

Rue Britannia, its music, magic and memory

Kieron Gillen (story), Jamie McKelvie (art & lettering)
Image Comics, 2007

There's a moment somewhere in your mid-thirties when you realise you're no longer part of the bright, hip set. It's not that you're old and you're probably living as audaciously as you ever did, yet there's a newer, younger crowd around and these bright young things are exactly where you once were: dictating that fleeting height of coolness.

Phonogram: Rue Britannia is the book which captures that moment perfectly. It's about nostalgia and identity, subjectivity of memory and the growing up you do, not in childhood as such, but somewhere between 23 and 35. Mostly, it's a book about music. About subculture. About Britpop in London circa 1995, the obsession at the centre of Kieron Gillen and Jamie McKelvie's wicked little tale.

Rue Britannia is hard-edged with detail and darkly humorous, with a sexist jerk of a hero who can't get over the fact he once used to be 'it'. Being an indie comic, it's also got its fair share of urban myth and magic, giving us Phonomancers, those who draw power from totemic music. Dave Kohl is the aforementioned jerk, in his own words "Toxic and male. Utterly noxious. Totally perfect", who we first meet crashing Ladyfest (think Riot Grrls ten years later) looking to get laid. His identity is firmly rooted in the long forgotten Britpop, but when its dead goddess, his ex Britannia, is messed with, he must sort out what's happening before his own identity unravels.

Gillen describes this as *Hellblazer* meets *High Fidelity*. His writing is sharp and satiric, the dialogue nastily witty. Kohl: "You're speaking to the saviour of reality," Aster: "Perhaps, but only your reality, David." More importantly, it's real. With two or three musical references per page, they've got to fit seamlessly into the dialogue or else nothing is going to work. Gillen mostly manages, with nothing feeling too forced nor deliberately showy.

The storyline flicks between timeframes with a rapidity which can be confusing, replicating in narrative Kohl's mental state as his source of identity is constantly re-evaluated. McKelvie's black and white artwork is clean lined and straightforward, before diving into a series of murky grey tones as memory is questioned and increasingly multiple interpretations of the past are offered. It is the artwork which leads us through the twisting plotline and McKelvie's skill ensures we don't unravel along with Kohl.

Initially published in six single issues, *Rue Britannia* suffers from none of the usual problems with collected graphic works, those glaring gaps in narrative arch or jolting changes in artistic style which too often stick out like so much flashing neon. There is an authenticity here which cannot be faked. The creators' nostalgia for their own past drives Kohl forward and the reader with him. Yet to read *Rue Britannia* as one for whom Britpop meant merely overplayed Oasis tracks on commercial radio is not to feel excluded. If you ever listened to music, any music, and it meant something; if you ever defined yourself by the scene you inhabited - however fleetingly - then this is your book.