

# the bigger picture

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A strange thing happened at a gig recently. As I waited patiently, cider in hand, for the band to come on, the man next to me turned to his friend and started telling him how excited he was that Lana Del Rey — the elusive, spaced singer — was the support act for the relative old-timers the Maccabees. Really, he said, I should be supporting her. At that point, Lana had yet to release her debut album, and the Maccabees were celebrating the success of



third. Luckily for him, the band had put me in a tranquil zone and I resisted the urge to put my hand on the shoulder of the man next to me. I told him just how ignorant he was of his statement. I travelled home on the tube and I felt a pang of guilt for my indignant response. It was his fault he thinks Lana Del Rey is a bigger deal than the Maccabees. It isn't his fault he has fallen victim to the culture of hype. It turns out, Lana Del Rey is the last minute, illness — though many would say this meant fatigue.

Her rise to fame is a perfect example of our obsession with finding "the next big thing" — the new act that will be the saviour of music, changing the way it sounds for the next 10 years. As soon as we find an act we believe has musical messiah potential, journalists, record labels and fans create a ball of hype around them, often before they've produced enough songs to make up an album. We grab them in their infancy because, ultimately, when an act starts to be talked about on Radio 1 and in NME, who doesn't want to be able to say: "Oh, Skeleton's Closet? Yeah, I was listening to them, like, 10 months ago."

You might wonder why finding that one special act matters. Well, for a long time, people have been asking why this generation has no defining sound — we have no punk or Britpop movement to call our own. I think our need to find the next big act is a contributing factor to this. In *Banding Together*, a book that looks at how new music genres develop, Jennifer C. Lena points out that it takes tens, hundreds or even thousands of people to make a music community. One act alone doesn't make a genre. It's a number of artists, united by a similar sound and conviction. Of course, there have always been stars and personalities — Frank Sinatra, Elvis Presley and the Beatles were a pretty big deal — but they were all set against a wider background. By focusing on finding that one special act, rather than on new ideas and sounds, we're stopping the evolution of fresh genres.

What's the solution? I think, quite simply, we need to relax a little. Enjoy the ride. Listen to new artists without wondering whether they are the next big thing, but simply asking whether they are a good thing. Who knows? Lana Del Rey might have started a genre of retro female pop crooners that will come to be the defining sound of our era. Then again, she might not.



**Vintage clubs and retro artists are having a ball as recession bites. Tim Cooper looks back at the scene**

It is eight o'clock on a Friday night, and a line of pretty young things in evening dress snakes incongruously past a queue of goths before creeping furtively through a hole in the wall. Inside, by candlelight, a fashionable young crowd is partying like it's 1929. A jazz band tootles away as girls in flapper dresses and feather headbands do the charleston, while boys in tweeds gossip over cocktails. With its speakeasy atmosphere, the Candlelight Club is one of a number of vintage nights springing up all over the country as the recession begins to bite.

Dressing up has never been more popular, with a scene for tribes from Regency dandies with extravagant moustaches right through to the mullet-haired, shoulder-padded 1980s. And the period between the wars is experiencing a high-profile revival, fuelled by nostalgic television series and films, notably *Downton Abbey* and *The Artist*. Old-time dance classes are oversubscribed, displays of the lindy hop and jitterbug are familiar sights at summer festivals, and young singers are recording the music of the era.

Patricia Hammond divides her engagements between retirement



## Gonna take a sentimental journey

homes, where she sings for people who remember the songs from their childhood, and fashionable clubs, where a generation young enough to be their great-grandchildren increasingly enjoys travelling back in time for an evening. Now the mezzo-soprano has released *Our Lovely Day*, an album of songs from the Edwardian era to the 1930s, including *We'll Gather Lilacs* and the surprisingly saucy *Button Up Your Overcoat*, rearranged for a new audience.

Hammond, 37, has been captivated by the period since her childhood in Canada, thanks to an English mother who collected sheet music and 78 records. She grew up singing old songs to her elderly neighbours, just as they had done in the days before gramophones. "We used to sit around the fire and sing together," she recalls. "I like the songs because they are often optimistic."

Hammond, who has a taste for glamorous evening wear, says she has "dressed like an old lady

since I was a child" because of her love of the music. Yet she believes that the reverse is true for most of the current generation of vintage fans: "I think most of the younger people get into the scene through the clothes, and the music comes second."

One appeal of the vintage scene, she says, is that "it is not as sexualised as dance clubs. The 1920s and 1930s were a safer time of good manners, dressing up smartly and behaving according to certain rules of society. And, in that environment, it's more exciting to see a little flash of calf, or perhaps an elbow as someone removes a glove."

Her words are echoed by two first-time visitors to the Candlelight Club, both students at the London School of Economics. "Normally, we would go to [the dance club] Fabric on a Friday night, but the atmosphere is much better here — I like that you can have a conversation with people," says Tatiana Kazim, 19. "In most clubs, the music is too

loud and everyone's on drugs. You are more likely to make a friend here."

"People are more polite," agrees Rachel Williams, 20. "It is more social than sexual. You wait for a charming man to come and ask you to dance, rather than find someone grinding up against your leg on the dancefloor."

Max Raabe, a 49-year-old Berliner, performs his repertoire of witty songs from the 1920s and 1930s in impeccable period evening dress, with a small orchestra. A big star in Germany, he has just finished recording an album of self-penned songs — *I Can't Kiss Myself Alone* — that pays homage to the era. (It will be released in Britain this summer.) "I believe we are the luckiest generation ever, to be living today," he says. "In one way, we have everything, with all the wonderful advances in technology and science and medicine, but I do think people are looking for something else — elegance and good manners. And I think

the 1920s and 1930s produced the most elegant music and lyrics of all time."

Not far away from the Candlelight — its changing location is kept secret, adding to the allure — a time-travelling clubber can fast-forward to the 1940s with little more than a change of clothing and an adjustment of their step. Swing dancing has boosted the popularity of club nights such as Jitterbugs, the Cakewalk Café and the Cat's Meow, in London, and Hedna's, in Milton Keynes.

Enthusiasts dressed in spats and braces, or tea dresses and seamed stockings, dance to old-time music — and new hybrids, such as electro-swing — played live or by the specialist DJs Lady Kamikaze, Tim Hellzapoppin, Chris Tofu, DJ Fruity, El Nino and DJ78 (aka Dave Guttridge), who mixes old shellac 78s on a pair of wind-up gramophones.

The Blitz Party, held in a railway arch in east London, takes this to its logical conclusion by re-creating the atmosphere of an

air-raid shelter, complete with blackout curtains. If you close your eyes, the rumbling of trains overhead might just be mistaken for an approaching doodlebug.

The London-based singer Katy Carr sings wartime favourites and has recorded an album of self-penned songs in the same style, called *Coquette*. Carr, 30, also divides her professional time between retirement homes and vintage clubs. "The 1940s were a fascinating era — musicians such as Vera Lynn, George Formby and Gracie Fields really made a difference to people's lives in a terrible time," she says. "I love the music and films of the era, and I love wearing 1940s clothes. They're good for a feminine figure."

Carr and Hammond may wear vintage clothes and manage without television, but they are not living in the past and are perfectly comfortable in a world of computers and CDs. While there are those who live a complete vintage life, right down to the cars

they drive and their home furnishings, most enthusiasts do not take it quite so seriously. Take Nicholas D Ball, 28, front man of the jazz band Albert Ball's Flying Aces, who wears flying goggles and collarless shirts on stage, but admits that, off duty, he is more likely to be found in jeans, T-shirt and trainers. "I think people like to look back more in hard times because they are terrified of what the future might hold," he says. "They are drawn to the aura of abandon and hedonism of the 1920s — the sort of lifestyle glamourised by F Scott Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby*. Coming to a vintage club is like being in a film for an evening."

The vintage scene even has its own magazine, *The Chap*, which successfully straddles past and present — alongside features on grooming for dandies and the history of the smoking jacket, the latest issue features an interview with Adam Ant, discussing "gentlemanly elegance". The scene has its own pin-ups, too.

The Vintage Mafia are six London girls in 1940s outfits who organise social events. Their motto is: "Always well dressed, not always well behaved."

Its epicentre may be the fashionable districts of east London, but vintage has spread all over the country thanks to summer events such as Wayne Hemingway's Vintage Festival, which has moved from Goodwood via London to a country-house estate in Northamptonshire.

"For me, vintage fashion is about appreciating great, timeless design that should not be forgotten," Hemingway says. "Glamour is sexier than the sportswear and Wag fashion we have today. The more intelligent young realise that conspicuous consumption is crass and uncool. That is why they are doing things our nans did — it saves money and gives you a sense of achievement."

As we move further into the 21st century, the definition of "vintage" inevitably grows broader. Britain has long had a thriving 1950s scene, recently rejuvenated by Imelda May. The 1960s and 1970s have experienced revivals on the back of television shows such as *Mad Men* and *Life on Mars*. And the 1980s is a touchstone for much modern music and fashion, from synthesizers to puffball skirts.

In 20 years' time, perhaps people will look back at the austerity days of the early 2010s from clubs where a future generation, dressed in vintage hoodies and trainers, prod laptops and tinker with iPads over a latte, while a greying revue of Simon Cowell's long-discarded protégés croon bygone *X Factor* hits in the corner.



This year's model: Katy Carr. Far left, Max Raabe. Above right, New Year's Eve at the Candlelight Club

DIETER MAY/RYTIMES, THE NEW SHERIDAN CLUB