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# The Sound of the Suburbs: Noise from Out of Nowhere?

*Although the song became famous in its own right, for me – as for any Scousers – it was simply an ordinary suburban junction where I went to the barber's shop. (It also led loads of people to nick the road signs . . . ) I think we sometimes get seduced into believing that extraordinary people and places are, somehow, extraordinary by nature – but they are often simply cases of the ordinary being given some extra significance. At the end of the day, Penny Lane is still just a road – and extraordinary people bleed and laugh and weep like the rest of us. As an ordinary Christian I think this is really encouraging.*

(Nick Baines, the Bishop of Croydon, BBC Radio 2)[1]

*All right Morrissey you thunderously appalling great ponce, tell me if you would, how much f***ing time did you spend in Dagenham researching this one? Spend time in the pub with the panel beaters, wideboys and assorted f***ing hoolies, get drunk with them, get in a few f***ing fights, really found out what makes them tick? Did you f***. You just warbled the first bollocks that came into your f***ing head, didn't you?*

(Mr Agreeable on Dagenham Dave)

From hip hop's urban violence and anti-police messages to earlier examples, for example the Jam's 'In the City' there has been an abiding pop fascination with urban imagery in pop and denigration of the suburb, as seen on the Sex Pistols' track 'Satellite' in which Rotten snarls 'I don't like where you come from/It's just a satellite of London.' Nonetheless there is a rich vein of pop documenting post-war suburbia on both sides of the Atlantic dating from 1960s beat combos, through 1970s punk via *The Pet Shop Boys* in the 1980s with their single 'Suburbia' and 1990s grunge up to the award-winning 2010 album by Canadian

indie outfit Arcade Fire *The Suburbs*. In tone these have oscillated between a commiseration of suburban drudgery and a celebration of the periphery and its possibilities. Pop has long had a centrality in post-war youth culture offering escape routes to its practitioners and to its listeners, alternatives to their routine surroundings in the form of emotional escapism. The suburbs have not only been spaces where pop music is listened, to or consumed but it has also been the inspiration and locale in which much pop was created or produced. Pop's practitioners frequently have been drawn from suburban locations which have provided much impetus to pop's messages and meanings. It has both reflected the suburban surroundings of its creators and provided a soundtrack for its suburban listeners whose lives were played out in box bedrooms at the edges of cities. The significance of place and its relationship to popular music at large is a growing area of academic enquiry. Socio-spatial interest in pop soundtracks appears to have intensified in an era of increased globalization within the music industry: perhaps because of the inescapable pull of such tendencies. Studies concentrating on the significance of the 'local' usually in music-making have included those of Bennett (2000), Finnegan (1989) and Fornäs and Lindberg (1995) but each concentrated on their own locales rather looking at the broader category of suburbia. This chapter attempts to address this imbalance by looking at the field of suburban pop and how music has reflected multiple suburbias and how in tone it has shifted from optimism to *ennui*.

## Suburban sensibilities in early popular music

On the blues song 'I'm Gonna Move to the Outskirts of Town' sung by Ray Charles the desire for the quiet life and privacy in suburbia is expressed as solution to the hustle and bustle of the city 'cos I don't nobody always hanging around'. The narrator nonetheless says that eventually they will have children there although woe betide her wife if she is in any way unfaithful – 'they all better look like me'. Luxury consumer comforts, the very trappings of the suburban life, are mentioned by brand-name.

> Let me tell you, honey/We gonna move away from here
>
> I don't need no iceman/I'm gonna get you a Fridgidaire.

The song was not a huge hit on its release but was later covered by Jackie Wilson, B. B. King and Rod Stewart and featured on the *Sopranos* (episode 73 of season 6). The suburbs flourished under President Eisenhower in the United States

with his emblematic GI loans offering mortgages for returning servicemen. Suburbanization away from cramped living conditions was meant to be an optimistic movement as the song implies however negativity towards the supposedly bourgeois suburban ideal was also expressed in the song as postwar youth culture took root becoming a full-fledged consumer-led market in both the United Kingdom and United States.

Young people no longer faced the shackles of the immediate post-wartime austerity and rationing was ended in Britain. As well as lessening material restraints, structural conditions improved: UK compulsory national service was dispensed with, full employment and lack of family obligation allowed the young disposable income. The ridiculing of suburban domesticity is also evident on the 1963 Pete Seeger hit 'Little Boxes' (written by Malvina Reynolds) which is scathing about speculatively built hastily constructed 'ticky tacky' dwellings 'all the same'. The song, used as theme tune to suburban comedy *Weeds* in several different versions including world music and hip hop variants playing in a show which ran on US television four decades after its appearance, predicts that the cycle will repeat endlessly:

> And they all play on the golf course and drink their martini dry
> And they all have pretty children and the children go to school
> And the children go to summer camp
> And then to the university
> And they all get put in boxes, and they all come out the same
> And the boys go into business and marry and raise a family
> And they all get put in boxes, little boxes all the same.

The song sounds like these inhabitants are being condemned to coffins – it is almost a checklist of American suburban clichés, which in the United Kingdom would have to be matched by references to net curtains and privet hedges. In attitudinal as well as spatial terms 'suburbia' nurtured youth culture's accelerated growth as the restlessness at the sterility of their surroundings was a key factor in the pop expressing suburban ennui, stimulated by the UK art school in particular. Of the pioneering performers of homegrown youth culture in Britain, the magnetic pull of the United States can be seen in a fascination with all things American. The still musically active Cliff Richard was the United Kingdom's answer to Elvis who was born in India under colonial rule but grew up in Cheshunt, Hertfordshire to the north of London. Diana Dors who was originally from Swindon, Wiltshire, was fashioned as the UK equivalent of Marilyn Monroe. It was not until those other enduring favourites, the Beatles

from suburban Merseyside and forever synonymous with Liverpool that British pop found its own voice in suburban English accents. By 1967 Beatles copyists the Monkees (based in the United States) on 'Pleasant Valley Sunday' penned by Goffin and King poured scorn on suburban aspiration when they sang: 'Another pleasant valley Sunday/Here in Status Symbol Land.' There is even a satirization of the suburban ritual of outdoor barbecue party: 'Charcoal burnin' everywhere/ Rows of houses that are all the same/And no one seems to care.' The Beatles later rivals the Rolling Stones hailed from Dartford in Kent. The increased affluence was a seedbed for the fertile growth for post-war pop. Participation in post-war pop could be buying into the youth cultural dream by starting a band oneself (an example of the activities listed in 'Pleasant Valley Sunday') or at the level of purchasing the end-product records substantiating the claim of Prime Minister Harold Macmillan in a 1957 speech that 'most of our people have never had it so good' referring, to improved living conditions.

While the Beatles were influenced by US musical trends (in their Hamburg incarnation their set almost entirely consisted of rock'n'roll standards) the band's recorded output was noteworthy for its Englishness. The influence of Albion was underscored by their singing in English accents and subject matter sometimes dealing with mundane almost kitchen sink subjects or venturing into melodramatic territory, for example on the songs *Eleanor Rigby* (1966) and *She's Leaving Home* (1966). These twin tendencies were accentuated further throughout the band's career as they grew in confidence musically to the point that the McCartney contribution 'Penny Lane' immortalized the line 'here beneath the blue suburban skies' sung in an approving manner on a song with a generally upbeat, optimistic register. Daniels (2006) has devoted an entire article to this single and its double A side the more surreal 'Strawberry Fields' as symbolizing a genre he calls 'suburban pastoral', a variant on the quintessentially English 'rural idyll'. Unlike the imaginary 'Blackberry Way' (the Move) or 'Itchycoo Park' (the Faces) or 'Detroit City' sung about the same year by Welshman Tom Jones in an American country drawl, both 'Penny Lane' and 'Strawberry Fields' were actual names of real places from Lennon and McCartney's childhoods. By the time the double A side was issued the band had dropped their now considered clean-cut although at the time shockingly long haired be-suited earlier image for even longer hair, moustaches and beards and hippie inspired clothing. Nick Green (2005:261–2) claims Strawberry Fields was revolutionary for its psychedelic noodlings however 'it is McCartney's Penny Lane that gets to the heart of the idealised English suburban way of life, safe from the dangers of the city itself, peopled by unthreatening characters who lend a feeling of steady continuity

[and] . . . capture everyday suburban life'. The banker, fireman and barber of the song are analagous to the fictitious butcher, baker and candlestick-maker of any English suburban high street before the onset of chainstores and out-of-town shopping began their decline, later sealed with the rise of online transactions. As the Beatles became a purely studio band, the two chief songwriters reverted back to their suburban origins for inspiration. The band had earlier been faces among the throng of 'Swinging London', celebrated for example on French *chansonnier* Serge Gainsbourg's satirical 'Qui est "in", Qui est "out"'. Here they were taking a more introspective, whimsical and personal view of Englishness.

From the exterior Mendips, the home of John Lennon's Aunt Mimi who he grew up with looks like an indentikit 1930s semi as found in suburbs all over the country: Edgbaston bordering Birmingham, Withington in Manchester or countless examples in Leeds, Coventry or London. Norman (2004:6) describes it as 'a semi-detached villa designed for the aspirational lower middle class, with mock Tudor half-timbering'. He calls Woolton where it was situated 'a respectable, desirable and featureless suburb'. Of the other half of the song-writing partnership we are told how in 1955 the 13-year-old Paul escaped to suburbia: 'the McCartneys left Speke and its pallid factory smog . . . [for] a council house in Allerton, one of Liverpool's nearer and better suburbs. It was a definite step-up for the family to move to 20 Forthlin Road, a double row of semi-detached houses small and neat enough to pass for privately-owned villas' (Norman 2004:16). At the time that the pair lived at these addresses: two different types of suburbia that show the contrast between private and social housing, it could not have been envisaged that both would become quasi-stately homes to be taken over by the National Trust and run in the same way as say Osborne House, Queen Victoria's Isle of Wight retreat and numerous other 'national treasures'. The Bee Gees grew up in Manchester. Band-member Barry Gibb re-bought the house that had been the family home in Keppel Road, Chorlton, when it came up for sale in 2002 and he and the late Robin were conferred with honorary degrees from Vice Chancellor Anna Ford and a posthumous award for Maurice, at Manchester University two years later. The house is now rented out but in 2008 featured in a BBC1 *One Show* item when Robin, who died in 2012 of cancer, revisited the property.[2]

As they grew in confidence both the Beatles and their arch-rivals the Rolling Stones dropped the r'n'b standards that they initially played covers of and began to document the everyday in their own original composition. Old suburban haunts are revisited and daily routines chronicled in English accents on various Beatles tracks, for example 'Good Morning Good Morning' with its observation 'nothing has changed, it's still the same' and on 'Day in the Life' where the surrealness

of Lennon's section (4,000 holes in Blackburn, Lancashire) is counterbalanced by McCartney describing the commute to work and the reverie of escapism of smoking on the bus – an act no longer permitted. The band employed English musical tradition in their character sketches. However the Beatles' commentary of suburbia reached its apogee in 'Penny Lane'. The Stones attempted social commentary on 'Yesterday's Papers' and probed the disturbing side of the suburban dream on 'Mother's Little Helper' about the plight of the housewife addicted to prescription drugs to get through the day.

Daniels (2006) notes that the rivalries between Lennon and McCartney continue in death as both have had their childhood homes become potentially competing visitor attractions under the umbrella of the National Trust (two words Lennon sang sarcastically about on the White Album's 'Happiness Is a Warm Gun').[3] Presumably both properties are visited by near-equal number of people as part of the pop-tourism industry that has grown up around the band and their city of birth: if outsiders are making the trip to Liverpool it surely makes sense to visit both. Guided tours can be conducted of both and there are accompanying brochures for the two rather modest houses.[4] After the McCartney's council home 20 Forthlin Road was bought, restored and opened to the public in 1999, Lennon's widow Yoko Ono bought the house of John's Aunt Mimi for £150,000 to donate to the National Trust, stumping up £75,000 restoration costs herself. Philip Norman's (2004) rewrite of his Beatles biography *Shout* includes in its photographic plates Yoko pictured outside Mendips in 2002, the year of its opening ceremony. Norman (2004:431–2) remarked: 'One can now therefore belatedly examine every detail of the genteel home which that self-professed "working class hero" never completely got out of his system . . . the "morning room" with its defunct servants' bells . . . the glass front porch to which Mimi banished him for so many hours of solitary guitar practice. Here is the sub-baronial staircase to the seven-by-ten front room [recreated], with its red-quilted bed and pin-ups of Elvis and Bridgette Bardot, where he . . . drafted the first eccentrically spelt versions of songs that would one day captivate the world.' The house had been in private ownership until 2002 so replica fixture and fittings needed to be sourced in several areas, for example the front room art deco armchairs and even the front door with its stain glassed windows had to be replaced as the original had been bought by a Japanese fan some years earlier. The example shows how the mundane almost becomes sacred. The houses in landscapes of ordinariness become extraordinary.

The press at the time painted rivalries between the Beatles and Stones centring on their North versus South and working- versus middle-class backgrounds whereas they also had much in common including their suburban roots. The same dichotomy was to be drawn later in Britpop between Oasis and Blur. The

description of the Rolling Stones's home county of Kent is described in terms stereotypically applied to suburbia by Norman (2002:25) as 'ranks of suburbs barely distinguishable from one another, crossed by railway bridges, whose names are synonyms for dullness and decorum – Bexley, Bromley, Beckenham, Dartford, Sidcup, Sevenoaks and the rest'. Meanwhile Keith Richards also was from Dartford but from the social housing end of the town and Templars Hill an 'estate [that] was brand new, dumped down on raw new tarmac roads without amusements or amenities' (Norman 2002:39). Various suburban compass points featured in the band's early history including Sidcup Art College where Richards studied and the Ealing Blues club where the band first played (selected as a location when its founder Alexis Korner could not find a central London venue prepared to host it and finally having a plaque unveiled at its former location in 2012 in a ceremony attended by Charlie Watts among others). Band members have long since moved away from their suburban origins but the Stones connection to their hometown is more of a living one than restoring their childhood houses as heritage projects: in 2000 the town's Mick Jagger Arts Centre was opened by the now Sir Mick who came back to unveil an extension in 2010 and pay a visit to Dartford Grammar School. In an audiofile of the event he describes the town as 'an odd place, really urban and suburban, from the playing fields you can see the M25, but then there's also countryside beyond that'.[5] Jagger is also patron-funder of the Red Rooster project in which Dartford primary school children can take up playing musical instruments.

Suburbia connotes territory in a constant state of flux. The suburb does not stand still and there is no singular experience of suburbia. Gentrification can be seen as the polar opposite of suburbanization but suburbia too is reinvented and gentrified with successive generations. The commentary of Swedish writer Lars Madelid (2007:50) who traces rock routes in his guide-book demonstrates an outsider's perception of neighbourhood and locale as seen in his comment: 'I choose to go . . . towards central Muswell Hill. This is where The Kinks have their roots and I am slightly surprised that the district gives such a cosy and inviting impression. I knew that . . . the brothers Davies grew up in an old working class suburb, and I had imagined a considerably more shabby area.' On hits like 'Autumn Almanac', 'Waterloo Sunset' and 'Well Respected Man', 'Plastic Man' and the concept album *Village Green Preservation Society* the Kinks were also erudite chroniclers of London and its suburbs. 'End of the Season' from 1967 begins with birdsong and sounds world-weary and bored of the city explaining 'I get no kicks walking down Saville Row. . . .' George Melly (1970:136) observed 'Despite his carefully grubby and poverty-stricken appearance, and painfully restricted vocabulary, the average young pop fan today is drawn in the main from a middle-class or suburban

background and is educationally in one of the higher streams.' The UK art school – dubbed 'state-subidized bohemia where working-class youth too unruly for a life of labour mingle with slumming middle-class youth too unruly for a life in middle management' (Reynolds 2005:xviii) – often acted as crucible of pop as seen from the backgrounds of Lennon, McCartney, Keith Richard, Pete Townsend of the Who, Queen, Malcolm McLaren and the Kinks. Madelid (2007) voices disappointment that the Kinks' neighbourhood is not as down-at-heel as expected. The reason is the gentrification that has taken place to make the London N10 area a highly desirable one. Horne and Frith helpfully include a table of where these colleges, which were frequently in suburban locations: for example, Hornsey College (attended by Adam Ant), Ealing College (Freddie Mercury, Pete Townsend) and Croydon (Jamie Reid, Malcolm McLaren). The Kinks and Syd Barrett were also 1960s art school alumnae.

## Suburban punk and post-punk

Like many musical styles punk has contested roots: the British trace its lineage to the Sex Pistols and the Kings Road, London, however US analyses see it as emerging from the hip New York arty garage rock scene and the CBGBs club. Both versions prioritized musical amateurism and a do-it-yourself ethos. Redhead (1990:87) has remarked: 'Punk is the best example . . . [of] . . . subculture, style and sound shrink wrapped for the pop culture archive. It represents not the end of the pop/rock/youth culture nexus but its most perfect product.' Sonically its boiled down three-chord thrash made it an ideal vehicle for the articulation of anger. Part of the punk mythology is of urban paranoia. Even if punk at first sight was 'white', artists like John Lydon had immigrant backgrounds with their experiences refracted through the faultlines of Irish Origins. Recalling Paul Gilroy's influential theory of the Black Atlantic and circulating migratory and cultural routes, Campbell (1999:158) has written of 'displacement, discrimination and diasporic cultural practices, and the enduring impact that these circumstances have had on second-generation identity', in relation to those of Irish heritage. The now US-based Sex Pistols singer John Lydon who identified himself as 'from Finsbury Park', inner North London on his appearance on the BBC's prestigious *Question Time* political debate show (5/7/12) entitled his autobiography *No Dogs, No Blacks, No Irish* in a reference to now outlawed racially discriminatory wording of lodging advertisements seen up until the 1960s in the United Kingdom. However this immigrant experience

has been frequently filtered through suburbia. Jon Savage (1991:72) names the suburban council houses of the Wormholt estate on the Shepherds Bush/East Acton border, modelled on the garden suburb principle: 'Although it was only a mile away from Hammersmith, Wormholt, just over the road from White City was quite different. It was a sprawling council estate that, despite the benefits of thirties town planning, was as much of a rabbit warren as the slums of Dicken's London had been a century before.' Croydon Art School was pivotal in the development of Pistols manager Malcolm McLaren who has been quoted as saying (Your Local Guardian series 2010) 'Croydon will always be remembered as a rite of passage of my life – one night layovers, in the arms of someone, the constant roaming at night through its market streets and thereafter navigating those deep leafy suburbs into the countryside beyond, spending hours looking out of Croydon's art school windows, observing and then struggling to come to terms with these giant triffids of buildings that rise up and spread themselves all along East Croydon's path, using charcoal pencil and anything close to hand. I drew and drew and drew.' Croydon in some ways has characteristics of exurbia as extenstive development took place in the 1960s onto its original suburban footprint. It contains gleaming office blocks including the futuristic sounding Lunar House, UK Home Office passport office as well as suburban homes. It has bid several times for city status seeing itself as a conurbation in its own right although it has been constantly knocked back.

The idea of punk emerging from the urban paranoia of towerblock-induced high rise hell perpetrated by its practitioners has tended to obscure its status as outlet for the frustrations of suburban youth articulated in punk soundtracks, particularly in its later guise of new wave. For all its urban posturing, punk was then an intrinsically suburban phenomenon in the 1970s, emerging from a period of crisis in governmental circles reflected in its short sharp shock sound. In the 1970s Bromley-set *Bhudda of Suburbia* central character Karim disapprovingly remarks (Kureishi 1990:130) 'Not a squeeze of anything "progressive" or "experimental" came from those pallid, vicious council-estate kids with hedgehog hair, howling about anarchy and hatred.' Yet the suburb of Bromley on the South London/Kent border has been named by Frith (1997:271) as 'the most significant suburb in British pop history'. Not only did it spawn David Bowie but in the punk era it was the base of the 'Bromley contingent' numbering Billy Idol and Siouxsie Sioux among members that fuelled the early roster of punk personnel. The Banshees' debut single Hong Kong Garden (1978) with its insistent nagging riff at first sounds like it is describing a perfect oriental scene but it was actually about a fight in a Chinese restaurant in deepest

suburban Chiselhurst as closer inspection of the lyrics, for example 'Would you like number 23?' referring to a menu item shows:

> Chicken Chow Mein and Chop Suey
> Hong Kong Garden takeaway.

The song actually details suburban violence perpetrated by local racists against the eatery's proprietors. Siouxsie has described the song as her revenge: 'I used to go along with my friend and just be really upset by the local skinheads that hung out there' (Webb 2009). The song's jagged, punchy structure fittingly ends with an apocolyptic single cymbal crash. This taut staccato sound continued on the track 'Suburban Relapse' from the album *The Scream* returned to in Chapter 6.

Many other songs of the era pilloried dull suburban lives. The Jam emerged from the Surrey commuter town Woking on Polydor during the phase of major label punk signings termed 'new wave'. Principal songwriter Paul Weller later had a volume of collected lyrics published under the title *Suburban 100*. Suburban stereotypes are evoked in their pen portrait of pin-striped commuting character Smithers Jones; a regular on the 8 a.m. train to Waterloo:

> Sitting on the train, you're nearly there/You're part of the production line
> You're the same as him, you're like tinned-sardines
> Get out of the pack, before they peel you back.

'Sound of the Suburbs' by the Members from Camberley, Surrey, painted scenes of a suburbia where the car is washed while mum cooks Sunday roast, little Jonny practicing guitar 'annoying the neighbours'. Its title has been more than once unearthed since including by myself (Huq 2007) and as the title of a 1991 Virgin compilation album of 1980s punk and new wave tunes. Their later 1978 single 'Solitary Confinement' delivered a more nuanced look at the suburbs. The opening powerchords usher in the familiar theme of the beginning locating suburbia as somewhere to flee from. Then as the song develops the youth-protagoist who the lyrics are addressed to relocates to 'London' only to find that he has swopped one prison for another: incarcerated in bedsit-land, isolated and trapped once again. The lure of the city 'to live out . . . life in style' did not live up to its promise.

> You are living in the suburbs/And you have problems with your parents
> So you move out to London town/Where you think everything's happening and going down.

The main repeating lyric was 'you're so lonely', echoing the anonymity of the city that is often named as a downside to urban living. The Skids had a track entitled 'Sweet Suburbia'.

US suburban pop sensibilities seem to be less obviously stated in song-titles but more indirectly noticeable in the general impression conveyed and images described. Consumerism seems to be a running motif, for example on 'Rockin' Shopping Center' from the 1977 self-titled LP *Jonathan Richman and the Modern Lovers*. The Sonic Youth track 'The Sprawl' with a title alluding the suburban development has been variously interpreted on web forums as being about prostitution and 'Selling Out'. The lyrics state

> I've gone native/I wanted to know the exact dimension of hell
> Outback was the river/And that big sign down the road
> That's where it all started.

And the chorus:

> Come on down to the store
> You can buy some more, and more, and more, and more.

On the post-punk New York New Wave band Talking Heads' track 'Once in a Lifetime' we are told of suburban routine on a highway which never seems to conclude, chasing the American dream:

> And you may ask yourself /What is that beautiful house?
> And you may ask yourself / Where does that highway go to?
> And you may ask yourself / Am I right? . . . Am I wrong?
> And you may say to yourself yourself/ My God! . . . What have I done?!

Here there is a direct questioning of the hamster-wheel existence of suburban life and realization of the futility of material possessions in the grand scheme of things which cannot compensate for the endless repetition of the cycle of life 'same as it ever was' which can catch up you unawares as it accumulates without your noticing and then gradually ebbs way. In the promotional music video for later 'Road to Nowhere' (another never-ending road that has little of the freedom one might expect of a 'freeway') the succession of expected conventional milestones: growing up education, job, career, marriage, kids are all visualized.

The Alberta-born Canadian songstress Joni Mitchell's album *The Hissing of Summer Lawns* of 1976, for example revisits many of these themes across its ten tracks and is returned to in Chapter 6. Similar suburban dissatisfaction is clear on 'Subdivisions' (1982) by the Canadian rock band Rush with eerie synth backing over a guitar solo of a progressive rock style. In an early biography (Gett 1984) now digitalized[6] the band's Neil Peary is quoted as explaining the song as 'an exploration of the background from which all of us (and probably most

of our audience) have sprung'. It is explained how in keeping with other prog rock such as Genesis and Marillion who had sung about mythical landscapes originally, Rush who hailed from the Ontario suburbs had 'a passion for fantasy and science fiction work which provided . . . an element of escapism from the grim reality of everyday life in suburbia'. The song signalled the change from such epic themes to the more everyday with a video filmed in part at a high school in Scarborough, Ontario, featuring evening Toronto newscaster Mark Dailey repeating the word 'Subdivisions' in the chorus. Aerial shots of city sprawl of freeways and flyovers give way to the band performing interspersed with story of a Hank Marvin-like high school nerd who ends up playing arcade games downtown after being ridiculed by cool and trendy classmates. The video also includes shots of a commuter subway station. The verse admonishes:

> Growing up it all seems so one-sided/Opinions all provided
> The future pre-decided/Detached and subdivided
> In the mass production zone.

The chorus references high school halls and shopping malls where one must 'conform or be cast out' concluding

> But the suburbs have no charms to soothe
> The restless dreams of youth.

As punk mutated to post-punk, suburban critique continued. On the Jam's 'Tales from the Riverbank' (1981) which like the Weller solo album 'Wild Wood' appears to have a title derived from the children's Classic novel 'Wind in the Willows' the yearning for an idealized past of open fields 'when we were young' which no longer exist is remembered. The tone is gentle and the tempo slow. The lyric wistfully admits:

> True it's a dream mixed with nostalgia
> But it's a dream that I'll always hang on to/That I'll always run to
> Won't you join me by the riverbank?

The more pugnacious-sounding fast-paced song 'Bricks and Mortar' decries rather than regrets the onset of the bulldozers replacing old, organic communities with gleaming new skyward leaning creations and car-parking in the name of progress:

> Bricks and mortar, reflecting social change,
> Cracks in the pavement, reveal cravings for success
> Why do we try to hide our past/ By pulling down houses to build car parks.

This critique of urban planning sarcastically refers to 'progress' and demands

> Who has the right to make that choice?
> A man whose home has cost forty grand.[7]

The sum of £40,000 sounds laughable when even in the present financial climate a modest house in the south of England might easily cost ten times this amount.

This lamentation of old rural landscape being replaced by suburban symbols can also be seen in the Pretenders' 'My City Was Gone' where a nightmarish situation ensues as Muzak fills the air after the farms of Ohio have been replaced by shopping malls. The sentiments can also be seen in Joni Mitchell's pre-punk 'Big Yellow Taxi' (1970) concerning the suburbanization of California where she relates 'They paved paradise/And put up a parking lot.' The line has much similarity with the Pretenders' verse:

> I went back to Ohio/But my city was gone
> There was no train station/There was no downtown
> South Howard had disappeared/All my favorite places
> My city had been pulled down/Reduced to parking spaces.

Both this and the Jam recall and the Weller interview are reminiscent of the couplet of Betjeman (2009:163): 'The sisters Progress and Destruction dwell/ Where rural Middlesex once cast her spell.' An ironic take on this sentiment is discernable on the latter period Talking Heads 'Nothing but Flowers' which describes a reverse movement of anti-suburban development that takes place as old suburban shibboleths are replaced with a back to nature movement as environmentalism wins out. The narrator sings nostalgically about missing his old suburban way of life with trappings of lawnmower and microwave. The Joni Mitchell line 'Don't it always seem to go/That you don't know what you've got till it's gone' seems appropriate here:

> From the age of the dinosaurs/Cars have run on gasoline
> Where, where have they gone?/Now, it's nothing but flowers.

He feels the new world of open fields disorienting.

> This used to be real estate/Now it's only fields and trees
> Where, where is the town? Now, it's nothing but flowers
> The highways and cars/Were sacrificed for agriculture
> I thought that we'd start over/But I guess I was wrong.

Given the band's previous distaste for the suburban rat-race on song that campaigns around a depleted ozone layer and other ecological issues were prominent in the late 1980s one can only assume that the song is intended with heavy irony. Around the same time the Pixies also sang of a world under threat from toxic waste in 'Monkey Gone to Heaven' and the B52s 1989 album Cosmic Thing (e.g. the track 'Topaz' also highlighted imminent environmental disaster).

In Paul Weller's later work the theme of yearning for the organic communities of old continued; 1985's 'Come to Milton Keynes' with Weller's then band the Style Council was a critique of New Towns to the annoyance of the district council of Milton Keynes. Older and wiser in an interview from 2007 at the age of 49 Weller took his journalist interlocutor back to Woking to promote his book of lyrics. We are told that Weller 'prefers its leafier, sleepier past' (Sandall 2007) to its present. The street that his 1995 solo album was named after Stanley Road is now dominated by offices at one end and a block of flats on the other . He is quoted as commenting 'It's f***in' 'orrible. How can you call this progress?' He recalls playing in the street, now converted to one way traffic, as a child which was possible as car traffic was so rare then. The interview states 'The young Weller's Woking was a place where "affluence and financial struggle were both very apparent, although any problems my family had I never noticed. There was always food on the table. We always had clean clothes". His dad worked in the building trade "on the hod", or on the taxi rank at the station, while his mum was a cleaner at the local 19th-century mosque, one of Britain's first.' Indeed Woking is also the site of a major Muslim burial ground in the United Kingdom (Naylor 2002), where Dodi Al-Fayed's body was flown to after his death at the side of Princess Diana in 1997. During the course of the interview a visit is paid to his parents who still lived at the time in Woking, in an upscale flat (a church conversion) on the edge of town. Of Weller we are told he now lives with his family 'in a house in Maida Vale in west London and, like many suburban boys, Weller is a devoted Londoner'. The narrative of decline is a longstanding one in writing on suburbia: both the character of Bowling in George Orwell's *Coming Up for Air* and the poetry of Betjeman make similar observations about how suburbia destroyed the countryside. In H. G. Wells' *New Machiavelli* too there is a disapproving description of how green fields get carved into parallelograms for suburban housing in Bromstead, painted as anti-progress. Weller seems to be lamenting how the old organic suburbia (he grew up in a two-up two-down terrace) has been destroyed by the new city-suburbia which includes office developments from multinationals such as Norwich Union (since absorbed by Aviva) in the town and blocks of flats.

Other suburbia-related musings present in punk came from a slew of new wave artists, for example the Stranglers who were originally called the Guildford Stranglers as they formed there ('English Towns') and XTC ('Respectable Street' 1981 about nosey neighbours and the jaunty 'Everyday Story Of Smalltown', 1984). The character sketch woven by these artists carry on the tradition of Penny Lane in evoking the 'idealized English suburban way of life, safe from the dangers of the city itself, peopled by unthreatening characters who lend a feeling of steady continuity to a place via a sun-drenched series of vignettes' (Green 2005). In 2010 the lead singer Andy Partridge was interviewed by *The Guardian*'s John Harris for a feature on suburban pop. The band's hometown Swindon had once been a west country railway town but its rapid train connection to London Paddington has almost made it a suburb of the capital and its major twenty-first century employer is Japanese car-manufacturer Honda which temporarily stopped production in 2008 and 2011 due to economic downtown and act of god happenings.[8] To the east of London Essex too has been source of pop inspiration and band personnel. 'Billericay Dickie' is a song by proto-punk Ian Dury on his 1977 album *New Boots and Panties*. His vaudeville theatre style also heard on the Billy Bragg song most associated with Essex is 'A13, Trunk Road to the sea', a reworking of the Rolling Stones' 'Route 66' itemizing places on the major arterial road that link Essex to the East End taking in suburbia en route. Things begin in Wapping taking in Fords, the Dartford Tunnel and the river too, Barking, Dagenham before the further reaches of Thurrock and Basildon before ending up at the seaside paradise of Southend. In his autobiography he has claimed 'I came from the place most kids come from: Nowheresville', (Bragg 2006:16–17). Other Essex post-punk artists included Depeche Mode and the Prodigy whose industrial electro metallic sounds arguably reflected the light industry of the county.

Post-punk's austere indie aesthetic of early recession-hit Thatcherism gave way to more glamorous, colourful 'new pop' as Thatcher moved into her second term. Suburban prime movers included to name but three: (i) the 'pure pop' of ABC fronted by Martin Fry who hailed from Stockport, technically in Cheshire but more accurately a satellite of Manchester; (ii) Wham!, a disco-rap duo from suburban Bushey in Hertfordshire just north of London and (iii) the pop-reggae of Culture Club whose lead protagonist Boy George was from Eltham, South London, an area later to become synonymous with the racist murder of Stephen Lawrence. Around the time of her third victory the maxim 'greed is good' held sway. The television stand-up comedy character Loadsamoney created by comic Harry Enfield attempted to satirize this vulgarity but ended up popularizing the stereotype. The Pet Shop Boys' early hit 'Opportunities' (1986) had a chorus

which sarcastically urged 'Let's Make Lots of Money'. Their later track entitled 'Suburbia' was ode to suburban boredom containing the constant refrain: 'I only wanted something else to do but hang around' on the track. The almost spoken word lyrics describe petty rebellion and vandalism:

> Stood by the bus stop with a felt pen
> In this suburban hell
> And in the distance a police car
> To break the suburban spell.

The vision is one of dystopia. The soundtrack reflects this with crashing collision type effects overlaid onto a simple almost nursery-rhyme-like keyboard refrain. As the song progresses this basic melody jostles for attention with panda car sirens and other sounds of urban chaos. In an interview Neil Tennant has stated: 'I thought it was a great idea to write a song about suburbia and how it's really violent and decaying and a mess. It's quite a theme in English art, literature and music, like in Graham Greene or Paul Theroux – that the suburbs are really nasty, that behind lace curtains everyone is an alcoholic or a spanker or a mass murderer. Also, this was the era of the riots in Toxteth and Brixton. I remember some friends of mine having to drive through the riots in Brixton to visit me in Chelsea, and being scared. Brixton was a prosperous Victorian suburb, and eighty years later it had become this decaying inner city.'[9] The quote recognizes that what is and isn't a suburb changes over time. As urban populations sprawl city characteristics inevitably spread to suburbs. The theme here is of faded suburban promise.

Subsequently the 1990s band E17 strongly identified themselves with their outer East London home-district choosing their postcode as name in the same way as NWA had declared earlier that they were *Straight Outta Compton* (1988) on the album credited as beginning the gangster tendency in hip hop with its liberal references to AK47 weapons and an agressively anti-police stance. Their debut album was entitled *Walthamstow,* an area that to date had probably been known to most as the stop at the nothernmost end of the Piccadilly line. *Straight Outta Compton* itself was later parodied in 'Straight Out of Dunwoody' the Suburb Life remix a pop video on the internet that namechecked Birkenstock sandals and explained that the police were called once every two years and littering was frowned upon.[10]

In the quotation opening this chapter from 1995 columnist Mr Agreeable from now defunct weekly music magazine *Melody Maker* criticizes the singer Morrissey for a lack of first-hand research experience in single 'Dagenham

Dave'. From a methodological point of view the quote appears to be a plea for ethnographic responsibility. Yet there is also a parade of stereotypes being displayed about this area of East London overspill that in later years became known for its far-right BNP (British Nationalist Party) vote earning the borough of Barking and Dagenham the epithet the 'the racist capital of the UK'.[11] It is however Manchester that Morrissey and his former band the Smiths are synonymous with. The city featured repeatedly in their work – most famously the picture of Salford lads club pictured on the sleeve of the Smiths album, *The Queen Is Dead*. The Smiths articulation of being crushed by their drab small-town surroundings was a regular a feature of their lyrics. 'William it Was Really Nothing' opens with the observation 'The rain falls hard on a humdrum town/this town has dragged you down'. Similarly 'Frankly Mr Shankly' recalls the plot of Keith Waterhouse's novel *Billy Liar* and a yearning for the narrator to escape the claustrophobia of suburban/small-town origins and answer back to the boss that he despises. 'London' unusually addresses the song's subject rather than being told in the first person. The person it addresses is about to get on the train to Euston and thereby 'escape' his unnamed habitus. This scenario again recalls the central plot of the novel and later kitchen sink film *Billy Liar*. On Youtube there has been a music-video of black and white images of the film, a kitchen sink classic, cut to the track which had no original video as it was never originally a single.[12] On the Smiths track 'Paint a Vulgar Picture' the hero seems to enact his solitary revenge from the confines of his box-bedroom lair: 'In my bedroom in those ugly new homes [sic]/I danced my legs down to the knees.' The Smiths' Englishness is all the more paradoxical for their Irish origins, all were sons of Irish immigrants.[13] Morrissey and Marr had both grown up in council house suburbia rather than the privately owned, speculatively built version, although their families had suburbanized out: Morrisey's from Hulme to Stretford and Marr's from Adwick to Wythenshawe. When Johnny Marr was asked 'When was the last time you cried?' in a *Q* magazine interview (February 2003) he answered 'I come from Ardwick, crying was beaten out of me', showing how the inner-city class origins were valorized more than suburban ones.

## The 1990s and on: Hip hop, Britpop and beyond

Long before it became the stuff of ring tones and downloads pop music was a tangible product where songs assumed primacy. The 1980s saw the purely

aural or sonic dimension of contemporary pop music reception supplemented by the advent of the pop video which was a factor in expanding the popular appeal of hip hop from its urban origins with ghetto associations to suburban bedrooms far and wide – all the more ironic given that MTV at its start only played white artists. Lavish cinematic promo clips were often accused of ostentatiously glamourising 'bling' however a subset of hip hop videos used the suburban idiom often juxtaposing the serenity of suburbia with a subculture that certainly at its outset was originally known for its raw sound tough image. Ice T's 'It was a Good Day' helped satisfy thirst for the 'urban' among young suburban youth with its lyrics that seemed to be resigned to a suburban fate and almost world-weary tone. The video ends with police snipers and gunmen swooping in on him as he walks home through a suburban street. Puff Daddy's memorable 'Bad Boys for Life' music video shows a hip hop crew (including Snoop Doggy Dogg, Ice Cube, xzibit, Shaq) cruising in an open top vehicle into a saccharine peaceful suburb 'Perfectown USA' as a real estate 'SOLD' sign goes up and neighbours' eyebrows are raised. The connotation is of the menacing cultural pollutant hip hop invading the unnaturally sunny picture of suburban tranquillity pictured satirically with humour and bravado. The 'there goers the neighbourhood' theme is evident again in the accompanying clip for 'Dilemma' by Nelly and Kelly Rowlands as a removal truck rolls in to 'Nellyville', which resembles the comfortable, upscale midwestern suburban setting of the US family prime time drama we have seen many times on the big or small screen, for example on *Desperate Housewives* or in the film *The Burbs*. The removal service brings with it the 'Dilemma' of the title as Nelly and new arrival Kelly desire each other although she has a pre-existing boyfriend. Unlike Puff Daddy's Perfectown in which Ben Stiller appears as a neighbour there are no white people in Nellyville and devoid of overt humour or irony, we see Nellyville with the sun shining and also in the rain as the melancholy torture of this love triangle is dramatized. There is no obvious resolution to this dilemma as the song simply fades out. The suburban trope in hip hop videos can also be seen in Trick Daddy's 'I'm a Thug' where our hero goes to 'meet the parents' and a whirlwind of images of high-class hotels, shopping and confusion over gun crime follows. High-end suburbia can also be seen in the video 'Touch'N You' in which Rick Ross can be seen performing in a swimming pool. It seems for these stars their acquired wealth allows them an escape route from humble origins and a passport into classy suburbia much in the same way as the original suburban aspiration dictated. Here the American dream is still present but with flashes of dystopian nightmare as in other genres.

Like punk British Britpop revelled in urban chic while the background of its practitioners revealed suburban roots. Here is a direct parallel with the statement of Gunn and Bell (2003:61) that 'Rejection of a suburban background was de rigeur for artists and writers of the 1950s like John Osborne.' Britpop from the mid-nineties onwards more than most musical scenes identified with the city, in particular London and its fashionable Camden inner-city neighbourhood. The wider Cool Britannia movement was actively championed by the first Blair government, encapsulated in pictures of Noel Gallagher with the PM at a Downing Street drinks reception. Early 1990s group Suede who Bracewell (2002) credits with beginning Britpop injected twisted suburban glamour into their songs in which a fascination for the seedy side of London, reflected and refracted through their origins in Haywards Heath, a prosperous if somewhat faded commuter town in Sussex. Geyrhalter (1996:220) has written on them 'Suede emphasise Englishness as a repressive, potentially perverse attitude towards sexuality. They celebrate London as an inherently sexual experience: "To Brett, London was big, swinging, punky, sexy, dangerous and depraved, the Ultimate metropolis" (*Melody Maker* 2/1/93).' The track 'Asbestos' from the 1999 album *Head Music* talks of 'suburban girls . . . making eyes at suburban boys' and vice versa. Britpop continually demonstrated a fascination with the capital city from those who were more often than not were from outside its boundaries mytholgizing a neo-swinging London also seen in parallel art forms such as the 1997 film *Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery* which also drew inspiration from the same era. In some ways it seemed that the 1990s, with its suburban role models gravitating to caricatured metropolitan culture and a Labour government led by a meritocratic-styled new-broom youthful premier in power, was the 1960s turned upside down.

Blur's second album *Modern Life Is Rubbish* seemed to document the familiar theme of suburban ennui. On the 1995 album *The Great Escape* Blur offers a caricature of 'poor' Ernold Same (possibly a relation of clothes fetishist Arnold Layne in the Pink Floyd song of the same name) that commiserates him for his sad repetitive life of drudgery which carries a life-sentence of commuting to a mindless, meaningless, repetitive, soul-destroying job:

> Ernold Same caught the same train
> At the same station
> Sat in the same seat/With the same nasty stain/
> Next to same old what's-his-name/
> On his way to the same place/ With the same name/
> To do the same thing/ Again and again and again.

The spoken-word rather than sung track is dryly intoned by Ken Livingstone, at the time Labour MP for Brent East and subsequently Mayor of London. There are echoes of the Jam's Smithers Jones. Blur's lyrics have satirized the futile, mundanity of suburban existence. A number of their songs take the form of character sketches centring on the suburban *ennui* theme, for example 'Tracy Jacks' – the civil servant who ran away to the seaside, 'Colin Zeal' – 'looks at his watch, he's on time, once again'. On the aptly named 'Stereotypes' from *The Great Escape* album (1995) opens with a first line that refers to Delderfield before a scene worthy of Leslie Philips unfolds:

> The suburbs they are dreaming
> They're a twinkle in her eye
> She's been feeling frisky since her husband said goodbye
> She wears a low cut T-shirt
> Runs a little B&B
> She's most accommodating when she's in her lingerie
> Wife-swapping is your future
> You know that it would suit ya.

The comedy adulterous behaviour that unfolds suggests another world beneath the surface of the suburbs contradicts the buttoned up 'no sex please we're British' stereotype. It's very title concedes that these type of goings on, seen for example in Cynthia Payne's suburban lair at Streatham where payment was by luncheon voucher was later fictionalized in the 1986 film *Personal Services*, is almost something of a cliché.

Suburbia 'gone bad' surfaced as a theme later on in their career. Far from the cheery pen-portraits and powerchords of earlier outings, the discordant sounding 'Essex Dogs' with its stop–start slow rhythm and reverb drenched bus-saw guitar from 1997's self-titled album tells of a dysfunctional landscape of 'tiny lawns' and what would now be ASBO land (referring to the punitive New Labour youth justice policy of the Anti-Social Behaviour Order) although the term had yet to be coined then. It is largely instrumental but among the spoken lyrics are:

> In this town, cellular phones are hot with teens
> In this town, we all go to terminal pubs
> It helps us sweat out those angry bits of life
> . . . You know you'll get a kicking tonight
> The smell of puke and piss.

This dysfunctional picture of suburbia gone wrong echoes of the Specials 'Friday Night and Saturday Morning', b-side to the number 1 'Ghost town' in which the narrator/hero snacks on pie and chips while waiting to go home after a night out in the city centre, the detritus all around him to the sound of a fairground organ:

> I'll eat in the taxi queue/Standing in someone else's spew
> Wish I had lipstick on my shirt /Instead of piss stains on my shoes.

However in 'Essex Dogs' there is no stated escape; its outright negative tone signals a shift from Blur's earlier suburban analyses which were more in a vein of gentle mocking fictional characters rather than outright condemnation. Blur hailed from Colchester in Essex. Yet pop fans and performers have hailed from many different types of suburbs: including working-class variants. The Gallagher brothers, lead protagonists of northern arch-rivals Oasis grew up in the suburbs of Manchester spending their formative years in the council cottage estate of Burnage. Jon Savage (1996:393) has described this as 'a step up from inner-city ghettos such as Moss side and Hulme: the 1930s semi-detatched suburbs of Burnage and Stretford, the garden city of Wythenshawe . . . ambiguous zones, far from the city centre; superficially pleasant, yet also prone to inner-city problems: broken homes, poverty, unemployment.' Oasis' lyrics were not always terribly meaningful, frequently following a template of nonsense rhyming however the idea of escape from the chains of suburbia does surface seen at times in Oasis' music. On the song 'Half a World Away' Noel Gallagher sings: 'I would like to leave this city. This old town don't smell too pretty.' Given that this was written before the band had made it and when Gallagher was on the dole this could as much refer to exiting Manchester rather than Burnage *per se*. The Smiths track 'London' also takes the capital as escape route. The subject of the song has parallels with Keith Waterhouse's daydreaming anti-hero Billy Liar. The sleeve of the Oasis single 'Live Forever' depicts 251 Menlove Avenue, the home of John Lennon's aunt Mimi where he spent his childhood, now as described above, a National Trust property.

Britpop was vociferously criticized by Fisher (1995) who drew parallels between its 'whiter than white' style and then Prime Minister John Major who predicted 'Fifty years from now Britain will still be the country of long shadows on county (cricket) grounds, warm beer, invincible green suburbs, dog lovers and pools fillers' and in his reference to old maids cycling to communion in the mist namechecking George Orwell, an old-fashioned socialist who probably would have been horrified to have lent support to a Conservative in this way. Since then

were the comments of Aidan Burley MP on Twitter decrying the 2012 Olympic opening ceremony as 'leftie multicultural crap'. Much of the content of Britpop was however not in the form of grand statements but micro detail of suburban foibles, for example Pulp from Sheffield and their tales of suburban peeping toms and outdated décor, for example from 'Disco 2000' a reference to textured wallcoverings that had been popular in the 1970s and 1980s: 'Do you recall? Do you recall? Your house was very small with wood chip on the wall. When I came around to call you didn't notice me at all.' Non-UK and non-Western influences were later experimented with by Britpop personnel. Oasis later went on to tour with Cornershop, the Anglo-Asian Wolverhampton band who scored a number 1 hit single with 'Brimful of Asha' with Noel Gallagher guesting on sitar. Damon of Blur departed from Britpop's orthodox template in collaborating with musicians from Mali.

Britpop began with a stated aim to differentiate itself from the US grunge rock tendency with Damon Albarn being quoted as saying 'If punk was about getting rid of hippies, then I'm getting rid of grunge' in a 1993 *NME* interview with interviewer John Harris widely quoted on the web including several Wikipedia entries. Yet there are many continuities between the two styles which articulate suburban alienation, for example the work of Nirvana which tapped into the 1990s slacker/Generation X debates or more recently in a track such as 'Jesus of Suburbia' by Green Day. Again aesthetic and visuals were part of the message. The video for the Smashing Pumpkins track '1979' for example includes scenes showing a raid on a convenience store, youth driving round in circles and a teenage house party with a band. The images look reminiscent of what we have seen in films like *Donnie Darko* and Linklater's *SubUrbia* among others. The 2001 Ben Folds track 'Rockin' the Suburbs' goes further than simply pillorying the suburban lifestyle as Seeger or The Monkees did by delivering an angsty direct attack on suburban life and privilege. The song which is guitar-led begins with the low-key, almost whined lyrics:

> Let me tell you all what it's like/ Being male, middle-class and white
> It's a bitch, if you don't believe/ Listen up to my new CD.

The song builds up in anger on the part of the narrator who threatens to swear because he is 'so pissed off'. Inevitably though the singer is following a long line in his art 'Just like Michael Jackson/Jon Bon Jovi/Quiet Riot did' the difference as admitted is that they were 'talented'. This satirization of the suburban pop experience became the theme tune to the 2003 Dreamworks animation film *Over the Hedge* in which cute furry animals battle the local pest control called in by

narrow-minded suburban neighbours. The song in its voicing of suburban ennui has much in common with Britpop. 'Garage' by Weezer also is a grunge track in which the space suburbia affords the status of being a misfit is celebrated by an introverted suburban kid who practices guitar in the solace of the outbuilding of his parents' suburban home. The US powerpop outfit Sparks whose biggest UK hit 'This Town ain't Big Enough for Both of Us' reached number 2 in 1974 also made a comeback in 2002 with the gently mocking 'Suburban Homeboy' describing a very US middle class existence hinting at the following of hip hop in suburbia:

> I am a suburban homeboy and I say yo dog to my pool cleaning guy
> I hope I'm baggy enough for them/ I play my Shaggy enough for them.

The old model saw flight from the city to the suburbs – Robins (1992:118) found this in his study as applying to musicians: 'Most of the people from this neighbourhood who have become successful through music have moved away. Then, typically, "they don't want to know the ghetto no more"'. Earlier generations of pop stars have repudiated their suburban origins by buying large country estates such as John Lennon and George Harrison at their mansions in Surrey and Oxfordshire. Britpop alumni have been more mixed. Blur's bassist Alex James bought a Sussex farm after living in Covent Garden at the height of Britpop. Noel Gallagher also moved to Buckinghamshire outside London after owning a London townhouse Supernova Heights in Hampstead, a North London neighbourhood that has was once a suburb and has always retained an aura of exclusivity despite having been swallowed up by the capital's growth and now lying in an inner-city location. *The Guardian* report when he left in 1999 explained 'Tired of London, and presumably of life, he has left Primrose Hill after he and his followers turned the star's home into a den of rebellious behaviour. . . . The collective sigh of relief at Gallagher's departure was about as deafening as his revelries. "There were noisy parties all night; all kinds of people staggering in and out of the place," says a psychiatrist living near by . . . This is not normally an area normally associated with that kind of behaviour' (Wazir 1999). When the late Amy Winehouse who had grown up in suburban Southgate returned to the United Kingdom after a stint in Jamaica her mother sought out a property in suburban Barnet for her as it was felt she would be safe there than with the temptations of Camden. She did not remain in the new setting and it was in Camden that she eventually met her substance abuse-related death. Blur drummer Dave Rowntree meanwhile retrained as a barrister and

stood both as a council and parliamentary candidate for the Labour party in Westminster. Paul McCartney has also been a long-term resident of St John's Wood, a smart inner London neighbourhood.

## Common themes and future directions in suburban pop

In addition to its recorded aural form, contemporary pop music reception takes multiple forms such as the pop video and live performance experienced at concerts and festivals. Clapson (2003:167) has decried the denigration of the suburbanite in pop history claiming: 'getting lyrical about the suburban plight is a maudlin indulgence, derived from an incomplete understanding of the everyday life of the English suburbs. For the simple fact remains that the suburbs, in their aggregate variety, have grown historically to constitute a massive and complex cross-section of the English people.' Bearing the UK suburban pop standard for the twenty-first century are Hard-Fi whose CV includes the 2007 single *Suburban Knights*. In spite of the words 'from nowhere' in the feature's tag-line the band's Richard Archer has described their hometown to the west of London's Heathrow airport to the *Independent* (Caesar 2005) as a strength: 'The thing about Staines is it's insular . . . but because it's insular it's helped us out. We were never like, "Oh the *NME* and all our mates in Camden are telling us that we have to make this kind of sound." So we just listened to the music that we loved . . . soul, dub, hip-hop reggae house.' Indeed in addition to the lyrics that have been pored over by theorists of pop often treating songs as a written text, music has provided lifelines and alternatives for the suburban listeners who have comprised the adoring audience who were always more than passive victims of their environs on both sides of the Atlantic and beyond. In the United Kingdom transport and the stress of commuting feature in several pop songs of and about suburbia. In the United States where there is more pronounced car culture there have been more descriptions of motor vehicle transport. Apart from such questions of infrastructure, romantic love, boredom and even the ideal of living in spacious surrounds have also inspired suburban pop. Suburbia however is not just the binary opposite of ghetto, there are links between the two in the twenty-first century; the suburbs are not static and the cultural activity alive in them means that they are far from sleepy commuterland or purely one-dimensional residential enclaves that depend upon the city, the modern suburb is complex and multifaceted. It can be argued then that there is more interesting cultural work than in the supposed central sites taking place in peripheral sites and what

might appear at first sight to be non-descript suburbia. The group Orbital for example emerged from a sound system that organized raves around the M25. Songs like 'Streets of Your Town' from Australian band the Go-Betweens also show suburban pop pervades in Anglo-Saxon settings other than the United Kingdom and United States.

The best-known album in the recent past addressing the suburban condition is from Canadian band Arcade Fire simply entitled *The Suburbs*. Even if one review remarked 'listening to the Suburbs is almost as boring as actually living in the suburbs themselves' (Meline 2010) most of the critical reception was almost entirely praiseworthy. It amassed a number of gongs including the 53rd Grammy Album of the Year, the Canadian Juno Album of the Year and International Album at the BRIT Awards in 2011.[14] The album is multi-textured as the two tracks with the same name demonstrate. 'Sprawl I (flatland)' is a plaintive number in a minor key with mournful instrumentation including violins and defeatism in its lyrics:

> Took a drive into the sprawl
> To find the places we used to play
> It was the loneliest day of my life
> You're talking at me but I'm still far away
> Let's take a drive through the sprawl
> Through these towns they built to change
> But then you said, the emotions are dead
> It's no wonder that you feel so strange.

This contrasts with the urgent pounding electric keyboards, sub-disco rhythms and female vocals of 'Sprawl II (Mountains beyond Mountains)', which rhythmically recalls Blondie's pulsating 'Heart of Glass'. The lyrics detail some of the recognizable features of the ever-expanding exurban landscape:

> Sometimes I wonder if the world's so small,
> That we can never get away from the sprawl,
> Living in the sprawl,
> Dead shopping malls, rise like mountains beyond mountains,
> And there's no end in sight,
> I need the darkness, someone please cut the lights.

The album's title track with its jaunty piano riff and chiming guitars, already referred to in Chapter 1, is a generally upbeat track even if it talks of being 'already bored' and refers to the flimsiness and ultimate lack of sustainability of hastily constructed mass produced 'crackerbox' suburban houses of post-war

America (Donaldson 1969) whose uncertain future had been pondered some years ago by Wood (1958) in the line:

> All of the houses they built in the Seventies finally fall/It meant nothing at all.

The vocalist seems resigned to this: it is a fact of life. The collapse of some of the old structures and certainties in recessionary times when old codes of morality, working practices, leisure and consumption have also weakened their grip over the suburbs of yesteryear.

The band also released the accompanying film *Scenes from the Suburbs* shot in Austin, Texas, and directed by Spike Jonze. This 30-minute feature begins conventionally enough showing suburban youth goofing around, fumbling at first love and taking dead-end jobs before a nightmarish scenario of a suburb with troop manned strict border control and the human cost of suburban regimentation unfolds. A brief appearance from husband and wife singers Win Butler and Regine Chassagne as cops can be seen. This sense of suburban paranoia contrasts with 'Mushaboom' by fellow Canadian singer songwriter Feist (2004) which the lyrics describes an idyllic suburban scene and settling down before the realization

> But in the meantime I've got it hard/ Second floor living without a yard
> It may be years until the day/ My dreams will match up with my pay.

The video appears to show the daydreams of a city dweller who wishes to spread their wings but is constrained by finances. Here the suburban dream as a mode of living to aspire to still persists although is increasingly out of reach to average salaries in current economic circumstances.

The music emerging from contemporary suburbia continues to be moulded by multi-ethnicity and other rapid social change. The pickled-in-aspic version of suburbia sung about in twentieth-century pop has experienced dramatic transformations as the urban landscape now has business parks, retail parks, out-of-town leisure complexes and shopping malls among its features challenging the traditional suburban set up. In 2012 the 'misunderstood' tweet of Aidan Burley MP at the Olympics 'Bring back red arrows [*sic*], Shakespeare and the Stones!' rendered him even more ridiculous as rhythm and blues which in the essence of the Stones is intrinsically multicultural, rooted in black America. As Norman (2002:33) describes music was their escape route from suburbia before they adopted their now familiar stage personas: 'Mike [*sic*] Jagger listened to Muddy Waters, Jimmy Reed, Howlin' Wolf, giants of the urban blues with heart-shivering voices, calling and answering their virtuoso guitars, that could change the view beyond the lace curtains from Kentish suburbia to the dark

and windy canyons along Chicago's Lake Shore Drive.' Their musical teeth cut the suburban circuit including the Railway Hotel, Harrow, the Crawdaddy club at the Station Hotel, Richmond and scene of their first ever gig the Ealing Club played in 1962 which guitarist Keith Richards mentions several times in his autobiography *Life* (2010).

Melville (2004) describes the universe of British hip hop outfit 'The Streets' as 'distinctly sub-urban – the land of asbos, twockers and daytime drinkers . . . surroundings [reflected] sonically, through word, accent and music.' Grime and dubstep are two suburban genres that have added themselves to familiar lists that have inspired past textbooks (Shuker 2003; Borthwick and Moy 2004). O'Connell (2006) calls the home of dubstep 'the hotbed of sub-cultural creativity that is Croydon', a suburb to the south of London with ambitions to be a city in its own right. An *Independent* article sounds similarly incredulous with the subheading 'The hottest dance sound around wasn't born in the USA. Chris Mugan tracks the new scene down to its unlikely birthplace' (Mugan 2006). For Melville (2004) 'Mike Skinner is the hip hop balladeer of the suburbs, an anthropological humanist . . . marking the unlikely connection between Norman Wisdom, Suggs, Seinfeld and Del Tha Funkee Homosapien.' A Letter to *Croydon Advertiser* (29 July 2010)[15] stated: 'There is a tendency to look for bricks and mortar examples when conveying what is good about Croydon . . . Our senior councillors are probably not aware of developments in the dance music scene [but] "Dubstep" is a new bass driven genre which has taken the world by storm . . . follow[ing] a rich history of musicians from our borough . . . Identifying dubstep as an example of Croydon culture may not be the conventional way to describe this borough, but that does not mean it should be ignored. The next time Councillor O'Connell is at some international municipal conference or on the radio, could he show he's in tune with what's going on in the whole of Croydon.' Escapism has long been a key function of suburban pop but so has the documentation of the quotidian. There are in modern record shops 'urban' racks of mainly dance music. To make a *suburban* category might necessitate use of a whole store's entire stock. Then again the idea of physical racks for classificatory purposes and 'record' shops seems anarchronitsic as music ceases to be a physical product and download culture and laptop DJs now dominate. Grime and dubstep from Croydon are but two recent styles that capture the textures of the modern suburb serving as a powerful rejoinder to conceptualizations of the suburbs as monocultural. Along with all the styles described above including Canadian indie rock these are proof, if proof were needed, that suburbia has provided a wellspring of creativity in pop soundtracking suburban existence in contemporary times.

## Notes

1 Chris Evans Breakfast Show, 23 August 2010 at: www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00th93y.
2 'It's good to Bee back says Robin' by Marie Burchill, *Manchester Evening News*, 2 October 2008 at: http://menmedia.co.uk/southmanchesterreporter/news/s/1070247_its_good_to_bee_back_says_robin. When the Manchester Metrolink tram route was extended the advertising posters read 'The smoothest thing to come out of Chorlton since the Bee Gees'.
3 A soap impression of his wife/which he ate and donated to the National Trust, this expression is apparently slang for excreting.
4 www.nationaltrust.org.uk/main/w-vh/w-visits/w-findaplace/w-mendips/; www.nationaltrust.org.uk/main/w-20forthlinroadallerton.
5 www.kentonline.co.uk/kentonline/news/2010/july/15/mick_jagger_visits_dartford.aspx.
6 http://2112.net/powerwindows/transcripts/gettsuccess.htm.
7 On its live performance (following 'In the City') on YouTube filmed at the Electric Circus venue in August 1977 the young Weller introduces it with the words 'This one's for fat councillors', www.youtube.com/watch?v=zKaLHbXjcZs.
8 'Honda Swindon closing for 50 days', BBC, 21 November 2008, at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/7741269.stm. This first 50-day stoppage was due to reduced orders and then in 2011 a halving of production due to a scarceness of parts from Japan in the wake of the Tsunami and earthquake.
9 Interview at 'Absolutely Pet Shop Boys – Unofficial Site', www.petshopboys.net/html/interviews/pleasse005.shtml. The same interview – curiously given how 'English' the band (and the interpretation of suburbia described) seemingly are – also alleges that the song was inspired by the Penelope Spheeris film of the same name about youths in suburban Los Angeles who channel disenchantment and rebellion into gang-life, www.worldgreen.org/living/eco-products-for-the-home/3261-friday-music-blogging-arcade-fire.html.
10 http://zhiphopcleveland.com/3158092/n-w-a-straight-outta-compton-suburbs-remix-video/.
11 www.obv.org.uk/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=344&Itemid=127.
12 www.youtube.com/watch?v=clPhtitSpes.
13 In an acerbic interview with BBC Radio 2 DJ Dermot O'Leary, the DJ's Irish roots seemed to be the only thing instilling a modicum of restraint into Morrissey who expressed clear disdain for *The X Factor*, another show that O'Leary had worked on. See www.morrissey-solo.com/content/133-Morrissey-on-Dermot-O-Leary-Radio-2- (30 April 2011, 3 p.m.).
14 It was also Album of the Year at the Canadian Polaris Awards and placed first in best of the year album lists drawn up by critics of BBC 6 Music, *Clash* Magazine and *Q* Magazine and second placed from Shasha Khan, Croydon Green Party for *NME*, *Billboard* and *Time*.
15 *Letter to the Paper on Dubstep*, 29 July 2010, at: http://croydongreens.blogspot.com/2010/07/letter-to-paper-on-dubstepyes-dubstep.html.