex James described the sessions as a " disaster " ; he added that " as it was all being put together , they were all good parts , but it just wasn 't ... sexy " . The band successfully recorded four songs , but they were wary about working in the same conditions again .

Blur resumed work on their second album due to a chance meeting with producer Stephen Street , who had previously worked with the band on their 1991 single " There 's No Other Way " . With Street now producing the album , Blur recorded a mix of material spanning both the period immediately after the release of Leisure and their 1992 tour . While the band members were pleased with the recording session results , Balfe , after hearing the songs , told the band they were committing artistic suicide . Although dejected by his response , Blur gave Food the completed album in December 1992 . However , the label told the group that the album was unfit for release and at the very least they should add a few more potential singles . Albarn complied , and on Christmas Day wrote the song " For Tomorrow " . Although " For Tomorrow " sated Food 's concerns , Blur 's American label SBK voiced discontent upon hearing the finished tapes of the album . To appease SBK the band recorded " Chemical World " , which Blur thought would increase Rubbish 's American appeal . However , Blur flatly refused SBK 's demand of re @-@ recording the album with American producer Butch Vig , who was popular at the time for his work with Nirvana .

= = Music and lyrical themes = =

Modern Life Is Rubbish 's sound is highly influenced by the traditional guitar pop of British bands such as the Kinks , the Jam , the Small Faces and the Who . The album 's songs explore a number of styles ? punk rock ( " Advert " ) , neo @-@ psychedelia ( " Chemical World " ) , and vaudeville music @-@ hall ( " Sunday Sunday " ) . Opening track " For Tomorrow " is , according to NME , " quintessential Blur . Damon , perennially bored , never stops singing , and Graham [ Coxon ] supplie [ s ] his usual immaculate guitar accompaniment " . While " Oily Water " harked back to the baggy sound of Leisure , NME described " Intermission " as " a pub piano knees @-@ up that rinky @-@ dinks along then gets frazzled in guitars and speeded @-@ up drums " . Most of the songs on the album are melodic and lushly produced , often supplemented by a brass section , string arrangements and backing vocals . To offer contrast to the classicist songwriting , Allmusic noted that " Coxon 's guitar tears each song open , either with unpredictable melodic lines or layers of translucent , hypnotic effects , and his work creates great tension with Alex James ' kinetic bass " .

Deriving from " the biting humor of Ray Davies and the bitterness of Paul Weller " , Albarn 's lyrics on Modern Life Is Rubbish are a social commentary and satire on contemporary suburban English life . While Rubbish celebrates modern British life , it also takes a cynical look at middle @-@ class existence . The overt Anglo @-@ centricism of the album was also retaliation against American popular culture ; James later explained , " it was f \* \* \* ing scary how American everything 's becoming ... so the whole thing was a f \* \* \* ing big two fingers up to America " . NME summarised the theme of the " thinly @-@ veiled concept album " as a " London odyssey crammed full of strange commuters , peeping Thomases and lost dreams ; of opening the windows and breathing in petrol ... It 's the Village Green Preservation Society come home to find a car park in its place " .

= = Packaging = =

The album 's title derives from stenciled graffiti painted along Bayswater Road in London , created by an anarchist group . For Albarn , the phrase reflected the " rubbish " of the past that accumulated

over time , stifling creativity . Albarn told journalist John Harris in 1993 that he thought the phrase was " the most significant comment on popular culture since ' Anarchy in the UK ' " . Due to Blur 's disdain for America at the time , the album 's working title was Britain Versus America .

The painting of the steam locomotive Mallard on the album cover was a stock image that Stylorouge ? Blur 's design consultants ? obtained from a photo library in Halifax . According to Design Week magazine , the painting " evoked the feel of a Just William schoolboy 's pre @-@ war Britain " . Inside the packaging , there is an oil @-@ on @-@ canvas of the band dressed as mop @-@ top skinheads in a tube train . The album 's lyric sheets also feature the songs ' chord progressions , hand @-@ written by guitar player Graham Coxon . While Albarn explained that it was an attempt to " [ let ] people to know that , old @-@ fashioned as it might seem , we write songs " , Total Guitar magazine attributed the inclusion of the chords to Coxon 's " keen [ ness ] to demystify guitar playing " .

= = Release and reception = =

To promote Modern Life Is Rubbish , Food released " For Tomorrow " as the album 's lead single in the UK in April 1993 . The single , which showcased Blur 's new sound and attitude , performed moderately well in the charts , reaching number 28 . A few weeks later in May 1993 , Modern Life was released . The announcement of the album 's release included a press photo that featured the phrase " British Image 1 " spraypainted behind Blur members ( who were dressed in a mixture of mod and skinhead attire ) and a Mastiff . At the time , such imagery was viewed as nationalistic and racially insensitive by the British music press ; to quiet concerns , Blur subsequently released the " British Image 2 " photo , which was " a camp restaging of a pre @-@ war aristocratic tea party " . The album peaked at number 15 on the UK Album Chart . In the next few months Food further issued two UK Top 30 @-@ charting singles ? " Chemical World " and " Sunday Sunday " ? to support the record ; however , Modern Life only managed to sell around 40 @,@ 000 copies at the time . Nonetheless , the mood within the Blur camp was positive , as the band felt they had accomplished something ; bassist Alex James told writer David Cavanagh in 2000 , " Modern Life Is Rubbish was a successful record because it achieved what we set out to achieve . I thought everything was shit except us " .

Modern Life Is Rubbish was released in the United States by Blur 's American record label SBK in December 1993 ? seven months after the album 's UK release . This delay was because SBK 's alternative @-@ music department had closed down ; Blur manager Chris Morrison later quipped , " When I asked [ SBK ] why , they said it was because the girl had left . " Despite fears that Modern Life 's overt Englishness would be lost on the American market , SBK insisted on marketing the album to MOR stations and aimed for Top 40 airplay . The label largely ignored Morrison 's arguments that Blur 's best chance of exposure in America would be to court college radio @-@ stations . SBK 's strategy was to list the album at a developing @-@ artist price ( around three dollars less than standard ) , send the band on an intensive tour in 1994 and to target modern rock airplay with debut single " Chemical World " . The record company believed this would help expand on the base audience who bought Leisure , and eventually open Blur to Top 40 radio . Further , to lessen the anglocentric feel of the record , SBK added additional songs to the track @-@ listing ? including " Popszene " . The plan fared rather poorly , as Modern Life barely had any impact in the US ; the album didn 't chart on the US Billboard 200 and sold only 19 @,@ 000 copies , a sharp decline compared to the 87 @,@ 000 units that Leisure shifted .

Modern Life Is Rubbish was well received by the British music press . NME reviewer Paul Moody was mostly enthusiastic about the record and rated it seven out of ten . While he felt the album had " enough faults to give a surveyor nightmares " , he was impressed that , unlike their peers , " Blur [ had ] thrown on their old clothes and stormed into No Man 's Land with all guns blazing " . Moody also praised the improvement in Albarn 's lyrics , which had hitherto " [ made ] Eurovision Song Contest entries seem like great works of poetry " . Q 's David Roberts , in a favourable four ( out of five ) star review , called Modern Life " an energised , infectious romp around contemporary little England , by way of an exuberant trawl through a highly @-@ coloured patchwork of its pop past " .

Roberts placed Coxon as the leading contender for " the vacant crown of [ Smiths guitarist ] Johnny Marr " . American publications also spoke favourably of Modern Life . Writing for the Chicago Tribune , rock critic Greg Kot felt the album was a vast improvement over Leisure , which he found " highly derivative " of the Madchester genre . " Nothing on [ Leisure ] prepares the listener for the adventurousness of ' Modern Life Is Rubbish , ' " he wrote , going on to describe the album as " a swirling , intoxicating song cycle that enriches superior popcraft with wiggly studio experiments . " St. Louis Post @-@ Dispatch writer Paul Hempel commended Blur for having " taken a bold step [ with Modern Life ] ? backward " , and pointed to their attempt at " a communion with past masters of smart , satirical Brit pop " . He concluded his positive review of the album by calling it a " series of pleasant surprises [ that ] offers numerous signs that great things are to come from Blur " .

= = Aftermath and legacy = =

In August 1993 , Blur set off on the Sugary Tea tour of the UK to promote Modern Life Is Rubbish . Named after a lyric in " Chemical World " , the tour was a success , as Blur reclaimed some of their popularity . A key performance was at that year 's Reading Festival which , according to David Cavanagh , was " brilliant " . On the tour , Blur performed a number of songs that would end up on the group 's follow @-@ up album , Parklife ( 1994 ) .

Parklife saw Blur expanding upon the themes and sounds they had first explored on Modern Life Is Rubbish ; the NME described it as " ' Modern Life Is Rubbish 's ' older brother ? bigger , bolder , narkier and funnier " . Parklife debuted at number one on the UK charts , and helped Blur emerge as one of Britain 's most popular acts . As Jim Shelley wrote in The Guardian , " a year after Blur were dismissed as too mannered , too retrograde and too English , Parklife was embraced for exactly the same reasons " . Modern Life Is Rubbish and Parklife , along with The Great Escape ( 1995 ) , formed what would be later referred to as the " Life " trilogy of Blur albums revolving around British themes .

Modern Life Is Rubbish remains highly regarded by critics , and is seen as one of the early , defining releases of Britpop , a genre that would dominate British pop music in the mid @-@ 1990s . Writing for The Guardian , John Harris called the album " one of the 1990s ' most influential records " . Stephen Thomas Erlewine of AllMusic felt that " Modern Life Is Rubbish established Blur as the heir to the archly British pop of the Kinks , the Small Faces , and the Jam " and that it " ushered in a new era of British pop " . Mark Redfern wrote in Under the Radar magazine that following Modern Life Is Rubbish , " [ a ] whole wave of Britpop bands followed in [ Blur 's ] footsteps , and for a while , it was cool to be British again " .

= = Track listing = =

All songs written by Damon Albarn , Graham Coxon , Alex James and Dave Rowntree .

" For Tomorrow " ? 4 : 18

" Advert " ? 3 : 43

" Colin Zeal " ? 3 : 14

" Pressure on Julian " ? 3 : 30

" Star Shaped " ? 3 : 25

" Blue Jeans " ? 3 : 53

" Chemical World " ? 4 : 02

" Intermission " ? 2 : 27

" Sunday Sunday " ? 2 : 36

" Oily Water " ? 4 : 59

" Miss America " ? 5 : 34

" Villa Rosie " ? 3 : 54

" Coping " ? 3 : 23

" Turn It Up " ? 3 : 21

" Resigned " ? 5 : 13

" Commercial Break " ? 0 : 56

= = = American release = = =

The American release of *Modern Life Is Rubbish* features an altered track listing . Blur 's American label SBK Records preferred the group 's original demo of " Chemical World " , and included it on the album instead of the Stephen Street @-@ produced version . According to *Select* magazine , this " defeated the object of recording a heavy rock song in the first place " . SBK inserted " Popsene " in between " Turn It Up " and " Resigned " ; Blur had refused to include " Popsene " on the British version of *Modern Life* , disappointed by the public reaction to the song when it was released as a single . " We thought , If you didn ' t fucking want it in the first place , " Graham Coxon explained to *Select* , " you ' re not going to get it now " . The American version also features several tracks with a few seconds of silence ( tracks 18 to 67 on the CD ) , followed by two " For Tomorrow " B @-@ sides ( " When the Cows Come Home " and " Peach " ) as hidden tracks 68 and 69 .

= = Personnel = =

Damon Albarn ? vocals , piano , keyboards

Graham Coxon ? guitar , backing vocals

Alex James ? bass guitar

Dave Rowntree ? drums

Stephen Street ? producer ( except " Sunday Sunday " and " Villa Rosie " )

Steve Lovell ? producer ( " Sunday Sunday " and " Villa Rosie " )

Simon Weinstock ? mixer ( " Sunday Sunday " and " Villa Rosie " )

John Smith ? engineer ; co @-@ producer ( " Intermission " , " Commercial Break " , " Miss America " , " Resigned " )

Blur ? producer ( " Oily Water " ) , co @-@ producer ( " Intermission " , " Commercial Break " , " Miss America " , " Resigned " )

Kick Horns ? brass ( " Sunday Sunday " )

Kate St John ? oboe ( " Star Shaped " )