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Common people

Institutional and vernacular norms in the vocal performances of Jarvis Cocker and James Dean Bradfield during the Britpop era 1994–1998

British popular music has long been studied, from a linguistic perspective, in terms of the extent to which British singer-songwriters perform their vocals in a way which approximates an American-stylised pronunciation (Trudgill 1983; Simpson 1999; Jansen 2018; Flanagan 2019). This study investigates the performed language of the lead singers of two of the most successful British bands of the Brit-pop period in this regard.

James Dean Bradfield of the Manic Street Preachers and Jarvis Cocker of Pulp both grew up in working class communities: Bradfield in Blackwood, South Wales; Cocker in Sheffield, Yorkshire. Both bands released three albums during the famed “Brit-pop” period (1994–1998), achieving chart success, winning awards, and notching two of the most celebrated rock songs of the decade in the working class anthems *Common People* (Pulp) and *Design for Life* (Manic Street Preachers), both of which peaked at number two in the UK singles chart.

This study analyses all of the songs on each band’s three albums during this period, identifying American-stylised features, using modifications of Simpson’s (1999) USA-5 model. The results allow for an evaluation of the singers’ linguistic performances, both of which are shown to be impacted by the competing prestige values of local vernacular forms (indexing authenticity and British working-class identity) and American-stylised forms (reflecting the institutional norm for the genre of rock music, alongside the singers’ multiple influences). Methodological reflection is provided on the USA-5 model, extolling the virtues of flexibility and adaptability when analysing datasets of this kind.

References

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