

## ***What if...* The Arctic Monkeys had released their latest album first? The importance of leading with band defining music**



It's no news that the UK's favourite rock band is back, and with quite a statement at that. Indeed, the Arctic Monkeys returned in May with their latest, very un-Arctic Monkeys effort, *Tranquility Base Hotel and Casino*. Interestingly, news of the album's impending launch began the usual hype-train as fans waited for the first batch of new material since 2013's awesome band rebranding, *AM*, but no singles were released in the run up to the release of *Tranquility Base...* – we were going into this one blind, not knowing what to

expect. But was this all just part of an ego-stroking experiment for the band to prove that people will buy the album anyway, without having heard any of the music? Do we just buy into the name of a group because we like what they've done before? What if *Tranquility Base...* had been their first album?

Image: <https://www.spin.com/2018/04/arctic-monkeys-tranquility-base-hotel-and-casino-album/>

### **The Numbers**

The band made chart history back in 2006 when they released their stonking debut effort, *Whatever People Say I Am, That's What I'm Not*, which sold [363,735 solid copies over the counter in its first week](#), and that's without any digital downloads, which were still a fairly emerging platform at the time. Their success can be put down to the band defining their identity early on and differentiating themselves from the busy indie-rock crowd which at the time, was at its peak. The Sheffield band led with some particularly strong material which allowed them to burst onto the scene in a big way – any one of the tracks on that first album could have been a single in itself; it was a powerhouse of an allrounder record. Upon the release of the album, an HMV spokesperson noted that [‘In terms of sheer impact, where a band has come from virtual obscurity to achieve huge, overnight success, we haven't seen anything quite like this since the Beatles.’](#)

In comparison, *AM* continued in a similar vein seven years later selling [157,239 copies in its first week](#) of release. As the name hinted, this album was to be a reinvention of the band's style, turning to riff-heavy anthems with irresistible pop hooks, and arguably, it ended up becoming their *chef d'oeuvre*.

Naturally, *Tranquility Base...* had a lot to live up to. Would it be a return to the raw, abrasive sound of old? Another record full of guitar driven bangers like *AM*? Unlikely. And we were proved right. Whilst the new record may not be what everyone expected from the Arctic Monkeys, how did it fair in terms of sales? In the first three days after release, *Tranquility Base...* shifted a [respectable 66,412](#), but this is nowhere near their previous feats, and if you have a gander onto their Spotify page, only one song from the album currently makes it into their top ten most listened to tracks. Saying this, the album did break the record for fastest selling vinyl in 25 years with 24,500 copies in the first week and as Noisy have aptly pointed out, [‘Arctic Monkeys don't even need singles to sell a shit-ton of vinyl’](#). The point here is that, as fans, we are willing to part with our hard-earned cash on a new record solely based on the fact

it's by a band we love. We had no knowledge of what kind of sound the album would adopt, but we're up for giving a try no matter what. You wouldn't buy a car without taking it for a test drive, would you?

*Tranquility Base...* certainly isn't everyone's cup of tea, but in reality, the Arctic Monkeys can do whatever they please and they know that we'll be suckers to keep following them. There's an air of arrogance about it, but it's true.



NME suggested that *Tranquility Base...* is '[as close as we've ever been to hearing an Alex Turner solo record, outside of his solo soundtrack for 2010 film Submarine](#)' and rumour has it that it almost was. Despite the rest of the band seeming somewhat extraneous to Turner's machinations, it was probably just as well it wasn't released as a solo record because although the charismatic front-man is a rather alluring figure all by himself, the appeal of a new Monkeys record far surpasses the former and they knew that the band name would reel in more sales.

Image: <https://www.turntablelab.com/products/arctic-monkeys-tranquility-base-hotel-casino-indie-exclusive-180g-colored-vinyl-vinyl-lp>

## The Image

Alex Turner's wardrobe has come a long way since the days of album #1; from adidas track jackets to the 70s rimmed glasses and James Dean hair. Originally, this was part of their endearment to new fans – just a group of everyday lads from a working class city, making '[chip shop rock and roll](#)', whilst proving that you don't have to be amazing at your instruments to be writing decent music. Essentially, the image matched the style: songs about drunken escapades, nights out, altercations with overzealous bouncers- it all fitted the mold.





Images: <https://www.stuff.co.nz/entertainment/music/103779121/Monkey-business-The-evolution-of-Arctic-Monkeys>

But now the style has changed drastically to the far-out concept of the 1970s space hotel at the site of the moon landing. Yet somehow, they pull it off, the image still portrays them as the epitome of cool and fans will still be swooning at Turner's feet given the opportunity, but I'm not sure how this image would have gone down as a band emerging from obscurity. The arrogance and air of confidence may well not have been popular – they'd have been labelled 'posers' and cocky, but they've built such a reputation and platform for themselves, they can do whatever they like with little consequence. They've even gone as far as abandoning rock all together and declaring their love of RnB, covering Drake's 'Hold On We're Going Home' in the live lounge, quite deliciously may I add:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RvA3q0ZU-NQ> .

Turner even talks differently now. It's all part of a persona that accompanies the music and adds to their untouchable halo of cool. But if you're looking to break onto the scene with your band, we wouldn't suggest going full Ziggy Stardust and creating alter-egos straight off the bat though – everyone will just think you're nuts. The new album is certainly out there and not what we would expect from the Arctic Monkeys that most of us have come to know, but it certainly isn't terrible. Even if it was, the media would just write it off as 'the dud album' that everyone has at some point in their career and we'd have forgotten about it by the end of the summer. What we're trying to say is that no matter your ambitions for your music career, whether you want to embark on an exploratory genre-modulating journey of concept albums and new revelatory sounds, don't do this stuff first, because you haven't got the backing. Yet. Wait for a couple of albums to establish yourself and your sound and prove yourself before earning the right to go left-field.

## The Album

Just imagine for a moment that it's 2006: You're a PR superstar and the manager of the Arctic Monkeys comes to you and asks you to promote their (hopefully) break-out album. You listen to the record. It's amazing. Like nothing you've ever heard before. It would be a PR dream. But then imagine an alternate

scenario: it's still 2006, but the manager comes to you with *Tranquility Base...* instead. You see the potential of the band but the record is fractured, jarring and based on a hotel on the moon. It's probably one you're going to steer well clear of and say 'Sorry fellas, it's not for us'.

There likely wasn't a market for a sci-fi concept album [\*'documenting a futuristic moon colony and the exodus that spawned it, told by an assortment of unreliable narrators who can sometimes barely string a sentence together'\*](#) back then, and to be honest, there probably isn't now. The big hitters from the first album were raw, aggressive, in-your-face tracks with clever lyrics, such as 'When The Sun Goes Down' and the all-time classic, 'I Bet You Look Good On The Dancefloor', but what are the equivalents on the new record? Tracks like 'Four Out Of Five' and 'American Sports' provide some of the catchier moments upon the first listen but you just can't see them jumping out at a time when indie-rock ruled all in the British music scene – you can imagine people listening to them in 2006 and thinking '*Where on earth did this come from? Who the f\*\*\* are Arctic Monkeys?*' (hardcore fans note the EP reference 😊).

Whilst 'Four out of Five' is without a doubt one of the stronger tracks on the record, I think all Arctic Monkeys fans can agree that it doesn't hold a candle to the nostalgic indie-pop guitar of 'Mardy Bum' or the riff-laden reinventions that we saw with 'R U Mine?' and 'Do I Wanna Know?'. It would be hard to know quite where or who the album might be aimed at had *Tranquility Base...* been the band's first album. 2006 was a year in the midst of the British rock revival, with what was lazily umbrella-termed as 'Indie'. We had bands like Razorlight, The Kooks, The Libertines and Franz Ferdinand, [\*all at the peak of this renaissance\*](#); The Arctic Monkeys had to define themselves in this competitive market, which they did, and now that many of these bands have drifted into obscurity via group break ups and irrelevant attempts at finding a unique sound, Alex and the boys have sat pretty and waited patiently before indulging themselves and getting weird with their latest effort.

However, in all honesty, I think we can safely say that it would have tanked as a debut album. It was a brave move to release something as divisive as this now, but back then when they were trying to make a name for themselves, it would have been career suicide. It would have provided the impossible task of marketing a very left-field style of music to an empty market; flogging a dead horse, so to speak.

## The Natural Progression

No band ever stays the same. Fact. As much as you always want the new album of your favourite artist to be more of the same of what you loved about the last record, it very rarely happens and there's a good reason why. Yes, bands could just keep churning out tracks in the same style forever if they wanted, but they would get bored – that's what b-sides of singles are for anyway. It might be pleasing for you, but what artistic satisfaction is there for your heroes if they get stuck in a one-track mind? Excuse the pun.

Bands and artists have ambitions too; they want to develop, progress and push boundaries, as we have seen from The Arctic Monkeys' latest album. Where's the fun in sticking to the safe option? Plus, you couldn't justifiably regard an artist as legendary if they didn't think outside the box and modify their art form. The Standard argues that the Arctic Monkeys '*never stood still and were unafraid to risk alienating parts of their fan base for the sake of progression*' in their rundown of the [\*'Best Indie Bands of All Time'\*](#) and these are sort of risks you can afford to take, once you've established yourself, that is.

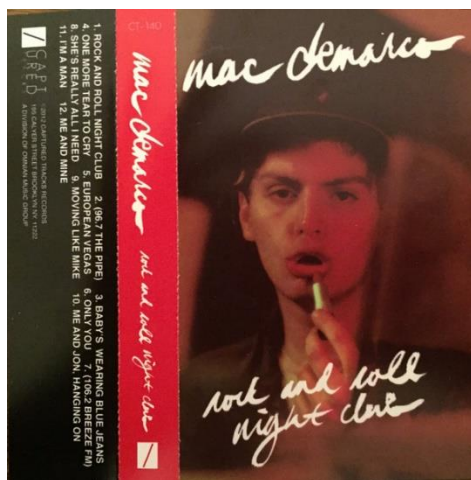


People change too. The Arctic Monkeys are no longer the boys they used to be in 2006. Stuff's [Barry Divola writes](#) that *'In the beginning, Turner came across as a modern version of Ray Davies or his early hero John Cooper Clarke, a working class lad with the gift of the gab and an eye for a killer line, singing about big Saturday nights and grim Sunday mornings, doorman gorillas who gave you a hard time, sulky girls you fancied, the fake tales people concocted to get noticed and get across.'* But now the band are men, in their early 30s; they don't go to sleazy clubs in Sheffield anymore to get drunk, they probably have a much more refined method of getting their kicks. There comes a point when you simply can't base your music on the same topics anymore, because you aren't living it anymore.

But it's not just subject content either, it's method and approach to music. [Turner told Divola](#) in their interview that *'Shortly after I met you, Barry, all those years ago, my manager gave me a Gibson LG-1 acoustic guitar. I've written loads of songs on that guitar, but then I reached a point where I knew the types of moves I always tend to make on the guitar. So I scurried off towards the piano and started to look for ideas there.'* Preferences and tendencies will naturally change as artists find new influences and their taste develops, it's a very organic progression, so the lesson to take from this is not to resist your ambitious wandering imagination as a musician, just reign it in whilst your working on your early material.

## The Advice

When you get together as a band, you have an initial idea of the sound you're going for. It might be an intriguing amalgamation of each member's favourite band at the time, but there's at least a hint of a communal shared goal in terms of style. As easy as it is to nail down one track and say *'yeah, I think we've completed that sound, mate, let's try something else'*, don't do it – at least not yet. Hone down that sound and identity that has blossomed from your best track and make sure that your listeners know what it is. A handful of songs with drastically different faces are only going to confuse potential fans and gift you with the music industry's equivalent of a Jekyll and Hyde personality.



Looking at a similar case from across the pond, indie goofball Mac Demarco has gone from unknown to hipster icon in a matter of a few years with his unique and recognisable brand of lilting guitar pop. However, rather than breaking onto the scene with a record-breaking album, Demarco went about showing the labels what he was capable of before he earned himself a deal. His first collection of tracks, *Rock and Roll Night Club*, [impressed Captured Tracks](#) so much that they offered to release his next album. It was then that the Canadian crooner dropped his best material and cemented his distinctive style with 2 and *Salad Days*. Essentially, the key is patience and whilst you may have to give the people a little of what they want at first, this will lead the way for your creative plans later.

Image: <https://www.discogs.com/Mac-Demarco-Rock-And-Roll-Night-Club/release/7841871>

At the end of the day, there's not a chance that the Arctic Monkeys could have destroyed their reputation and legacy as one of the best UK bands ever with their divisive latest effort. It might be 'Four out of Five' rather than 5 stars from the music mags, but Turner won't be worrying too much I shouldn't think. [\\*mic drop\\*](#)

Alex Paddock