Fashioning the “People’s Guitarist”: The Mythologization of Rory Gallagher in the International Music Press

Journal Item

How to cite:


For guidance on citations see FAQs.

© 2022 Lauren Alex O’Hagan

https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/

Version: Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher’s website:
http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1080/19401159.2022.2048988

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online’s data policy on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

oro.open.ac.uk
Fashioning the “People's Guitarist” The Mythologization of Rory Gallagher in the International Music Press

Lauren Alex O'Hagan

To cite this article: Lauren Alex O'Hagan (2022) Fashioning the “People's Guitarist” The Mythologization of Rory Gallagher in the International Music Press, Rock Music Studies, 9:2, 174-198, DOI: 10.1080/19401159.2022.2048988

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/19401159.2022.2048988

© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

Published online: 10 Mar 2022.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 2050

View related articles

View Crossmark data
Fashioning the “People’s Guitarist” The Mythologization of Rory Gallagher in the International Music Press

Lauren Alex O’Hagan

School of Humanities, Education and Social Sciences, Örebro University, Örebro, Sweden

ABSTRACT
This paper traces how the international music press used the clothing and appearance of the Irish blues/rock musician Rory Gallagher to mythologize him as the “People’s Guitarist.” I explore how this image was constructed and developed over time, as well as Gallagher’s own response to this mythologization and how it has consolidated since his death in 1995. I argue that Gallagher’s unwillingness to compromise his integrity and shift his music or clothing to fit changing trends made him an anomaly in an image-conscious music industry. Thus, his appearance became an easy target for the music press who focused overwhelmingly on his clothing in interviews and articles. This focus unfairly drew attention away from his music and downplayed the important contribution he made to the world of blues and rock.

KEYWORDS
Rory Gallagher; music press; mythologization; clothing; lumberjack shirt; jeans

Introduction

Whether it is Elton John and his glasses, Frank Sinatra and his trilby hat, or Angus Young and his schoolboy uniform, musicians are often associated with a certain item of clothing. These items are latched upon by the music press who use them as “shortcuts” to describe people, thereby cultivating a particular image which makes the artist synonymous with and inseparable from said garment (Miller). In many cases, musicians select their clothing deliberately to shock or draw attention to themselves, particularly when performing on stage (e.g., Kiss, Madonna, Freddie Mercury). Others choose to eschew glamor and wear items from their everyday wardrobe, such as jeans, white t-shirts, and plaid (e.g., Bruce Springsteen, Neil Young, John Fogerty). Nonetheless, these “ordinary” garments still become mythologized over time, acquiring all sorts of sociocultural meanings in the music press, from independence and hard work to authenticity and hegemonic masculinity (see Frith).

This was the case for Rory Gallagher, the Irish blues and rock musician, who served as the singer and guitarist of the power trio Taste (1966–1970) and went on to pursue a successful solo career (1971–1995). Whether onstage or offstage, Gallagher dressed in a lumberjack shirt, blue jeans, and sneakers – the clothes in which he felt most comfortable. Yet the music press saw Gallagher’s clothing as part of an “anti-star” image (Nolan; Clarke; among others), a visual protest against the glamorization of the music industry to...
which he was strongly opposed, and increasingly framed his music within this context in interviews and articles rather than focusing on his musicianship. Gallagher became increasingly distressed by what he considered to be “lazy” journalism (Jackson), leading him to abandon the look in the late 1980s in exchange for a black leather jacket and black jeans – a decision also influenced by his own battles with anxiety and depression that had worsened considerably at this time.

In this article, I trace how the international music press used Gallagher’s clothing and appearance to mythologize him as the “people’s guitarist” (see Holdship). By conducting a corpus and content analysis of 370 articles that appeared across the international music press from 1969 to 2010, I assess how the lumberjack shirt and blue jeans were used to present Gallagher as ordinary, humble, and hard-working, as well as other “trademark” elements of his image, such as his “battered” Fender Stratocaster, long unruly hair, and even his sweat. I also explore Gallagher’s own response to this mythologization and how it has developed over time, both in the course of his lifetime and since his death in 1995. Ultimately, I argue that Gallagher’s unwillingness to compromise his integrity and shift his music or clothing to fit changing trends made him an anomaly in an image-conscious music industry. Thus, his appearance became an easy target for the music press who focused overwhelmingly on his clothing, unfairly detracting from his music.

Despite great public interest in the fashion choices of pop and rock icons, surprisingly few academic studies have been carried out on the topic. To date, research has tended to focus particularly on musicians with a strong image as style icons, such as Michael Jackson (Ferreday), Lady Gaga (Geczy and Karaminas), David Bowie (Mills), Roxy Music (Bracewell), and the Beatles (Wilkins and Inglis). Scholars have also looked more generally at the fashion associated with particular music styles, including dance (Jaimangal-Jones, Pritchard, and Morgan), grunge (Kyoung), punk (Weiner), and New Romantic (Bernhard-Jackson), as well as specific clothing trends in music, such as military uniforms (Langkjaer) and “gender bending” fashion (Jairath and Daima). Work has also been carried out on fan apparel like band shirts (A. Brown) and battle jackets (O’Hagan), as well as the role of certain dress codes in fandom (Araste and Venstel) and how fans use clothes to perform identity (Chaney and Goulding). However, few studies have been carried out on unglamorous musicians, such as Rory Gallagher, who do not actively seek to develop an image through clothing or to how this image unfolds in the music press.

Therefore, this study is unique in its focus on Rory Gallagher – a musician who has thus far been ignored in academic research (with the exception of O’Hagan, “Rory”) – and its application of corpus and content analysis to a large archive of historical articles about him. Through an empirical study of the ebb and flow of journalistic responses to Gallagher and his music over time, it showcases how the music press play a pivotal role in shaping audiences’ understandings of performers. Exploring this fashion-driven mythologization of Gallagher is important because it demonstrates how a sustained focus on his clothing glossed over the significant contributions he made to blues and rock music, which fed into his negative self-perception and gradually worsened his already fragile mental health. Its findings, thus, will contribute to a growing body of work on the relationship between musicians, clothing, and the music press. On a secondary level, they will also go some way toward recovering Gallagher’s musical integrity, safeguarding his legacy, and crediting him as a true pioneer in his field.
Rory Gallagher: Last of the Independents

William Rory Gallagher was born at the Rock Hospital in Ballyshannon, Ireland, on 2 March 1948. His mother, Monica, came from Cork in the south of the country, while his father, Daniel, hailed from Derry across the border in Northern Ireland. It was in Derry that Gallagher spent the first eight years of his life, before moving to Cork in 1956 with his mother and younger brother Dónal (born in 1949) following his parents’ separation.

Gallagher was just six years of age when he found his musical calling. He was surfing the family radio one evening and came across the American Forces Network, which had been broadcasting in Northern Ireland since 1943 when a US naval base was established in Derry (Vignoles, 10). Through the Voice of America and its Jazz Hour programs, Gallagher was introduced to blues musicians like Son House, Big Bill Broonzy, and Muddy Waters. Around the same time, through BBC radio, he also became aware of the skiffle musician Lonnie Donegan who interpreted American folk songs by Woody Guthrie and the primal blues of Lead Belly. These experiences marked the start of Gallagher’s lifelong affair with the blues.

Gallagher begged his parents for a guitar, using a round cheese box, ruler, and elastic to create the instrument he had in his mind. They agreed and sourced a guitar by mail order, which turned out to be a four-stringed plastic ukulele (McHugh). In 1957, at the age of nine, Gallagher progressed to an acoustic guitar and started to teach himself chords by copying the hand shapes of musicians from photographs in Melody Maker and later through books from his local library such as Lonnie Donegan’s Skiffle Hits. He promptly acquired a repertoire of folk and rock-and-roll tunes and began performing regularly at local care homes, church halls, and asylums around Cork (Vignoles, 24).

As a boy, Gallagher’s other main passion was cinema, particularly the films of Gene Autry and Roy Rogers. He was fascinated by the notion of the singing cowboy—a lonesome outlaw who roamed from town to town playing music. Both Autry and Rogers were deeply influential in shaping Gallagher’s own vision of what it meant to be a musician, as well as his style of dress. Gallagher’s schoolfriend Billy Barry recalls him participating in local talent shows, dressed in a lumberjack shirt, blue jeans, neckerchief, and cowboy hat (Vignoles, 24), while early childhood photos show Gallagher’s brother Dónal in a Roy Rogers costume which Gallagher himself had outgrown.

Gallagher attended North Monastery, a strict Catholic school run by the Christian Brothers. Pupils were required to follow a mandatory code of dress: matching black blazer, tie, and trousers with a white shirt. Yet the moment school finished for the day, Gallagher changed out of his uniform back into his everyday clothes: a lumberjack shirt and blue jeans. Although he was a diligent and clever child, Gallagher suffered frequent beatings with blackthorn rods from the Brothers for his interest in what they considered to be the “devil’s music.” One particular incident in which Gallagher was hit so hard that his legs turned septic had a marked effect on him, according to brother Dónal, fueling the anxiety from which he suffered for the rest of his life (Ross).

When he turned twelve, Gallagher purchased his first electric guitar—a Rosetti Solid 7—before buying the instrument three years later that would become his constant life companion: a 1961 Fender Stratocaster. At fifteen, Gallagher turned professional, joining a local showband the Fontana (later called the Impact) and traveling across Ireland to play popular music covers in ballrooms and dancehalls. During Lent when dances were temporarily
prohibited in Ireland, the Fontana performed in Britain and Germany. Despite his busy schedule, Gallagher took night classes at the School of Art and continued to attend school (having now moved to the more liberal St Kieran’s), obtaining his leaving certificate at aged seventeen. The day after Gallagher graduated, the Fontana headed to Spain – then under the Franco regime – for a series of concerts at the US naval bases, but he was forced to cut his mop-top hairstyle before being permitted entry (O’Sullivan).

While Gallagher valued the showband experience, he felt stifled by the strictures of their music. Furthermore, he hated the fact that, just as at school, he had to wear a uniform: all members were required to have matching gray suits and ties. In 1966, he made the decision to leave the showband and form his own band Taste with two fellow Corkonians Eric Kitteringham and Norman Damery. Taste gave Gallagher the freedom to wear his everyday attire on stage and grow his hair down to his shoulders, which quickly earned him the reputation of having the longest hair in Cork (O’Driscoll). Taste moved to Belfast in 1967, attracted by its thriving blues scene. The band quickly became acclaimed and, just one year later, they were offered a residency at the Marquee Club in London (Kitteringham and Damery now replaced by Richard McCracken and John Wilson). In 1969, Taste supported Blind Faith on their final American tour and in 1970, they stole the show at the Isle of Wight festival, delivering five encores (Byrne), yet just a few months later, the band split as a result of managerial issues. The bitter breakup of Taste and the protracted legal proceedings deeply affected Gallagher – legal proceedings finally resolved in 1992 with none of the band members receiving royalties from their music; Gallagher never played any Taste material again and became extremely guarded in his relationships with others, only trusting his brother Dónal with his business affairs.

Gallagher went on to have a successful solo career, recording with his childhood hero Muddy Waters in 1971, winning Melody Maker’s Player of the Year in 1972, and being courted by the Rolling Stones in 1975 when Mick Taylor left. Never one for self-publicity, he built his reputation by word of mouth through his live shows, where he would often perform for more than three hours with a fully improvised set. In an average year, Gallagher spent ten months on the road, gaining a huge following across the world, particularly in mainland Europe where he regularly appeared at the Rockpalast and Montreux festivals. Gallagher had a very clear idea of what a real musician should be – someone who “play[s] a lot” and keep[s] close to their audiences” (M. Brown) – and was not prepared to conform to the music industry’s demands by releasing singles, appearing on Top of the Pops, wearing glitter, or adding pyrotechnics to his sets. In short, he wanted his music to speak for itself (Figure 1).

Off stage, Gallagher’s personality, beliefs, and interests also made him somewhat of an outsider. He had a strong aversion to the drugs-and-groupies lifestyle associated with rock and was an extremely shy person, preferring to retreat to his hotel room after gigs to read, draw, or watch movies rather than attend parties and socialize (Fanning). Over the course of his lifetime, he had few close friends and no romantic interests and lived in a modest studio flat in London (Vignoles, 154). He was also a devout Catholic, attending Mass on a regular basis, and was well known for his politeness and old-fashioned chivalry, never swearing or telling coarse jokes, always standing up when women walked in, and calling his mother every night before he went to bed (MacRory). As Gallagher often said, he felt like an “outsider looking in” (Ward), a feeling that was encapsulated in one of his most popular songs “A Million Miles Away.”
As this article will show, the music press frequently drew attention to Gallagher’s clothing choices to signal his independent attitude to the music industry and his philosophy of life, often being flippant in their remarks. In doing so, they mythologized him as a working-class hero; yet, this portrayal was upsetting to Gallagher who had no interest in cultivating an image and felt that it discredited his music.

**Research Design**

In order to explore how Rory Gallagher’s clothing and appearance was used to mythologize him as the “people’s guitarist,” I conducted extensive research into a large body of articles published in the international music press over a 41-year period. The articles were taken from the RoryON!! website ([www.roryon.com](http://www.roryon.com)), a grassroots fanpage set up by John Ganjamie and approved by the Gallagher family, on which articles about Gallagher
are collated and shared. The articles span from 1969, when Taste released their debut album, to 2010, when a statue of Gallagher was unveiled in his birthtown of Ballyshannon. Since 2011, any new articles about Gallagher have been shared instead via the Rory Gallagher Group on Facebook, the RoryON!! website now serving more as an historic archive than an active repository. For the purposes of this paper, I decided to focus solely on the RoryON!! articles, partially due to the complexities of retrieving old social media posts but also because my main research focus was how this “mythologization” of Gallagher unfurled throughout his lifetime and immediately after his death.

In the first stage of the research, all 438 articles on the RoryON!! website were downloaded and converted to TXT files. They were tagged with metadata on the publication, year, country, and journalist. Through this process, 73 publications were excluded based on their absence of metadata or the fact that they were not articles, but rather excerpts from tour programs or rock encyclopedias. The remaining 370 articles were then uploaded to Sketch Engine – a corpus manager and text analysis software – in order to identify particular patterns in their content. Searches were conducted on words associated with dress (e.g., “shirt,” “denim,” “jeans,” “pants,” “Levis,” “jacket,” “sneakers”), as well as Gallagher’s appearance (e.g., “hair,” “sweat”) and instrument (e.g., “Strat,” “Stratocaster,” “guitar”). Attention was also paid to adjectives, such as “hard-working,” “humble,” and “working-class.”

Focusing on keywords enabled me to see frequently occurring collocations and their relationship to the surrounding text, thus providing a sense of the strategies that publications used to cultivate a particular image of Gallagher and frame this in relation to his music.

The collected articles represent 15 countries, with the UK, Ireland, and the US featuring most prominently. Most articles come from the leading music magazines of the time (e.g., Sounds, Melody Maker, New Musical Express (NME), Hot Press, Disc and Music Echo, Creem). Others tend to be “one-off” articles written in local newspapers or college magazines in response to a particular performance (e.g., Dallas Observer, Illinois Entertainer, SoHo Weekly News). Just 16 of the 370 articles were written by women, a reflection of the evident gender bias of music journalism (see Davies). Figure 2 shows how the collected articles are distributed over time. It reveals a notable peak in publications between 1971 and 1977 when Gallagher was at the height of his fame, as well as following his death in 1995. It also reflects his decline in popularity in the 1980s, seen as uncool and old-fashioned in an age of MTV and synthesizers, as well as a refreshed interest in his music in 1991 as part of the blues revival.

Next, I conducted a detailed content analysis of the articles, led by the reoccurring word patterns established in the corpus analysis, in order to identify salient themes. While I had initially planned to organize my analysis according to differences in the music press across countries and specific publications, the content analysis revealed that the vast majority of journalists – regardless of background – used the same general arguments and framing around clothing and appearance when discussing Gallagher and his music. Moreover, these attitudes developed in exactly the same way over time across the international press from the Taste period through Gallagher’s solo career to his death and beyond. An astonishing 90.5% of the articles make reference to Gallagher’s clothing and appearance, using it to frame him as the “people’s guitarist.” In what follows,
I provide a chronological overview of how these ideas emerged and developed in the music press, embedding my arguments within Gallagher’s own responses and historical background on the broader musical context.

**Analysis: Fashioning the “People’s Guitarist”**

In her study on the social meanings of hats and t-shirts, Crane describes clothing as an “open text” (11), which acquires different personal, social, and societal meanings depending on context. Similarly, Mackinney Valentin sees garments as “wearable archives of fashion narratives” (140) that vary across time and space. Clothing, thus, carries “symbolic ambiguity” (144), serving as both an empty vessel waiting to be filled with meaning by the wearer, yet also carrying layered meanings based on pre-established cultural connotations. This is particularly the case for items such as lumberjack shirts and denim jeans. These garments were first produced in the mid-nineteenth century and worn largely by US cowboys and loggers for practical purposes: they were warm, hardy, and durable. However, over the course of the twentieth century, they became strongly linked with “freedom, hard work, rugged individualism, and masculinity” (Mackinney Valentin, 149), as well as honesty, integrity, and ordinariness (Davis; Fiske).

The lumberjack shirt and denim jeans combo was popularized by the grunge movement of the early 1990s, with Nirvana’s Kurt Cobain using the clothes as a deliberate nihilistic and anticommmercial message that “ran against the grain of the flashy aesthetic of the 1980s” (Marin). However, more than twenty years before, the same clothes were worn by a range of musicians, from Bruce Springsteen and Neil Young to John Fogerty and Rory Gallagher, the focus of this paper. Petkovski notes how such clothing served to create an image of the “performer as worker” and was deeply tied up with working-class
identity and physical labor. In the case of Springsteen, several studies have questioned the authenticity of his clothing (Bird; Pfeil), arguing that he beguiles working-class audiences by downplaying his actual class through symbols of lower economic status; nonetheless, these garment choices are appreciated by such audiences who see him as “one of them.”

For Rory Gallagher, the choice to wear a lumberjack shirt and jeans was strongly influenced by his lifelong love for the blues and the “singing cowboys” of the Wild West. Ever since he was a young boy, he had worn such apparel and, when he became commercially successful, he did not feel the need to change it and continued shopping in Leaders, the local store in Cork where he had always bought his clothing. The music press, however, quickly picked up on Gallagher’s sartorial choices, using it to mythologize him as a “no frills, no star trip, just a plain good ol’ chap” (De Pascale) and, as music trends changed, to increasingly make fun of him and portray his music as part of a bygone era.

“The Errand Boy for a Polydor Executive”

The image of Gallagher as the “people’s guitarist” developed early on in the music press when he was still a member of the three-piece Taste (1966–1970). Taste had quickly established a reputation for themselves on the live circuit as a raw, high-energy band who played an experimental mix of blues, jazz, folk, country, and rock, and this image was quickly exploited in articles through references to Gallagher’s clothing and appearance. A piece published in Hit Parader in 1970 described Gallagher’s “battered guitar” and “ridiculously small” amplifier as “better suited to a home hi-fi outfit,” but argued that this was what gave him such “warmth” and humility (“Sound Sandwich”). Similarly, an article in the same year from NME compared Gallagher’s nonconformist and down-to-earth dress to his nonconformist and down-to-earth attitude to music (Green). Gallagher unintentionally fueled these comparisons further, setting a precedent for later articles, by telling journalist Richard Green that he wanted to avoid “a very unshow-bizzy, pop star, Max Factor makeup thing” in all that he did. These comparisons were picked up again in a 1970 article in Sounds when journalist Royston Eldridge described Gallagher’s clothing as building “a natural [image] of [a] genuine nice guy” and that this was the same image he had on stage, coming out with no big announcements; just a “cheerful thumbs up” and “sheer hard work.”

Gallagher left Taste in 1970 and launched a solo career the following year; however, the image of him as the “people’s guitarist” pursued him and became further consolidated. Articles promoting the release of his eponymous debut album in May 1971 (seen as a transition album between Taste and the blues style he would develop) and second album Deuce six months later in November (a more rock-oriented sound with a blues base) frequently stated that he had been well known for his check shirt and jeans since he was fifteen and illogically equated this to the reason why his music was “so genuine and straightforward” (Briel). As Gallagher made an increasing name for himself on the international stage, almost every article picked up on his choice of apparel, using it as shorthand to portray him as down-to-earth and humble in line with the stripped-back blues music that he played. The strength of this image is reflected in the collocations with “shirt” and “jeans” that frequently reoccur across the body of articles: words either frame Gallagher and his clothing as inseparable entities (e.g., “trademark,” “same,” “regulation.”
“ever-present,” “never-ending,” “eternal,” “ubiquitous,” “faithful,” “customary”) or emphasize his unassuming nature (e.g., “simple,” “ordinary,” “crumpled,” “dirty,” “scruffy,” “faded”). Likewise, his music is regularly described with similar adjectives – “basic,” “simple,” “organic,” “raw,” “gutsy,” “plain,” “straightforward,” and “uncomplicated” – tying the two things together unequivocally.²

Journalists regularly commented on the fact that Gallagher’s clothes came from his local shop Leaders or Woolworths and Tesco – high street stores where most men across the UK and Ireland bought their shirts and jeans at the time. They argued that it was this “no-nonsense” and “practical” clothing (Diamond) that showed a “total lack of pretension” and made him an “anti-star,” a “true working-class hero,” and “one of the boys” (Nolan; Muller; “Blue Print”). Again, the press reinforced the link between his clothing and style of music: “he looks exactly the way he plays – trademark flannel shirt, faded jeans, flat-footed sneakers, wild half-curly tresses falling unkempt to his shoulders” (Fricke). Many publications were quick to state, however, that these clothes were not a “gimmick” and that Gallagher was a “natural person radiating a lot of human warmth” who “simply looks as he feels” (Haring). Writing in Melody Maker in 1972, Michael Watts reflected that “Rory the musician is inseparable from Rory the man,” who represents “qualities of honesty and straightforwardness with which showbusiness has never particularly wished to associate itself.” He noted how when Gallagher gets up on stage, he is “working for the audience without recourse to the props of image, of attitudinizing, and stage theatrics.” At the time of writing, Gallagher was in the middle of a ten-month world tour and had recently released his first live album Live in Europe to critical acclaim. However, articles such as this show that the music itself was not the principal focus, but rather how Gallagher’s attitude was reflected in his music. Thus, his concerts were praised more for showcasing his “gritty effort and determination” in playing “basic and unadorned” music rather than the quality of his musicianship and skills as a performer.

Articles from across the international press also frequently emphasized Gallagher’s “solid Trojan-like touring capacity” and his “almost non-stop schedule” (Flood Page), once again linking this hard-working attitude to his clothing. He was described as “plain” (Kozlowski) and “anonymous looking” (Gold), which meant that one would “hardly notice him in the street” and that “he could sit down in any pub and not attract one iota of curiosity” (Dowling; Flood Page). Fiske notes that jeans and lumberjack shirts provide a “facade of ordinariness” that enables their wearer to avoid any expression of mood or personal emotion (2). While Gallagher’s clothes were not consciously chosen by him for these purposes, they, nonetheless, enabled him to continue going about his everyday life without being recognized and fit perfectly with his own belief about music, seeing himself first and foremost as a musician rather than a star. He emphasized this in the 1974 Irish Tour documentary, explaining that he was not interested in “Rolls Royces, fifteen-story mansions, and the cloak and dagger type of existence” and wanted “to be able to walk into a shop and buy a bar of chocolate” or “go into a bar and have a pint without being besieged all the time.”

Although the above comments did Gallagher’s music an injustice by focusing too much on the link between his clothing, attitude, and style of playing, their aim was to stress his normality in an industry of caprice and illusion. However, in other cases, remarks were deliberately derogatory and served to make preconceptions about
Gallagher’s intelligence based on his style of dress. Across the European and US press, for example, he was described as resembling an “Irish peasant” (Weimer), a “friendly farmer” (Moya-Angeler), or a “simple, sympathetic countryman” (Haagsma). Journalists also often commented that he looked as if he could do little more than sing and play guitar. The British music press, on the other hand, often drew comparisons between Gallagher’s appearance and that of “a paper boy” (Solomon) or “a lad who’s just come in waiting for an interview, trying to become an errand boy for a Polydor executive” (Mackie). The Irish press, in contrast, compared Gallagher’s appearance to that of “an unmade bed” (Waters, “Rory”) or commented on his likeness to a cowboy, joking that if he put on weight, he could star in an advertisement for Marlboro cigarettes (Nolan). These types of remarks were often used as shortcuts to suggest that Gallagher was not making any progress in his music because he chose to stick to a simple blues-based format. This was a criticism against which Gallagher regularly struck back, arguing that his progression was subtle and could be best witnessed in his improvisation each night on stage.

Gallagher’s brother Dónal took these journalistic comments more personally, arguing that “Rory was a very intelligent, well informed, and well-read person” who taught himself French and German and had a great interest in art, politics, cinema, and literature (Burke; Howard). He claims that this was a side of his brother of which few people were aware because he did not like to talk about himself. Consequently, lacking this knowledge of Gallagher’s interests offstage, journalists fell back on casual stereotypes associated with his clothing and made assumptions on his presumed level of intelligence and musical ability.

“Without a Speck of Make-up”

The first half of the 1970s was a hugely successful period for Gallagher. Over the course of five years, he released five studio albums and two highly acclaimed live albums and delivered constant sellout tours across the world. However, in articles and interviews, the music press chose to focus predominantly on his dogged loyalty to the blues and unwillingness to change musical styles or clothing rather than delving deeper into the music he was creating. Although the early 1970s saw various music trends (e.g., progressive rock, arena rock, soft rock), it was glam rock with which the press constantly drew comparisons, perhaps because Gallagher’s music and image stood in such sharp contrast to that of T Rex, Sweet, and David Bowie.

Journalists were seemingly bemused that Gallagher did not respond to the glam rock movement, frequently noting that he still dressed in a lumberjack shirt and jeans “without a speck of make-up” (Doherty, “Rory: Play”). Some journalists even challenged Gallagher directly, asking him why he was not replacing his denim jacket with a flashing pink one or applying silver glitter to his eyes (Gold). Articles sarcastically stated that “if there’s one thing Rory’s not, it’s trendy” (Mackie) and described his “seemingly endless supply” of check shirts and jeans as “eccentric” and “not remotely fashionable” (Watts). Some publications even went so far as to suggest a link between Gallagher’s clothing and being dirty or lazy. Writing in 1974 about the premiere of Gallagher’s Irish Tour documentary, Steve Clarke of NME asked, “Wouldn’t you put on your best toggs and bask in the limelight?” for such an occasion, before going on to say, “Of course you would, but Gallagher doesn’t.”
thereby framing him as an outcast for choosing to wear “his eternal checked shirt and jean jacket ensemble” (“Strat-toting”). From these comments, we see how the music press expected Gallagher to respond to glam rock, but that this response was tied up strongly with the way he looked rather than his style of music.

Already in 1971, Gallagher expressed frustration in an interview with Disc and Music Echo about the music industry’s increased focus on appearance rather than talent: “If you wake up one morning to find you’d been crowned a superstar, it would seem you’ve got to go out and change your style of dress and living” (Boucher). A similar comment followed in a 1973 interview with Zoo World, where Gallagher complained that people nowadays “find it odd for a performer to come out wearing precisely what anyone else might wear” (Dupree). He also lamented the fact that most people only remembered Buddy Holly for his glasses rather than his songs (Lowery).

Speaking to Melody Maker in 1973, Gallagher acknowledged that he perhaps should get more involved in the “glamour side” of music, but that it just was not for him. He argued that it was not progressive to “keep shocking the public,” nor was it “up to a make-up artist” to make someone sound new; rather, music was something that should grow organically over time. However, he expressed worry that he looked like a “cynical outsider” because of his opposition to “image” and recognized that he could perhaps be a bigger star if he was not so hung up on this (Ward). Gallagher elaborated on his stance further in a 1974 interview with Disc and Music Echo, explaining to journalist Andy Blackford that

“I prefer bar poets. I believe in folk in ordinary clothing who rely upon themselves to entertain. Who can conjure up all the colours and images from inside themselves, without relying upon lighting and huge photographs and fireworks and all that. If I wanted to be outraged, I’d rather listen to some of the double meanings in the old blues songs.”

Reflecting specifically on glam rock, he described it as a “Gret Garbo approach” to music, whereas his approach was “more raw” and focused on “getting into people’s bloodstreams.” However, he felt that there was room for both types of music and that the press should stop pitting them against one another.

Gallagher’s increasing disgruntlement at the press’s focus on why he was not adapting his clothing to the glam rock trend became more apparent in 1975 in an interview with Melody Maker during which he stated that he would never wear “a space suit just to keep up with the Joneses” (Doherty, “Rory: Play”). Equally, however, he would hate for people to come to see him in concert just because of his lumberjack shirt and jeans. Once again, he found himself having to justify his clothing, emphasizing that it stemmed from his love for “Muddy Waters and cowboys” and that if his favorite musician were Little Richard, then perhaps he would dress differently. Repeating earlier comments, he clarified that he wanted to create excitement “by simply playing music” and was not remotely interested in fashion or special effects on stage (Doherty, “Rory: Play”). In an interview with Hot Licks in the same year Gallagher described the English press as “lazy,” saying that they had created an image around his lumberjack shirt and now they never bothered to write anything about his actual music (Jackson).

Despite most of the music press attacking Gallagher’s clothing during the glam rock era, a small, dedicated group of journalists continued to support him and defend his choice of apparel. Bob Dunne, for example, described his lumberjack shirt and denim
jeans as upholding “the last bastion of normality and sanity” and Mick Brown called them “a bastion of stability” at a time of much falsity on the rock scene. They argued that it was only natural for Gallagher to continue wearing what he had always worn, emphasizing this with the strong quotation: “were he to wear a pink satin Al Capone suit, his audience would undoubtedly vomit” (Dunne). Again, these types of comments show it was the image of glam rock to which Rory was compared and with which he was expected (or not) to conform rather than his music.

As the glam rock trend began to give way to punk in 1976, Gallagher expressed optimism that “an element of sanity” was starting to creep back into music, which he hoped meant “more worthwhile bands” would attract attention (Melody Maker). As to be expected, the music press also immediately responded to this new trend and Gallagher became remythologized, his clothing now moving from a visual representation of his ordinariness or unfashionability to a symbol of his strong work ethic.

“Hard-working Rory”

Punk burst onto the British music scene in 1976 with bands like the Sex Pistols, the Clash, and the Damned providing a contested cultural space that represented youth culture as a site of provocative fun and protest (Worley). Ripped shirts, tartan trousers, safety pins, mohawks, and Dr. Marten boots all became part of the punk image, providing a strong contrast to the spandex, glitter, and feather boas of glam rock. In an interview with Melody Maker in 1976, Gallagher was asked once again about his clothing, rather than his music, and whether he would be changing it in response to punk. This time, he framed his answer in the context of his Irish identity, arguing that the Irish are cynical about gimmicks because of their folk tradition and that dress is not important for them as long as the music makes sense and will stand the test of time (Doherty, “Rory of the Crowd”). Asked a similar question by Rock and Roll News, Gallagher explained that he had “never had the urge to dress up on stage,” describing it as “theatrical Batman and Robin stuff” (Michaels) and that if he wanted to draw attention to himself, he would “walk around in a bright green cape and a broad red stripe” in his hair (Haring). When presented with the same question once again by Melody Maker in 1978, he stated that “people are too worried about my appearance; they say I should be changing my image every week” (Irwin), while to Beat Instrumental in 1979, he countered, “I was never into sartorial elegance. Why would I throw away my love for the blues just because it’s not in vogue?” (Sweeting). In this last quotation, Gallagher himself links the way he dresses to his love for the blues, emphasizing that just because the music genre is no longer fashionable, it does not mean that he will abandon it nor his style of dress.

Although the music press continued to hound Gallagher with the same question about when he would change his clothing from 1976 to 1979, they did not do so with the aim of drawing attention to his “lack of style,” as they had done in the glam era. Punk had fostered a rebirth in “street clothing”; thus, Gallagher’s “back to basics” lumberjack shirt and jeans did not seem too drastically far removed in the same way as glam clothing did. Instead, it became rebranded by the music press as illustrative of his continued hard work and dedication to performing at a time when punk bands were delivering one-off short live shows only. This is apparent in a 1977 article for Hot Press, where Niall Stokes warned punks to be wary of thinking they were high energy but retiring off the stage after
thirty minutes when Gallagher was constantly on the road performing three-hour sets per night. He described Gallagher as the “Cork Cowboy,” elaborating that his “cowboy gear” reflected that he was ready to “knock [the audience] cold from the start” with his “working-man blues,” an audience made up primarily of “urban inhabitants, industrial workers and dole-queue card carriers.” Stokes’s words read like a statement of intent, using Gallagher’s clothing to concretize an image of him as an extremely hard-working and conscientious musician who stood in contrast to others in the punk era. In this statement, however, emphasis once again is placed on Gallagher’s attitude to music rather than his actual music, thereby playing down his continual development and innovation.

Gallagher constantly rebuffed remarks about his hard-working attitude in interviews, arguing that he was “only doing the norm” and “should probably work harder” (Clarke) and that he was too “restless and nervous” in character to ever let his reputation take over (Doherty, “Rory: Play”). In interviews with Melody Maker and Beat Instrumental, he expressed frustration at being dismissed as “hard-working Rory” (Gallagher), “the guy [who] wears a denim jacket” (Sweeting). Describing it and similar comments as “back-handed compliment[s],” he argued that “the hard-working checked shirt bit” was an “easy cop out” that did not mean anything and he would rather journalists say that they did not like his music (Doherty, “Rory: Play”). Talking to Cameron Crowe of the San Diego Union in 1976, Gallagher explained that he had “never tried to cultivate an image” and that touring was simply a “hobby” to him, while his lumberjack shirt and jeans were the only clothing in which he felt comfortable. He acknowledged that people called him crazy for spending most of the year on the road, but that sitting at home was not “art” and he did not like to take it too easy (Tyler). He also reflected that he had got “philosophical” about such criticism and liked the fact that he seemed to get less publicity nowadays (Irwin). For Gallagher, it was better to build his fanbase through constant touring rather than through “promotional hype and image projection” (Stokes). In interviews, Gallagher also drew attention to musicians like Bruce Springsteen and Bob Seger who he commended for not creating a public image yet still being successful. He acknowledged that they were both “hard-working,” but it was unfair to call them that because they were extremely talented and had worked hard to become big without media gimmicks (Stevens).

Although not a fan of punk music, Gallagher admired the movement for its explosiveness and energy and for revitalizing the dying club scene. In punk, he recognized his own attitude of “staying outside the system” and producing “outlaw music” (Fay), so much so that after seeing the Sex Pistols perform at the Winterland Ballroom in San Francisco in 1978, he scrapped his entire album on the day it was due to be presented to Chrysalis, turned his four-piece band back into a three piece, and rerecorded a new album instead. The album – Photo Finish (and Top Priority, released one year later) – had a much harder, edgier sound, or in Gallagher’s words a “brass knuckles, meat and potatoes” feel (Stevens), and soon his audiences became full of “kids with punk haircuts and Clash t-shirts” (Holdship), alongside those with lumberjack shirts and jeans. Writing in Melody Maker in 1978, Harry Doherty noted that it was “hip to dig” Rory Gallagher and the Sex Pistols and “still keep our friends” because his clothing and music “transcended all trends, while Susan Whitall felt Gallagher was popular amongst punks because they tapped into his “intensity” and “sheer wall of sound riffs.” These statements show
how Gallagher’s clothing, attitude, and slightly heavier music was deemed in line with punk and, thus, made him more acceptable to the music press after having been heavily criticized during the glam rock era. Thus, as the 1970s came to an end, Gallagher’s unwavering commitment to his musical philosophy seemed to be successful, gaining him new punk fans who identified with his sound and attitude and keeping him relevant in the music press. However, this was quick to change as the 1980s began.

“That Denim Jacket and Check Shirt Have Become like a Stigmata to Me”

In his 2018 biography, Vignoles describes Gallagher as a “lone figure holding out against the march of pop glamour, the ever-present synthesizer, and the decline of guitar rock” in the 1980s (137). After the release of Jinx in 1982, Gallagher’s contract with Chrysalis came to an end, the record company turning their attention to the New Romantic movement and signing Gen X, Ultravox, and Spandau Ballet. Jinx was a return to a more blues-oriented sound and, despite it containing some of Gallagher’s best material, it was met with lukewarm reviews by the music press, seen as archaic and redolent of another age. Writing in the sleeve notes of the 2018 rerelease of Jinx, Dónal Gallagher explains how his brother sought to get back in touch with the blues, having felt pushed too far into a heavy direction with his previous two studio albums. The album’s title and general melancholic tone were also reflective of problems in Gallagher’s personal life at this time.

In the late 1970s, Gallagher had developed a fear of flying that severely hindered his ability to tour, while the accumulated stress and pressure of so many years of relentlessly working without allowing himself extended breaks had led to a series of nervous breakdowns (Makowski). Brother Dónal notes that Gallagher had always been an extremely nervous and melancholy person and that his punishing work rate had always had a huge emotional toll on him, but that his mental health began to worsen significantly from this period onwards. Gallagher’s poor state of wellbeing was also exacerbated by an ongoing legal battle around Taste that cost him 80% of his earnings, as well as the marriage of his brother, which left him feeling somewhat abandoned and betrayed given how much he relied on Dónal and that they had always lived together (Coghe). Following the conclusion of the Chrysalis contract, Gallagher spent three years without a record deal before forming his own label, Capo Records, in 1985. After a year in the studio working on a new album – Torch – he became dissatisfied and scrapped it completely, just as he had done seven years earlier with the original Photo Finish.

During this fallow period between 1982 and 1987, Gallagher’s international fanbase did not waver and, although touring far less, he still attracted large crowds to his headlining performances at the Rockpalast (1982) and Montreux (1985) festivals, as well as Self Aid (1986), an unemployment benefit concert held in Dublin. Nonetheless, over the course of these five years, Gallagher was hardly mentioned in the music press, seen now as a relic of the past who no longer fit into the 1980s music scene. On the scant occasions that he was mentioned, articles could not resist making references to his clothing and appearance, even when discussing his music. In a 1983 interview, for example, Philip Nolan of the Evening Herald decided to “challenge” Gallagher on what he called “his eccentric sartorial taste,” noting that he replied “genuinely uncomprehendingly” and stated that he could not be both “Boy George and Segovia.” While Nolan (and
others) saw Gallagher’s clothing as somewhat passé when framed against 1980s fashion, others instead saw it as a sign of musical integrity, both Hervé Picart of Best and David Gotz of Record Review, for example, claiming that Gallagher’s “rustic plaid shirts” were a sign of his “timelessness” and unbreakability in a fickle music industry.

Things came to a head in 1987 when Gallagher suddenly made the decision to change his “trademark” clothing, dropping the lumberjack shirts and jeans and replacing them instead with an all-black jeans, shirt, jacket, and boots ensemble. The change occurred practically overnight during the recording of Defender. Gallagher stated that he was on his own in the studio one evening when he felt an “unpleasant and threatening feeling” come over him (Ross). After that experience, he said he could not bring himself to wear the same clothes ever again. In an interview with Hot Press, journalist Liam Fay asked Gallagher why he was not wearing his lumberjack shirt and jeans. His response is extremely telling of his increasing troubled mental state at this time:

> At the moment, I just can’t wear them to be honest with you. . . . I know it’s peculiar, but it’s just a psychological thing. That denim jacket and check shirt have become like a stigmata to me. I never treated it like a uniform but that’s what it has become over the years, a uniform that I just don’t want to wear anymore. Lately, I wear an ordinary black shirt and a black jacket when I’m on stage. Right now, I feel a lot happier in black.

Defender was a blues album with a much darker edge than any of Gallagher’s previous works and as close to a concept album as he ever got with its hard-boiled crime theme. By this time, Gallagher was now on medication for his mental health problems and a string of other physical health ailments, which had made him gain weight. The physical and mental strain he was under was also reflected in his appearance, which had changed dramatically over the five-year absence. Consequently, when Defender was released in July 1987, the music press were far more interested in the way Gallagher looked rather than his comeback album. Articles described Gallagher as much heavier and “puffy around the neck” (Ross), his “boyish features” now replaced with “bad skin” and “watery eyes” and his baby face now “bloated” (Harper) and tired. Comments were particularly nasty amongst two new British music magazines: Kerrang and Metal Hammer. Journalists frequently preempted what Gallagher would wear before they met him and expressed disappointment in their articles at seeing that he was not wearing his “trademark” clothing (Oliver, “Defender”; Simpson).

Furthermore, concert reviews often stated that Gallagher was dressed in a lumberjack shirt and jeans even when he was not. In a review for Defender, Derek Oliver wrote sarcastically that Gallagher’s new album meant that he was “in danger of becoming, er, fashionable again” (Oliver, “Rory”). He also compared Gallagher to newer guitar heroes like Eddie Van Halen and Yngwie Malmsteen, describing his old blues triplets as “rather passé to say the least” and asking him whether he had any desire to become more contemporary. Sticking to his guns, Gallagher argued that the key to being a good guitarist was “to be economical” and that he recorded albums as a “personal statement” of what he wanted to achieve, not to please others (Oliver, “Defender”). In these types of comments, Gallagher’s music and clothing become conflated, seen together as unsuitable for the modern age.
Gallagher’s well-loved Fender Stratocaster also did not escape comments from the music press. In an increasingly throwaway society, Gallagher was seen as strange for still playing the guitar that he bought when he was fifteen years old. What had been previously described as “trusty” (Fricke), “standard” (Dalton), and “beloved” (Harrigan) in the 1970s was now reframed as “old” (Lewin), “beat-up” (Lewin), “moth-eaten” (Hedges), “sandblasted” (Washburn), “battered” (Oliver, “Defender”), and “world’s worst looking” (Gallagher). Journalists also constantly compared Gallagher’s changed appearance to his guitar, describing him as looking “as weather worn as his Strat” (Blankenburg). As with his clothing, Gallagher was constantly asked in interviews when he was going to change his guitar, to which he politely replied that it was his “absolute maximum dream” to own a Sunburst Stratocaster when he was a child and that he still felt the same way (Twelker). Antipathy toward the Stratocaster extended beyond the music press to Fender itself. In 1980, the guitar maker was so concerned that Gallagher’s Stratocaster was bad for the company’s image that they gifted him with a new model. Gallagher laughed at the fact that Fender thought he was frugal or could not afford a new guitar, explaining that he did not see the need to replace something that was not broken (Erskine).7

Essentially, the press had turned Gallagher’s everyday clothes and cherished guitar into gimmicks and, moreover, were using them to ridicule him, framing both his loyalty to the blues and his appearance as outmoded. Talking to Classic Rock in 2003, Dónal Gallagher explained that his brother would read such comments, look at himself in the mirror, and become increasingly morose (Ling). “The 1980s haven’t been kind to me,” Gallagher himself lamented in a 1992 interview with Hot Press. Following the release of what would be Gallagher’s last album Fresh Evidence in 1990 (a strong blues record with autobiographical lyrics exploring themes of ill health and mortality), long-term band members Gerry McAvoy and Brendan O’Neill received an offer to join Nine Below Zero and left Gallagher’s band. This decision had an extremely negative impact on Gallagher’s already declining mental wellbeing, which had taken a further turn for the worse following the death of his uncle Jimmy in 1988 to whom he was extremely close (Connaughton). Although he had always suffered from low self-esteem and had never been satisfied with anything he did, Gallagher now became plagued with extreme self-doubts about his talent (Vignoles, 193). Furthermore, his superstitious beliefs, which had always been a part of his life, now developed into obsessive compulsive disorder and he found himself unable to enter rooms with crooked picture frames, avoided certain numbers, and had to rearrange shoes if they were set apart (Ling; Connaughton 142). Such was Gallagher’s distress that he stopped doing things he had once loved like attending concerts and buying records, instead becoming more reclusive and isolated from others (Ross).

Brother Dónal became so worried about Gallagher’s inability to look after himself that he moved him into the Conrad Hotel in Chelsea in 1993, hoping to replicate life on the road and make him feel less lonely, but it had the reverse effect, with Gallagher spending more and more time alone in his hotel room. In July 1994, his thoughts turned suicidal, and he was only saved from jumping out his hotel window by a chance phone call from his friend Rudi Gerlach (Muise, 69). Gallagher told Gerlach that he felt like “a corpse” and everything was “too much” for him, but he had to keep going so as to not let down his fans (Muise, 80). Despite his fragile state of mind, Gallagher insisted on touring and
Dónal reluctantly agreed, knowing that he could “keep a better eye” on his brother if they were together on the road (Hodgett). On 10 January 1995 Gallagher collapsed on stage at a gig in Rotterdam and was admitted to hospital shortly after where doctors discovered that he had advanced liver disease, caused by his long-term use of medication (Vignoles). Gallagher underwent a successful liver transplant, but after thirteen weeks in intensive care, he caught an MRSA infection and passed away on 14 June at just 47 years of age. As Dónal Gallagher reflected in an interview with the Sunday Times in 1998, music was his brother’s “great love” but also an “obsession” that “took over his life” and left room for nothing else (Ross). His constant search for perfection had a detrimental impact on his overall wellbeing and, ultimately, a fatal outcome.

“Busloads of Pilgrims in Their Lumberjack Shirts . . .” (Lynch)

On the day of Gallagher’s funeral, the streets of Cork were lined with more than 50,000 people who had come to pay their respects. Many were dressed in lumberjack shirts – what had ironically become the iconic uniform that marked a Rory Gallagher fan. Perhaps the most poignant image was that of long-term friend and roadie Tom O’Driscoll carrying Gallagher’s Stratocaster and propping it up against his coffin “like an ineffably poignant still life,” as Niall Stokes of Hot Press said.

The tributes that poured in from the music press following Gallagher’s death and funeral show a striking reversal in opinion. After all the years of heavy focus on Gallagher’s clothing and derogatory remarks about his music being outmoded or predictable, comments now centered on his musical legacy and praised him for his unwavering commitment to play what he wanted and never bend to the whims of the music industry. Articles focused on his originality as a guitarist, his powerful voice, his thoughtful lyrics, and the overall integrity of his music and described him as being “deeply intelligent and sensitive” (Waters), “charming, good looking, and modest” (Welch), and a “transparely decent human being” (Lynch). Words like “angel” (Ling), “saint” (Lynch), “gentleman” (Connaughton), “trailblazer” (Ross), “maestro” (McClelland), “hero” (Cariappa), “legend” (Stokes, “Down”), and “genius” (Hunter) were all frequently used to characterize him. Writing in Guitar Magazine, Glenn Rice reflected:

How did he maintain continual public and critical support, not to mention 14 million album sales, while never troubling the mainstream chart compilers? Or become what U2’s Bono described as “one of the top ten guitarists of all time” and remain unrewarded with fame? His undiluted and constant passion for the blues itself, trimmed of flash and artifice, may have had something to do with it.

Fundamentally, the things that had made Gallagher unpopular with the music press in his lifetime were now being commended by the very same music press posthumously. Liam Mackey of Irish Xpress reflected on this sorry state of affairs in 1997, writing that it was a shame that it took death for Gallagher’s immense contribution to music to be acknowledged. This was echoed by Dónal Gallagher who, speaking in 2000, expressed anger at the fact that nobody had told his brother how much they appreciated his music when he was alive and that he had spent the last fifteen years of his life thinking that nobody cared about him anymore (Haagsma).
Equally, when Gallagher’s lumberjack shirt and jeans were mentioned – which was now relatively infrequently – they were framed as a simple reflection of who he was as a person: down-to-earth, humble, and unpretentious. There was no longer any insinuation that they were gimmicks, nor were there any jokes about them being old-fashioned or shabby. Instead, they were just presented as matter of fact, free of any judgment or malice: “he was a handsome, smiling man who favored checked lumberjack shirts” (Koster); “up on the boards, hair flying, lumberjack shirt soaked with sweat” (Mackay). Likewise, Gallagher’s hair which had so often been described as “unkempt” (Harrigan), “wild” (Solomon), “unruly” (Jeffries), “straggly” (Gilbert), and “mess[y]” (“Rory”) by the press was now seen positively as a sign of dedication to his music, while even his sweat was now mythologized as “the mark of someone who shed every drop for the fans” (O’Hare). In the inaugural Rory Gallagher Memorial Lecture at the Cork School of Music in November 1995, Marcus Connaughton claimed that Gallagher had become a “fashion icon,” without wanting to be or realizing that he was.

Similarly, Gallagher’s Stratocaster, which came under so much criticism in the 1980s, was now described by the music press as a personification of “the blood, sweat, and tears” that he put into his music (McDonald). As Gallagher was never romantically associated with anybody, the Stratocaster was also now personified in the press as his wife (… “married to his guitar” [Vignoles, 28; Sweeney]), “mistress and his best friend” (“One Man”), “companion” (Ling), and “faithful dog” (Leonard) rather than as “battered and worn out” (Newton). Journalists commented that Gallagher and his Stratocaster were “inseparable” and that he knew every curve and contour so well that they became “a single entity” (Blankenburg). Similar comments were made by Gallagher himself in an interview with Ray Minhinnett shortly before his death (“it’s my life, my best friend, a walking memory bank, part of my psychic make-up”), but had been derided by many at the time as being overly sentimental and sappy. Yet, two years after his death in 1997, Gallagher’s brother Dónal was approached by Fender to help with the production of a Rory Gallagher Signature Stratocaster – an exact replica of Gallagher’s 1961 Stratocaster. The guitars are still sold by Fender today and currently retail at around $4,000.

Although Gallagher is no longer the focus of much press attention and is still absent from lists of the best guitarists, when he is mentioned, comments reflect those that were published immediately after his death. His persisting image is that of a real, authentic, working-class hero who shunned fashion, showbusiness, and the clichéd rock-and-roll lifestyle. Over more than fifty years, the mythologization of Rory Gallagher by the music press has gone full circle, his clothing seen today in much the same way as it was viewed in articles from the 1970s: as a reflection of the “people’s guitarist” and the “hardest working man in music.” However, added to this for the first time is a new-founded deep layer of respect and recognition of his achievements and ability to mix “an archivist’s love of rural American bluesmen with a finger-in-the-light-socket stage presence” (Koster) that bonded with people all across the world. “I know I’m my own worst enemy,” Gallagher had admitted in an interview with Seconds in 1991, “I’m not a record company dream. I’m not selling an image or standing on my head too much. There are certain TV shows I can’t do because I refuse to mime. … I can’t go away and vanish like some people want. …
I’ve always had a following, and I think that maybe in the ’90s I’ll find a niche; if I never do, that’s okay” (Roche). In a cruel twist of fate, it would seem that Gallagher has finally found that niche in posterity.

Conclusion: Recovering the Check Shirt Wizard

In 2020, the Gallagher estate released a live album recorded during the 1977 Calling Card tour entitled Check Shirt Wizard, featuring an artistic image of a smiling Gallagher in a lumberjack shirt on its cover. The inside sleeve contains two reviews from the tour, originally published in NME and Melody Maker, which make reference to Gallagher’s appearance and the fact that he does not “dress like a star” and has a “workmanlike” manner. Yet, these reviews are juxtaposed with promotional material from Chrysalis about Gallagher (“when was the last time you heard a guitarist really play guitar?”), ticket stubs shared by fans, and glossy images of Gallagher on stage, playing guitar, singing, and interacting with the audience. In bringing together these elements, Gallagher’s family reappropriates any persisting negative associations around his clothing, recognizing it as a core part of his identity yet defining this identity on their own terms in the context of his live shows.

Throughout his lifetime, Gallagher stated that he would never sell himself as a product and that he wanted his music to speak for himself (Kelleher). Thinking about his place in history, Gallagher described his biggest dream as people recognizing and appreciating one of his records in fifty years’ time (Blues). This attitude, which the music press struggled to understand, appears to have paid off as Gallagher has a rapidly growing fanbase amongst teenagers and young people who have discovered his music through YouTube, Spotify, and social media platforms. At the Rory Gallagher Festival held annually in Ballyshannon, girls and boys who were not even born when Gallagher passed away now gather together with men and women who attended Gallagher’s shows and bought his records loyally throughout the ’60s, ’70s, ’80s, and early ’90s. They stand there in the thousands, dressed in lumberjack shirts and jeans, worn out of honor, respect, pride, and love for Gallagher — the clothing of a humble, soft-spoken Irishman who thought like a folk musician, yet had the soul of a bluesman and the energy of a rockstar.

Endnotes

1. The 15 countries are Australia, Belgium, Canada, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Netherlands, New Zealand, Spain, Sweden, UK, and US. Articles from non-English-speaking countries were translated by fans before being uploaded to RoryON!!
2. Citing sources for each of these descriptives would be distracting. Using the search engine on the RoryON!! webpage (http://www.roryon.com) will reveal numerous sources for each of these descriptives.
3. From 1954 to 1999, Marlboro cigarettes were advertised by the Marlboro Man – a rugged and macho, check-shirt cowboy.
4. Gallagher was an avid reader of noir fiction and particularly enjoyed the books of Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, and Patricia Highsmith. He had touched on the crime theme throughout his career with such songs as “Secret Agent,” “In Your Town,” and “Big Guns,” but Defender was the first album that solely focused on the topic.
5. Although the Gallagher family has never officially disclosed the physical health problems that Gallagher was experiencing during this time, press reports and comments from friends suggest that he had been diagnosed with hyperthyroidism, psoriasis, tendonitis, and asthma, and was also experiencing severe abdominal pains (later discovered to be the onset of liver disease).

6. At the time, Gallagher described Defender as his best album to date and, nowadays, it is recognized by music critics as one of his best albums.

7. In a 1998 interview with Guitar Magazine, Dónal Gallagher explained that the Strat’s appearance was not the result of mistreatment, but rather of his brother’s rare blood type (AB-), which had high acidic content and made his sweat act like paint stripper (Leonard).

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Lauren Alex O’Hagan is a Researcher in the School of Humanities, Education and Social Sciences at Örebro University in Sweden. She has published widely on inscriptive practices, consumption culture, and social class in Victorian and Edwardian Britain. She also has an interest in music memorabilia, memories, and identities, and has previously published works on Rory Gallagher, Phil Lynott, and Tom Petty.

Works Cited


**Discography**


**Film**