

FRIDAY AFTERNOON. A small field just outside Hull. The young girls at the front of the stage look bewildered. Half an hour ago they were gleefully bouncing around while a Black Eyed Peas tribute act performed “I Gotta Feeling”. Now they’re peering up at a dour faux Mancunian in a floral-patterned shirt and NHS glasses, who’s brandishing a bunch of lilies and singing “Let me get my hands on your mammary glands”. They don’t know what to make of it. Michael Jackson, or at least someone who looks a lot like him, saunters up to the stage to have a look, watches quizzically for a couple of minutes, then saunters off again.

This is Tribfest, where, every year for three days, the Beverley Polo Club is transformed into a parallel universe where bands pretend to be other bands. It’s a modest festival devoted solely to tribute acts, where 3,000 punters devoid of cynicism get to see 30 or so knock-off versions of the biggest musicians in the world – for £80. It’s extremely family-friendly –

“No foul or abusive language on stage”, a backstage sign instructs. The air doesn’t smell of skunk, there’s nobody obviously walking around selling acid, and end-of-pier compering comes courtesy of Britain’s Got Talent semi-finalist Craig Harper. It’s a cross between Live Aid and a village fête.

Tribfest began in 2007, a year after Ed Faulkner visited a similar festival, Glastonbudget, which occurs every May in Leicestershire. Faulkner, who fronts Beautiful South tribute band The Beautiful Couch, wanted to start his own event in East Yorkshire, as an affordable and local alternative to the big music festivals (“I’d love to do a festival with real bands, but they all want caviar and chips. I can’t deal with that”). He now boasts a database of 150 tribute bands and says he gets three or four emails a day from acts asking to play at Tribfest.

The last few years have seen the tribute scene explode. What started



THE GREAT PRETENDERS

With Michael Jackson, Madonna and The Smiths on the same bill, Tribfest may be the greatest festival on Earth. Esquire goes access all areas with 30 tribute bands

Words By Alex Godfrey | Photographs By Dan Burn-Forti



The Man In The Mirror

Name Perry Pullman
From Hull



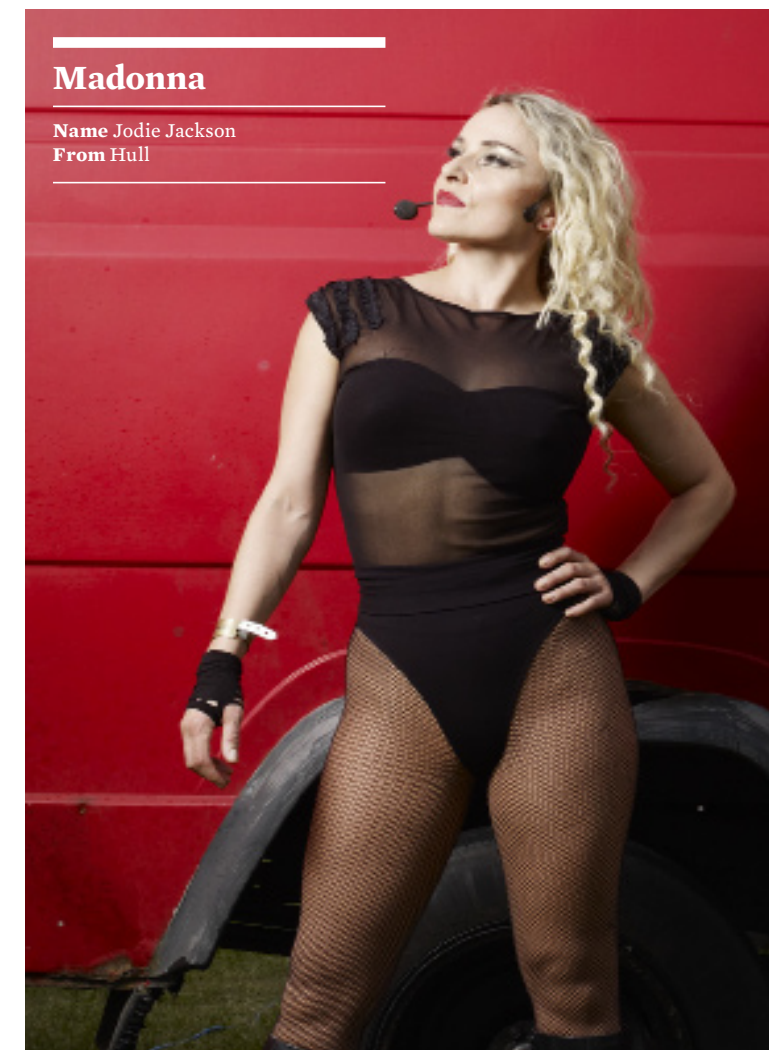
The Smiffs

Name Billy Marshall
From Barry, Wales



Stipe

Name Rick Southern
From Cheshire



Madonna

Name Jodie Jackson
From Hull

in the Eighties with the likes of Björn Again and The Bootleg Beatles has become a booming business, where the real McCoy just haven't made it unless they have a tribute band profiting from their songs. Many of the acts at Tribfest do this full-time, tour internationally and reap enviable financial rewards. Oasisish average three or four gigs a week, and can't hang around for Esquire's photographer as they're leaving for a stint on a cruise ship. Kazabian ("z" is a popular substitute letter in the tribute world) formed in March last year, and by July already had more gigs booked than their (almost) namesakes, to the dismay of the latter's Tom Meighan. The Black Eyed Peaz (see) enjoyed a 50-date summer tour this year, and played three nights in Shanghai before coming to Tribfest.

"The market is massive," says Tim Reid, who runs Elmgrove Productions, a company that used to put on a lot of theatrical shows and pop revivals, but is now focusing on tribute acts. Reid is the mastermind behind the Peaz, the Scissor Sisterz (yup), and Lady GaaGaa, all of whom are performing at Tribfest. Reid, who performs in both Scissor Sisterz (as Babydaddy) and the Peaz (as Taboo), formed the Peaz a year ago, noticing a gap in the tribute market, and says demand has been overwhelming. "In Asia it's massive," says Charlotte Marsden, who performs as Fergie in the Peaz and Ana Matronic in the Sisterz. "The guy who booked us in Shanghai wants to take us to Hong Kong next year." Marsden was trained in musical theatre, but has now comfortably settled into a career as a tribute artist. "This isn't where I thought I was going to be," she says. "But there comes a time when you have to weigh everything up, and it wasn't gonna happen for me. I had to make a decision to call it a day, or find something that would get me performing and singing with professional like-minded musicians, which is the next best thing for me."

Billy Marshall, who doubles as Morrissey, tells a similar story, although his tribute work sprung from a more conventional love of the source material. He and his

band-mates have been performing as The Smiffs for three years, getting together after not making a success of their own bands. "The dream of living that dream never happened," he says. "And because of that we jacked it in. But through The Smiths we wanted to just play something we love. If we make money, fantastic; if we don't, we're still playing music we love." As with all the bands here, The Smiffs may lack a certain indefinable magic (and more definable musicianship) that distinguishes them from their idols, but they are, nevertheless, impressively similar. Marshall looks enough like Morrissey from a distance, sings like him, moves like him and talks like him in-between songs (which makes it rather disconcerting when I try to find him backstage after their set and barely recognise the smallish Welsh man with a floppy fringe and turquoise Adidas top).

There are varying degrees of impersonation to be found at Tribfest. A few of the bands on the bill don't bother with the costumes and accents and just plough through the songs, which is arguably more dignified than passing yourself off as someone else, but infinitely less entertaining. Seth Fullbrook, a Stoke musician who moonlights as Coldplay's Chris Martin in his band Coldplayer, looks, sounds and acts so much like Martin, even in the prickly way he poses for Esquire's photographer backstage, that I feel

It's hilarious. I come off stage and there's people wanting photographs taken — I'm just a guy in a wig and a parka

a little uneasy about talking to him. Friends suggested he get into the tribute business because he's practically a Chris Martin doppelgänger, and Coldplayer take things to another level, with stage decorations and costumes that ape Coldplay's Viva La Vida tour. "Give

DWARF FIGHT
"IT'S NOT THE SIZE OF THE DOG IN THE FIGHT, IT'S THE SIZE OF THE FIGHT IN THE DOG," SAID MARK TWAIN. CLEARLY HE WAS REFERRING TO THE ONGOING SPAT BETWEEN RIVAL MIDGET TRIBUTE BANDS MINIKISS AND TINY KISS. TIM LOOMIS, MINIKISS'S ORIGINAL DRUMMER, LEFT THE BAND AND STARTED TINY KISS AFTER, ACCORDING TO HIM, JEALOUSY FROM MINIKISS'S JOEY FATALE THAT HE WAS "GETTING ALL THE CHICKS". FATALE RESPONDED BY SENDING HIM A CEASE-AND-DESIST NOTICE AND, ACCORDING TO LOOMIS, THREATENED HIM OVER THE PHONE. THE WAR CONTINUES

me real, don't give me fake," he sings as they begin their set with "Politik", the irony apparently lost. Oasisish, who formed in 2004, use the same instruments as Oasis, and their set on Friday night is hilarious. Fake Liam walks the walk, talks the talk and thoroughly exudes the attitude, nailing the poise, the belligerence and the cold 1,000-yard stare (even if some wag has sent an SMS to the text box on the screen by the stage, reading "Looks more like Frank Gallagher than Liam Gallagher"). Someone throws a Huddersfield Town scarf on stage and he wipes his arse with it. "The Prodigy are on next," he says, referring to the next tribute act, Jilted Generation. "I've just seen Liam Howlett backstage and I gave him a good fisting." The moment I realise I've truly fallen through the wormhole is during "Wonderwall". As with the real deal, Oasisish have been joined by a string quartet, and the field is rammed. The crowd lap it up, lighters and phones in the air, all singing in unison. A man in front of me puts his arm around his lady, gazing lovingly into her eyes while singing along. As far as this audience is concerned, the fact that this isn't actually Oasis is irrelevant. To all intents and purposes, this *is* Oasis. They roar enthusiastically at the end of each song. Are they applauding as they would at an Oasis gig? Because they love the music? Or are they acknowledging the illusion? Does it matter? Paul Higginson, who plays Liam, enjoys the absurdity. "It's absolutely hilarious," he says backstage after the gig. "I come off here and there's people wanting photographs taken. I'm just a guy in a wig and a parka. For me this is all tongue-in-cheek, but there has to be a serious business side as well, it's my full-time job. It's got to be a good performance, I don't do things by half. It's got to be bang on, otherwise I don't wanna know. I want people to look at me and think, 'Christ, that could be Liam Gallagher up there.' I watched the DVDs when I got into this, practising what he does with his hands when he sings a certain song, where's he pointing to, when he touches his hair — all these tiny

Coldplayer

From Stoke



Lady GaaGaa

Name Emma Watkins
From Bristol



Kazabian

From Hull

little things that Liam Gallagher never has to think about, because he's Liam Gallagher."

Watching these bands bask in reflected glory is a surreal experience, a lie everyone's aware of but happily buys into. Including the bands. "Even for myself on stage, sometimes it's like, 'This could be

an Oasis gig," says Higginson. A few of the bands I spoke to expressed similar sentiments. One of the reasons REM fan Rick Southern (from Cheshire) formed tribute band Stipe was because he wanted the same buzz Michael Stipe gets on stage, and says being up there performing as him makes

FAKING IT
ESQUIRE'S TOP FIVE
FAVOURITE TRIBUTE
BAND NAMES:
1 | SURELY BASSEY
2 | DEFINITELY MIGHTBE
3 | BOGUS QUO
4 | FRED ZEPPELIN
5 | OASISN'T

him feel arrogant. Gavin Willbourn meanwhile, a part-time actor from Wales who has Axl Rose down to a tee in Guns 2 Roses, says it's "very easy to get lost in the moment when you're drunk". During their set an argument breaks out between two teenagers behind me. "How can you say he's better than Slash! He's not better than Slash!" says one. "He is!" insists the other. "Bullshit!"

Steven Adler, Guns N' Roses' original drummer, was also impressed — in 2006, when his own band imploded in the middle of a tour, he hired Guns 2 Roses to play the remaining shows with him. "It was fun, but I'd rather be doing this to be honest," says Willbourn. "It was too choreographed."

Rick Southern has never played with Michael Stipe, but he has met him. Southern's another one who, if your vision was impaired, you might mistake for the real thing on stage. In 2008, the BBC brought Southern's band onto The One Show to surprise guest Michael Stipe with a performance at the end of the show. The band were nervous because the BBC asked them to

start in the middle of "It's The End Of The World As We Know It (And I Feel Fine)", which they'd never done before, as well as getting them to change the words (to "It's the end of the show and we know it"). Stipe applauded and told them they were awesome, although "he couldn't wait to get his glasses on for the photograph", says Southern. "He didn't want to look like me."

Sixteen-year-old Perry Pullman looks like Michael Jackson, at least after he's applied his make-up and wig. He doesn't sing like him — he doesn't sing at all, miming his way through a half-hour dance set in the VIP marquee on Saturday afternoon. His plan is to be singing live in the next couple of years, but he can't yet, he tells me, because his voice has only just dropped and he has to work on it. He's been copying Jackson's moves since he was four, despite his insistence that when he's not doing this he can't dance at all. "He can't," confirms his mother, who makes some of his costumes and is sitting next to us while we talk. "He's got no rhythm at all." "I really can't," says Perry. "Only Michael Jackson." He's been performing professionally for two years and wants to make a career of it. "I just want to make everyone happy," he says. "You did that," says an earwiggling lady sitting near us. I ask her what she thought of his performance. "Superb," she says. "I got quite emotional at one point." Really? Why's that? "Well, because Michael Jackson's dead now," she says, pausing. "And watching him do it... it's so realistic."

In contrast to Pullman, who spends the entirety of the festival in costume, posing for photos with punters, The Smiffs' Billy Marshall is something of a wallflower. I'd bumped into him earlier in the day and asked him to meet us here at the VIP marquee for a photo. Having not been around for The Smiffs' set, Esquire's photographer is mildly concerned upon meeting Marshall, who turns up with his fringe flopped down, and encased in an enormous parka buttoned up to his chin, lest anyone should recognise his distinctive floral shirt. "I can't bear to walk around

the site dressed as him," he confesses, although once we're out of sight it doesn't take him long to Morrissey himself up.

Seth Fullbrook — Coldplayer's Chris Martin — is just as defiant. More a respectful admirer than a fan, Fullbrook only started doing this properly a year ago. His main aim is to succeed with his own band (who all double as the Coldplayers). He had a wig made for his Chris Martin act, not just to replicate Martin's most iconic hairdo, but also to physically separate himself from him when he's not on stage. "That way it's easier to change back to me when I come off," he says. "Sometimes it's soul-destroying singing other people's songs and getting a reaction. Certainly if you're a songwriter yourself." Doing the tribute circuit is a means to an end, a way of funding his own band, The People Involved. "I got made redundant from the past three jobs in six years," he explains. "That's one of the main reasons why I'm trying to make this more of a

It's soul-destroying getting a reaction singing other people's songs if you're a songwriter

regular thing. Because I got sick of being made redundant, and I can't deal with the stress of it again."

LINES BLUR AT Tribfest. It all gets a little confusing. "This one's for No Way Sis," says one of Prodigy tribute Jilted Generation during their set, paying homage to the band who were on before them, but name-checking a different, now defunct tribute act instead. "Thank you, Glastonbudget," says Stipe's Rick Southern at the end of his set, before correcting himself. And during Guns 2 Roses' show that night, a woman on stage dressed like Lady Gaga films the crowd. She is, it turns out, Fake Axl's fiancée, and a tribute act called The Lady Gaga Experience. But she's not the same Lady Gaga who sang in the VIP marquee earlier that day. That was Lady GaaGaa, performed by Emma Watkins, one of the performers on Elmgrove Productions' books.

"It can be a bit crazy at times", says Watkins, "especially with kids because I don't think they understand — they just think you're Gaga. Every time you move your arm they'll do the same thing." And sure enough, when her gig starts there's a troupe of goggle-eyed young girls at the front, singing along. This is what it's like in Tribfest's parallel universe, a place where reality and fantasy become one and identities get fuzzy.

"It's just fabulous," says Jodie Jackson, an impressive, full-time Madonna lookalike who sounds like a sassy New Yorker when she's on stage, and Su Pollard when she's off. She prefers this to her years in musical theatre, and spends all three days in costume. "Nobody can tell me anything," she says. "I'm my own boss. I can be whoever I want." 🗨️

Oasish

From Reading



LADYGAGAA AND OASISH PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALEX GODFREY