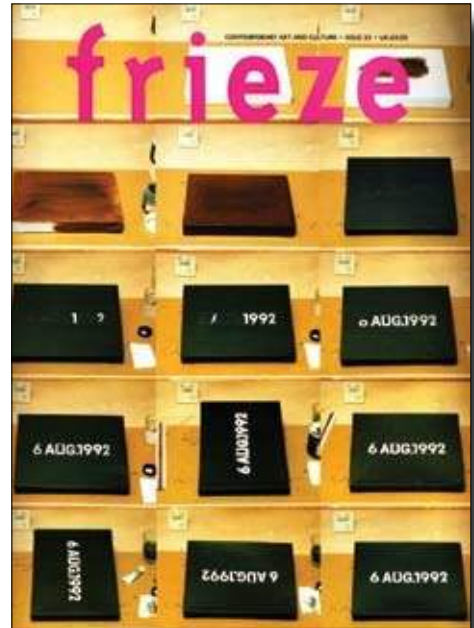


# frieze



## Reel Around the Fountain

### David Barrett pays tribute

One Friday evening last November, artists Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard presented 'The World Won't Listen'. This was a one-night-only, live art performance at 30 Underwood Street, which took the form of a gig by The Still Ills, a Smiths tribute band. The artists described it as a 'mock-gig' even though it had all the ingredients of a

real one, but then I guess it also had a few others, too. Like the large concrete pillars running down the middle of the white gallery space. Or perhaps it was the video camera, prominently placed for the purposes of documentation, that really distanced us from the occasion. The invite said 'from 7pm'; again, good for a private view,

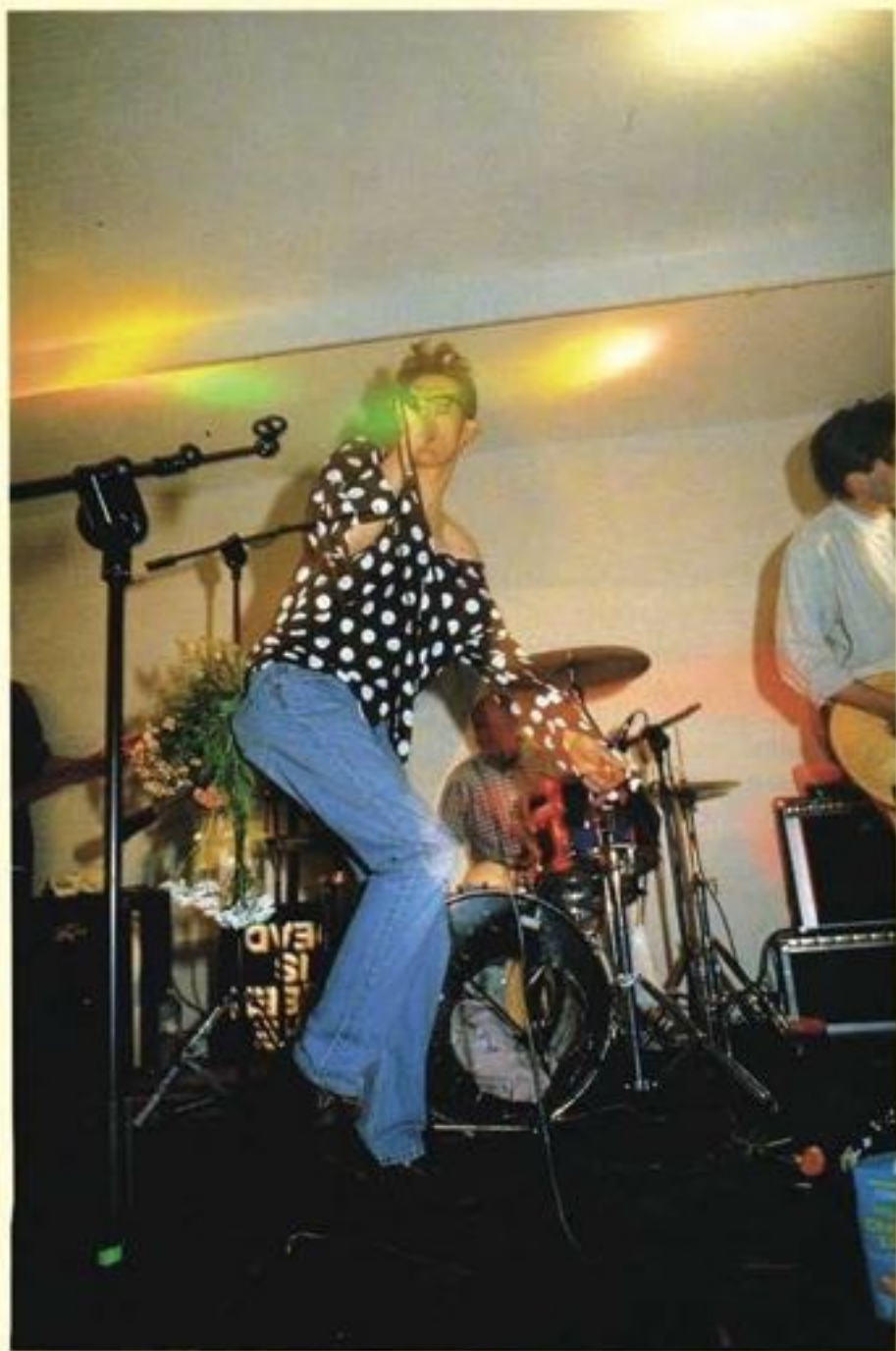
but rather early for a gig.

At any rate, the crowd arrived at seven, in two groups: the art crew and the *Smiths* die-hards. Of course the band arrived at nine. As they filed past, 'Morrissey' with flowers in his back pocket, a vague sense of expectation spread, no one really knowing what would hap-

pen. The music began and the art followers watched attentively. The *Smiths* fans began their dancing, as if having spent the last decade just killing time: 80s hair, 80s clothes, and 80s dancing. *I decree today that life is simply taking and not giving.* Blissful misery. Completely lost in the music, singing with more passion than 'Morrissey' on stage. *England is mine and it owes me a living. Ask me why, and I'll spit in your eye. Ask me why, and I'll spit in your eye.* What was not real about this gig – this band even – for the fans? Where was the mockery? *But we cannot cling to the old dreams anymore. No, we cannot cling to those dreams.* And yet, in amongst this ecstatic abandon, stood the art crowd – a mock-crowd? – concentrating on the scene, trying to understand it. Put to shame, rather, by their lack of passion. And so our opposite expectations became manifest through reception: the art coterie were self-conscious, distanced and alone, while the fans were engulfed, swept away, part of the crowd, the band and the music. *Does the body rule the mind, or does the mind rule the body? I dunno...*

There are other tribute bands, of course, who mimic famous groups of the past, the longest-serving being the Bootleg Beatles. A recent addition is No Way Six, one of several Oasis tribute bands, even though – despite frequent claims to the contrary – Oasis are still together. No Way Six have released their own single, *I'd Like to Teach the World to Sing*; a cover version of a song paraphrased by Oasis on 'Definitely, Maybe'. No Way Six play major venues, like the Shepherd's Bush Empire, at £12 a ticket – hardly a 'mock-gig'. (If this is supposed to be a laugh, then it's not cheap.) And even though they now have their own songs, they still haven't dropped the simulated look or sound. Going to see No Way Six is not like going to see Björn Again or the Counterfeit Stones; it is not ironic. That is, there is no gap between the band's actions and intentions. The audience is engulfed, not distanced. The borrowed image of No Way Six is not a comment, but their essence, since they wear their hearts on their anorak sleeves. And their show is neither spectacle, nor simulation, but emulation. It is as good as a 'proper' gig; it is as good as an Oasis gig. They are as good as Oasis. They are Oasis.

So how did we come to suffer such a sense of humour failure? The answer lies in the fact that irony decays over time. The longer you take an ironic stance, the more your criticality fades, and the more you become the very thing that



© Iain Forsyth & Jane Pollard *The World Won't Listen* 1996

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© No Way Sis

you would mock, making it possible for the object of your derision to thrive. Example: Blur. Now Blur may have been the figureheads of new-laddism, but their stance was ironic. They broke the rules for the fun of breaking them – an essential aspect of any rule (it was Bataille who pointed out that we wouldn't need rules if we didn't break them). But it was only an act, a mockery; they were not supporting the dubious values of laddism anymore than they actually stood for any other aspects of male-dominated rightist culture. Blur, semi-serious, gave a right

royal two fingered salute to the lefties. They gave the people what they wanted, which turned out to be the repression, infantilism and boredom. But without Blur's irony, Oasis could not have happened: everyone forgot that Britpop was a joke, not a vision of the future. Through Blur performing this Back to Basics music, even with tongues in cheeks, Dad Rock gained its cultural foothold. Simply speaking its name allowed it back into the discussion, a discussion from which it had been banished only after much struggle. So although irony enables the trans-

gression of rules, it can also bring about its authors' downfall. It is a double-edged sword, to be used by all means – just don't become so lazy as to rest on it.

The Still Ills' gig, meanwhile, was getting uncomfortably voyeuristic; we were anthropologists, observing the way 80s people lose themselves to memories of music. The stage was invaded. 'Morrissey' was kissed. 'He' threw flowers. They threw them back. There was a collective will that this was actually HIM, the God of obsession himself. *Ask me why, and I'll die. Ask me why, and I'll die.* Yet it was too easy to laugh at the Mozza haircuts overcome by rapturous melancholia when, judging by appearances, they probably have more to be miserable about now than they ever did 10 years ago. But was this actually the joke? Or were the art crew the butts? I certainly knew all of the words to all of the songs, and yet it wasn't me who was having all the fun. *Under the iron bridge we kissed, and although I ended up with sore lips, it just wasn't like the old days anymore. Only my I'm-watching-performance-art attitude kept me from singing out loud. No, it wasn't like those days.* Indeed, by the end of this paradoxical night, I found myself rueing the fact that, as the band had made their way past me toward the stage, I hadn't reached out and touched Morrissey when I had the chance. For no reason, other than so that I had. So that I would know that I had actually, *really*, touched HIM. *Am I still ill?*