

Strawberry Jam is the Best Jam

Chapter 1 - The Spice Girls

I'll start with an anecdote. I remember being about fourteen. My youngest brother, who was about six years younger than me - that is, still young enough to be truly child-like, as opposed to my more teenage ways - had the first Spice Girls album. This was mid-90s. Peak Britpop, peak Spice Girls. When every child under the age of ten owned a copy of that album. Anyway, as we shared a bedroom, there was a period of about a month or so where that album was played to death, and I heard it constantly. As I sat playing Super Nintendo games that was the endless backdrop. Accompanied by a familiar routine. He'd put it on, then I'd complain that the Spice Girls were "crap" and tell him to turn it off.

However, I remember having this mild sense of cognitive dissonance at the time, as even though I repeatedly stated that "I hated the Spice Girls," that wasn't actually quite true. In truth I didn't mind the music. Some of the songs I even quite liked. In fact, the little arguments usually ended with me saying something along the lines of, "Go on then, you can have it on, *if you want it on*." I'd say I hated it, then feign a tolerance for it, as I secretly enjoyed the catchiness of the songs.

And no, before you jump in, I'm not gay, lol. This isn't, "I secretly liked the Spice Girls and that's how I first knew.." The point I'm making is kind of the opposite one. As a teenage boy, like all teenage boys, I intuitively understood that "pop music" was a girl thing, so liking it didn't fit with my self-image. Had I been gay I would've probably not worried quite as much about looking a bit girly in the eyes of my wider social circle, and ultimately in the eyes of the opposing sex. So that slight cognitive dissonance was a consequence of two conflicting responses. My natural response to the music was a positive one, but that didn't chime with the image I had of myself, and that I wanted to put across to the rest of the world. In this particular case self-image won out. My desire to look cool and credible (and stereotypically male) overrode any desire I had to give an honest appraisal of a Spice Girls song. So "I hate the music of the Spice Girls" was the output. Even though that wasn't the complete and actual truth.

As I wasn't fully self-aware of this at the time it just resulted in a slight niggles of guilt. On some level I understood I was being dishonest. Which got at me a little bit. It annoyed me, and I remember stopping and thinking about it momentarily as I played my video games. Fortunately, pondering on it made me confront it somewhat. "Why am I lying?" I asked. I quickly realised that it was a case of what

I've just written above. That I was tailoring my opinions to fit the public image I wanted to present. Or, in some sense, to simply live up to the image others already had of me. That is, to conform to the expectations others had ..be it friends, parents or teachers. In essence, I was bothered what other people thought of me, however much I thought or claimed otherwise. I didn't quite put it in that language at the time, but I came to the realisation and understood it nevertheless. It isn't hard to understand really when you make the effort to think about it (it's true of all of us), it's just hard to admit at first.

Once I became fully self-aware of this it was something of a revelation. I realised I'd been living in a social straightjacket. That my tastes, my true self as it were, had been suppressed and overridden by a desire to conform to a spectrum of public personas. The school version of me, the home version, the self-image I presented to friends. The squirming and embarrassment I felt when those personas sometimes came into conflict. I decided I was going to be more honest. Of course, I wasn't stupid, I didn't turn up for school the next day in a Spice Girls t-shirt. It wasn't a radical overthrow of all care for social status and acceptance, but still, in my mind I had a much clearer understanding of things. I stopped lying to myself*, even though to some degree I kept lying to other people ..or at least sheltering them from my true opinions and tastes. It made me a lot freer. Like I'd developed a superpower that most other people didn't have.

*As a side note, it's worth adding that these things are never quite that cut and dried, and that although I did indeed become much more honest with myself, it wasn't quite that simple. We can never truly cast off our hypocrisies and self-delusions. In reality it's much more of a path or process. Obviously, I'm still better than everyone else, but not quite perfect.

Chapter 2 - The Spice Girls vs Nirvana

Fast forward. Another anecdote. This time I'm about twenty years old, and I'm at college studying music. There was a guy on the same course as me. A very nice guy - liked his music, played guitar, alternative, acoustic/rock type. We kind of bonded over liking some of the same music. Again, nothing gay. This was two straight males ..albeit with long hair, that didn't talk to women that much ..but still, purely platonic. As things used to be before the Internet.

Anyway, the music was generally 60s guitar bands, along with the odd "underrated" album by some unknown, underappreciated artist. I'm saying "unknown", but it was the sort of stuff that would've been known to every alternative type on a music course, or anyone who's ever read Q Magazine, but to us this was the niche, "Have you heard of this album.. !?" **Aren't we the experts on music face**

So a mutual respect kind of developed, and it was nice to know someone who was interested in music the same way you were.

But then, one day, he asked me what I'd been listening to..

Normally a question like this would garner a response of some indie band or other. However, the previous day I'd been harbouring some nostalgia for the days of 2 *Become 1*, Super Nintendo and me pretending to hate the Spice Girls. So I'd had that 90s pop classic on. Now, by this point it must be said, thanks to my earlier revelation, I'd really thrown off the shackles in regard what I allowed myself to like or not like. I basically just listened to whatever I felt like listening to, regardless of how cool or uncool it was, or what listening to it said to others about me as a person. Though if it was something particularly stigmatising I didn't always shout from the rooftops that I was listening to it. Either way, I listened to all sorts. From my much-loved bands like The Beatles, The Smiths, Blur, Oasis, etc (if I had to be pigeonholed it was definitely indie) to stuff I just listened to when I was in the mood for something different, be it pop, dance, hip-hop, whatever. I just listened to what I genuinely liked, and in my own personal space I was more than happy to have the Spice Girls next to Radiohead and Nirvana in my CD rack. I'd really expunged any sort of snobbish bias by that point. Good music was just good music to me.

(Though, as another anecdote later on will show - yes, there are more anecdotes (!) - I still had a lot of *cultural* bias when it came to music. As, like with food, our tastes are partly shaped by the culture we grow up in - and this is equally hard to overcome. So my honest opinions were still somewhat biased by that factor, as we'll note later.)

Anyhow, when I mentioned that the Spice Girls had been my most recent soundtrack the response it garnered was, "WHAT?! [*brief pause*] .. *are you joking?*" The guy genuinely thought I was joking. And he was genuinely disappointed in me when he

found out that I wasn't, like I'd let him down in some deeply tragic way. Like he'd found out I was secretly a member of the Church of Satan or something. Though, saying that, with all the moshers and alternative types on that course that probably would've went down fairly well – it probably would've nabbed me a goth girlfriend even.

I remember feeling a little guilty when I saw his response. I knew the rules. I knew I was crossing the streams. In fact, by that point I was so free from social constraints when it came to my tastes in music that I kind of enjoyed publicly breaking the taboos. Saying the 'wrong thing' was always like a little social experiment to me. I knew what the response would be, but I wanted to see it in real time. To see how strong the contortions would be. It really is a little bit like having a superpower, you can walk through social boundaries that other people have a strict mental block against.

Conversely, there is a price to using it though.

That guy was a nice guy. He certainly wasn't mean enough to completely disown me for liking a Spice Girls album. However, he did lose some respect for me that day. His worldview naturally had a hierarchy, where people that listened to the Spice Girls and other 'manufactured' music were lower down and less credible than people that listened to Nirvana. It was a view I would've shared just five or six years earlier as I sat playing F-Zero and Super Mario Kart. So honesty, even over something as simple as music, can come at a cost to your social circle and reputation. Something most of us intuitively understand, even as children.

Personally, I feel blessed to have been freed from the cognitive dissonance and compromised tastes I once had as a teenager. I think I've enjoyed music much more than most other people, who are partly hemmed in by music being their social badge. So I'd definitely recommend the self-reflection and self-awareness - hence why I'm writing this. As once you understand how your desire for social status affects what you assume are your natural tastes you really do become a better pilot of your own mind. A much freer bird.

However, socially it's also probably wise to temper that honesty in public when you do acquire that freedom of mind. When my original teenage self somehow decided to publicly hate the Spice Girls, semi-subconscious though that decision was, it was actually quite logical ..from a social point of view. As it spared me potential ridicule and alienation. Later on, in my more aware state, joining the Church of Satan might have helped me get a spooky girlfriend, but telling people I listened to the Spice Girls most certainly didn't. So breaking the subconscious social programming can have its downsides, and you do need to be mindful of that.

Chapter 3 - Energy Drinks

A kid, let's say about ten years old, pesters his mam for an energy drink. "You won't like them," the mam insists, "they taste horrible and sour."

"Nor, I do like them."

"How do you know you like them if you've never had one?", she continues.

"I do. I like them!"

Eventually, and reluctantly, the mam gives in. "Okay, I'll get you one, but just one."

She buys the can and hands it to the kid. He takes his first sip. His face wrinkles up as his natural disgust response kicks in.

"See," the mother states with vindication, "I told you that you wouldn't like it."

"Nor, I do like it." The child keeps on drinking.

This is kind of like with the Spice Girls earlier, only in the opposite direction. The child's tongue isn't impressed by the taste of the energy drink - the natural impression is that it tastes quite nasty - but his mind overrides this, as drinking energy drinks is seen as "cool", or whatever word kids use for cool these days.

The older kids or older brother drinks energy drinks. The YouTubers and other social influencers do. The drinks are full of sugar and caffeine and God knows what else, creating the sense that you get some type of drug-like buzz or rush from them. They're even packaged to look like alcoholic drinks. So it's all very edgy, adult and dangerous. A banana milkshake tastes much nicer - the tongue knows this - but the brain wants social status. It's much more important to look cool and credible.

So, the child forces himself to gulp down the concoction. He pushes past his taste buds and convinces himself, "Yes, I do like these drinks." You could call this a lie, but in a sense it's not a lie, as he doesn't have the self-awareness to be fully conscious of the self-deception. What he wants is to fulfil a self-image. To mimic his peers. The drink and its taste isn't really that important, that's not why he's drinking it, it's just an inconvenience that gets brushed aside in pursuit of the more important goal. So when he tells his mam, "See, I do like these drinks," as he continues drinking, he believes what he's saying - in spite of his wrinkled nose. Though there might be a slight feeling of cognitive dissonance at the back of his mind somewhere as he says it.

This dissonance is quickly forgotten however. Once he pushes past that initial sourness it becomes an acquired taste. He perhaps tries all the different flavours and finds one he likes the most, "My favourite is the blue one", or rather, one that's least

disagreeable to his actual sense of taste. With the self-image fulfilled it then becomes habit. Consequently he might go on to spend the next ten or fifteen years of his life drinking energy drinks ..and believing sincerely that they're his favourite drink. That they're an essential part of who he is as a person. Regardless of the fact that his actual taste buds once upon a time told him otherwise. Or that, if he'd been born on a desert island, free from all social influence and need for social status, he'd have chosen the banana milkshake over the energy drink every time.

So who has the happier life? The person who sticks with the banana milkshake and forgoes social status? Or the person who pushes past their taste buds to make friends and have a social life?

Chapter 4 - Alcohol

Don't worry, before you start saying, "Yeah, kids are stupid, with their silly fads and trends," we're getting to the adult world. With alcohol as a seamless transition.

Alcoholic drinks, like energy drinks, are also not so much about the taste, but more about the lifestyle and social status they offer. Now, of course, I'm not saying that alcoholic drinks (or energy drinks for that matter) *can't* be enjoyed for their taste - sometimes it's nice to have a cold glass of lager, whether there's a social world around you or not - but the truth is clear and apparent. We all understand how it was in large part a desire to look and be grown-up that led us to want to drink alcohol as teenagers in the first place. It really wasn't the taste. In fact, back in the 90s we didn't just have Spice Girls, Sega and Super Nintendo - it was also the era of the alcopop.

Whereas energy drinks are non-alcoholic drinks marketed like alcohol, alcopops were alcoholic drinks marketed to appeal to children (or, if you're being generous to the makers, young adults). Youngsters weren't too keen on the taste of alcohol, but with some brightly coloured labelling and fruit "pop" flavours, the path to drunkenness was made a little more comfy. A sugar honey with the medicine. A helping hand to con and coax the basic instincts. Taste once again under the influence of self-image.

And, this is the thing, you never grow out of it. You can only become aware of it. From the young man sinking pints to look manly, to the gentleman sipping his whisky with the self-image of taste and refinement. Do people enjoy the taste of champagne, or do they just enjoy the idea of living the high life? Again, I'm not saying you can't enjoy the champagne, or whisky, or lager purely for the taste and experience, but it's highly unlikely that social aspiration hasn't played at least some part in it.

Even self-awareness of the influence can't truly sever you from it. As I type I'm not entirely sure how much of my own liking of alcohol is genuine taste and how much is social habit. It was certainly the case that I never enjoyed getting drunk and having hangovers when I was younger. It was much more the social pressure that led me to do it. I remember once I refused a shot of something in a nightclub, and the bargirl handing them out called me "boring" (!). It's pretty hard to resist that type of social pressure. A single word shouldn't have that much effect on you - it's stupid to be bothered by such a thing, yet still, I recall it now, showing that it must have bothered me, even though I brushed it off at the time.

No one likes to look like they're ruining the party. My usual happy medium, even back then, was stating that I just drank beer or lager. No spirits, no whacky shots or cocktails, nothing with a ridiculously high alcohol percentage. However, when

someone sticks a glass of vodka down in front of you, which they've paid for (in spite of the fact that you may have said, "No, it's okay, just get yourself one") it's rude to not drink it. You feel obliged to accept the gift ..and the headache. Even the self-awareness doesn't excuse you from the social conundrum.

As I've aged I've gotten better at saying "No", so on the odd occasion that I do go out I certainly won't be having strange shots or glasses of vodka. However, I do still "like" the odd pint or bottle of beer ..but do I like it? This is the question. Do I genuinely like it, or is it an acquired taste, born purely of the fact that I've wanted to socialise over all these years? And if it is, is that a bad thing?

If I'm going purely on my taste buds I might prefer a cup of tea or glass of orange juice when I'm at the bar on the work night out. However, do I really want to be the weirdo at work on Monday morning who ordered a cup of tea when everyone else was having beers and cocktails?

Ultimately you weigh up the personal pleasure versus the social cost and try to find a balance. At least if you're self-aware of this inner conflict it's easier to find a balance you're happy with overall.

Chapter 5 - More Drinks

Anecdote three. Actually, there was a little bit of an anecdote in that last chapter wasn't there. The bit where I was unfairly called "boring," so I guess it's anecdote four. This one is also night out related. Well, more evening at the pub related, but these days it's the closest we get.

It wasn't quite a pub where you drink shots of vodka, more a place where the people drink real ale. The type of people that like obscure real ale, from obscure little breweries, with funny little names. Where each initial sip comes with commentaries about the tanginess or fruitiness. The "grassy, earthy" flavour, or the "caramel" or "liquorice-like" aftertaste. The "Ooh, isn't this obscure." It comes with many of the pretensions you might normally associate with wine tasting. Though more bearded, and absent the elegant women.

It was also an arty, music type venue. Folk nights, open mic nights, quiz nights, arty spoken word poetry type nights. You get the picture. I'd come to see my friend play, so I was in a friend of a friend type situation. On my own and talking to people that I vaguely knew through this one friend. Naturally music came up as a topic. I was asked by one guy what I'd been listening to. (Sorry for the sense of déjà vu.) We had another Spice Girls situation on our hands. This time it wasn't quite as bad. I'd been listening to funk music. Nothing obscure, just 70s chart type funk, blending into disco. The sort of stuff you get on re-runs of Top of the Pops.

I'd always hated funk and disco music growing up. I put this down to cultural bias in retrospect, as I foreshadowed in the second chapter. I grew up in a white, melodic rock household, so funk and disco were a bit foreign and unfamiliar. Again, it's similar to food. We like what we're familiar with, so unfamiliar things fill us with a sense of discord and apprehension. It takes a little bit of effort or cultural conditioning to overcome this. The first time I had Uncle Ben's Spicy Mexican Rice I was in uncharted territory. Now I eat it every week. It takes time to try new things, there's the danger you might not like it if you try it. If you're hungry it's easier to "just have chips." The familiar groove. The dependable, if boring, sense of fulfilment.

Anyhow, over the years my bias against funk and disco had gradually softened up. The odd song had made it through my defences. However, what had pushed me this time was simply the fact that a 70s radio station had been on in the background at work. I found myself singing along to a few of the songs (in my head, not out loud, I'm not that brave at work). Like with the Uncle Ben's rice, or should I say Ben's Original now thanks to woke-ism, I'd found a new taste I liked. "I quite like these adzuki beans," I thought, "..whatever they are." So I went home, searched on YouTube, and added the new songs to my roster.

Funk music is actually quite cool, so it shouldn't have went down too badly, but we were dealing with real ale drinkers here. I said "Funk" in response to the question, there was a slight look of disappointment, followed by a hopeful, "What type of funk?". When I said "'Upside Down' by Diana Ross, just that type of stuff," it sealed the deal. Any friend-of-a-friend reputation I had for being interesting went in a little beardy puff of smoke. They wanted some priestly baubles, some esoteric delights. They didn't want to be discussing music that normal, everyday people listened to on the work radio. Like with the ale, they wanted something with the appearance of novelty. A rare flavour. A sense of exclusivity.

"These people can't appreciate that strawberry jam is the best jam," I said to my friend as we walked home afterwards.

Chapter 6 - Strawberry Jam Is The Best Jam

Yey, we've reached the title of the booklet. It was always the plan. I think in that pub I began with a little bit of credibility, no doubt thanks to my friend mentioning me to these friends-of-friends in half decent terms. After all, I am interesting, in spite of what that bargirl said. Just look at me, writing little essays about funk, strawberry jam and the Spice Girls. Who else is doing this? If I wasn't the most interesting person in that pub I was easily in the top three. So there was a little bit of hope in the room when I opened my mouth, but it was quickly dashed. It's like they came to me expecting a banquet and found me eating a jam sandwich.

Now strawberry jam *is* the best jam. Of course, not everyone likes strawberry jam in actuality, nor jam in general for that matter. You may be reading this thinking that all jam is just icky congealed gloop. The point is though, yours would be an honest assessment. An assessment based on your actual sense of taste. Not a choice made with a desire to fulfil a self-image. Either way, whether you actually like jam or not, you should be able to recognise that strawberry jam is king. If you can't acknowledge to yourself that strawberry jam - the popular, obvious choice - is the best jam - *especially if that's what your taste buds tell you* - then you'll never have a true north star when it comes to judgement. Your taste compass will always be off. Corrupted by your desire to appear more intelligent in the eyes of others.

The average person, if asked for their favourite jam, will give strawberry as the answer. If not strawberry it'll be some other popular choice - maybe marmalade or blackcurrant. (If they're really odd it might be lemon curd.) However, the cultured person will give a different answer when asked. "Actually, there's this wonderful little farmers' market, just outside town, they do this lovely gooseberry jam with a hint of cinnamon."

Now it may seem like I'm picking on these people for being pretentious, and, let's be honest, I am. However, the important point, the actual point, is that they often end up living a life of self-deception. Denying their senses what they truly desire, solely to please a societal self-image. And in their head, like the child with his energy drink, they'll truly believe that the obscure jam is their favourite. The very thought that the pedestrian choice could be best is anathema.

It's a bit of a silly example, after all, it's just jam. It gets to the nub so beautifully though. Freshly baked bread and strawberry jam is lovely. No matter how common it is. In fact, it is common because it is lovely. Imagine how beautiful strawberries would taste had you never tasted one before. Had they arrived from some newly discovered continent as an exotic fruit. Again, if you were on a desert island with all these jams placed before you, completely free from prior social influence, would you really choose the gooseberry and cinnamon?

This easy example also goes to show how intelligent people are much more cursed by this desire for status than average folk. As at least for average people there's a 'wisdom of the crowd' type aspect to the trends they flock to. For the intellectual however, seeking his separate, exclusive club, he defines himself in the opposite. If the mob are choosing it, he, or she, will seek something other. If the plebs are eating jam and bread, he will have caviar.

I know which I choose.

You come to my table, hoping for rare dishes and exotic delights, but you cannot value the simple strawberry. Nor the funk classic, nor the 90s pop hit.

Chapter 7 - Little Boy Blue

Imagine two children. An elder brother and a younger brother. The mother of these two children brings back two toy trains from the toy shop. A red one and a blue one. The elder brother takes the red train. "Red's my favourite colour!" The younger brother, by default, is then left with the blue one.

Blue now has to be the younger child's favourite colour ..their badge, their standard. As red is already taken. If they say that red is their "favourite colour" too, they get accused of being a copycat. Plus, if they both have red trains, how will they know which is which?

This simple reality may then become part of that child's self-image. "Yes, my favourite colour is blue!" Even though it's not a reflection of their actual taste, more a reflection of their circumstance. (Though to some extent our real tastes are partly a product of circumstance, as circumstance can imbue meaning. A *Sweater Shop* jumper once worn by a girl you had a crush on has its beauty enhanced by her presence. The stripey jumper, with its pretty colours, imbibed with meaning beyond its basic aesthetic appeal.)

Another 90s reference for you there.

Of course, it doesn't have to be blue, it could be any colour.

"What about orange? You like orange. Orange is a cool colour. Why not get an orange train?"

Either way, you get the idea.

Parents often put their children on different teams when it comes to actual personality traits too. If one child is a bit noisy and out-going the other child becomes "the quiet one" by default. Personalities do naturally differ, however, the truth is, the differences are rarely large, especially between siblings. Parents noticing these differences will often over-exaggerate them though. "Stevie's a little tearaway, he's *always* getting into bother, but Timmy is no bother *at all*, you *never* hear a peep from him." Once typecast in such a way it can become hard to escape the label and expectations.

The reality is, we can all be quiet or loud at times. Troublesome or well-behaved. The full spectrum of human emotion and behaviour a possibility in all of us. Just as the entire spectrum of colours is open to our choice and appreciation. Not just blue or red.

Chapter 8 - Long Hair Is For Girls

It's also worth noting that aesthetic taste can naturally override social cost at times. It's not all one way. Long hair is a very good example, and this one definitely relates to me somewhat as well.

Despite being male I've always preferred having long hair. As a teenager and young adult it was just "what I liked." Long hair obviously looked better I thought, and I always instinctively felt that short hair looked angular and ugly. I preferred, and still prefer (though it matters increasingly less these days), the way I look with long hair when I see myself in the mirror. A short, army-style haircut just doesn't appeal to me.

However, it slowly dawned on me - a little too slowly - that what "I like" isn't necessarily what everyone else likes. I may like long, feminine locks, but perhaps that's because *I like females*, and as a consequence, by nature, that's what defines my notions of beauty. So, my personal fashion choices are warped a tad by a sense of what I personally find appealing. Females, on the other hand, admire males, so they may not be too impressed by guys with girly waves of hair.

Maybe the girl in the Sweater Shop jumper would've liked me a little more had I paid more attention to what she liked and focused less on appealing to my own tastes. Though Mick Jagger didn't do too badly, so I can't blame it entirely on the hair.

Most people understand all this instinctively, just as I instinctively once understood that it made sense to "hate" the Spice Girls. At that age I also understood how long hair on males was viewed, however I guess the pull of my own tastes was just too strong on that one. Plus, it must be said, I was never quite the epitome of laddishness, so my instincts probably weren't quite as strong as they otherwise would've been. In fact, another example of the teenage me lying about the Spice Girls serves as a good case in point. Though I played football, and was laddish enough to "hate" pop music, I wasn't quite laddish enough to be entirely upfront about how much I liked the Spice Girls, and girls in general - as in, *like liked*. Even at the age of fourteen or fifteen I found it incredibly embarrassing admitting that the image of Ginger Spice, overspilling from a union jack dress, appealed to me on a primal level. "No," I'd protest, "I don't care about girls." So I was a bit too delicate for sure. Again, explaining the hair.

This is where our natural personalities do break the social mould somewhat. I remember watching wrestling as a child. My favourite wrestler was always Bret 'The Hitman' Hart. Most of the other kids liked Hulk Hogan, or the British Bulldog, or some other stereotype of masculinity. Whereas the eight year old me aspired to imitate the guy with long hair, sunglasses, jeans and a pink leotard. I wanted to beat

everyone up in the Royal Rumble, but I needed to do it with a bit of panache. Some subconscious feminine flourish. Even at that age the He-Man archetype didn't hold much appeal. So perhaps I was always destined by nature to be a long-haired fop.

The characters in wrestling, and in the Spice Girls, clearly appeal to these natural personality variations that exist. A certain percentage of boys will want the Bret 'The Hitman' Hart action figure instead of the Hulk Hogan one. Likewise, for every girl aspiring to be 'Ginger' or 'Baby' Spice, some will prefer to be 'Sporty'. Another 90s thing that held this appeal was the TV show *Friends*. For girls you could be the good-looking, slightly ditzy one (Rachel), or the bossy, get-things-done one (Monica), or the quirky one (Phoebe). Likewise, for males you had the dichotomy of Joey and Chandler - the dim, alpha male and the smart, wise-cracking beta. With Ross as the everyman, in touch with his emotions. Navigating the adult responsibilities the other two didn't have.

I remember (anecdote time) when *Friends* first blew up in the 90s. I'd never watched it, but I'd heard the name bandied about, and knew that other people at school watched it. At the time the name just sounded really gay to me. Not gay gay, but *gay gay* - though the two uses of the word are, of course, related. In fact, to detour a little, this is the thing with language, it naturally evolves. Words become popular because they accurately convey a meaning. You can try to be clever as a writer and find "more articulate" ways of saying things, but you can't really beat the natural swamp of human culture. Millions of people, talking every day, having to communicate. I could describe the name *Friends* as "twee", but that word wouldn't be quite right. Plus, a teenager would never use that word. *Gay* is the right word. Yes, it is a bit offensive, but it also conveys the impression accurately. So I can be honest and use it, or dishonest/inaccurate and not. I can't have it both ways.

It's similar with emoticons and text-speak. A few times in this little series of chapters I've used "lol". It's not conventional to use these expressions in "proper" writing, and they're considered low-brow, as they're associated with idiot teenagers texting each other. So you will definitely lose social brownie points for using them. However, at the same time, "lol" is so common because it's actually very useful. When we communicate in person we can use intonation, gestures, facial expressions. They all help to convey sentiment. With the written word we lack those things, so terms like "lol" do help. Your teacher or intellectual friend might say, "No, no, no ..you should improve your writing skills and vocabulary to better communicate using the written word. Text-speak is lazy and bad practice!" However, those people don't complain when they're reading something that uses *italics*, which also adds tone and emphasis to text. Again, there's no right or wrong. You just have to accept you can't have it all ways. Just as with the balance between being honest and being sociable, there are downsides whichever way you want to go. For me it's "lol" all the way, but I've probably already burned more bridges than you have.

Anyway, back to Friends, lol, I remember wondering why the tougher and cooler kids were watching something with such a gay-sounding name. I also remember noticing at one point that almost everyone in my class had started acting differently. The girls and boys suddenly adopted slightly different mannerisms. One lad even started using emphasis in his sentences differently, "...could I *be* anymore bored of this." (Look how useful that emphasis is.) I noticed this behaviour change, but didn't understand it. Then I finally saw an episode of Friends. "Ah, they're all imitating characters from this show," I realised. "Could that guy *be anymore Chandler*."

It was a bit disappointing seeing how easily their personalities had all been flipped by a TV show, but I guess in hindsight it was in many ways tapping into characters they already possessed to some degree. Of course, having finally seen an episode I started watching it as well ..begrudgingly. It was a little too sentimental for my tastes overall, but, admittedly, it was a good show. It would've been another teenage lie to argue otherwise, though I had a good go as I continued watching it.

Naturally I resonated with Chandler the most too.

Chapter 9 - The Greatest Hits

Would I order a jam sandwich if I was out at a restaurant? Probably not. Though perhaps if I was into my food as much as I'm into my music I would. Maybe if I'd wanted to be a chef instead of an Arctic Monkey I'd be putting down a marker. Maybe at my own restaurant I'd be going full punk. "Let's give the people what they really want !"

"Yes, Madam, if you want beans on toast, you can have that ..and no, I won't be adding any fancy seasoning to make it look more up-market. Just straight out the tin, onto the toast. As you'd have it at home. You don't have to fake it here."

Now, a person may sit happily eating beans on toast if they're at home, in their own home, but they wouldn't order this in a restaurant. They'd order something more appropriate to the situation, whatever their belly wanted. Plus, the whole point of heading out to eat is to do something special and fancy. So it would defeat the purpose somewhat. The point of this little series isn't really to be puritanical about taste though. As I noted earlier, it's more just about being mindful of these influences. Being aware that social pressures can affect our choices (in ways we often don't realise) - when it comes to food, music and many other things. And that, likewise, being honest about our genuine likes and tastes can come at a social cost too.

With some self-awareness you can have a bit more freedom, and you can weigh up the pros and cons more easily.

I'll finish with one last anecdote. When I told my friend I was writing this he mentioned a time when he was travelling in a car with another friend. It was a longish journey, and they'd spent the time listening to two albums: The Police's *Greatest Hits*, and *Dark Side of the Moon* by Pink Floyd, with The Police, by far, getting the prominent share of the air time. Anyway, when they reached their destination - another friend's house - this other friend asked what they'd been listening to on the journey. The first friend - the one who'd been in the car with my friend - without missing a beat, stated *Dark Side of the Moon*. When my friend noted to the other guy that the *Greatest Hits* had had a fair bit of journey time too, the first friend then played this down lol. As if, really, they hadn't been listening to it that much at all. Obviously, it didn't quite carry the same bohemian gravitas as *Dark Side of the Moon*.

Hearing this did actually make me laugh out loud a little. The *Greatest Hits* of The Police is a pretty impressive collection of songs. Many would say classic collection. If it was something in the actual mould of the Spice Girls you could understand the

shirking of association, but here we see a higher level of wanting to be niche. A true desire to be interesting, that craves only association with the most critically acclaimed and esoteric rarities.

It's a sad situation that many true music fans fall into.

I must admit though, prejudice against "greatest hits" is something I too used to suffer from. Even long after I'd made peace with the Spice Girls. Listening to a "greatest hits" or "best of" collection kind of suggests you're not a "real" fan. You just want the popular hits. You don't want or appreciate the hidden gems or more obscure albums. So it's not really the done thing. However, it is the *strawberry jam* of a band's back catalogue. The "best of" generally is the best stuff. Admittedly there's the problem that the track choice has been curated by someone other than the band members, but still, generally, the public gets what the public wants.

So, if you're downplaying a greatest hits, to the point where you're reluctant to admit you've even listened to it, you've probably gone too far in your quest to be alternative. It's much better to come back down to earth, so you can enjoy the good things in life once again.