



Phonogram, Vol. 1: Rue Britannia

Kieron Gillen , Jamie McKelvie

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Britannia is ten years dead. Phonomancer David Kohl hadn't spared his old patron a thought for almost as long... at which point his mind starts to unravel. Can he discover what's happened to the Mod-Goddess of Britpop while there's still something of himself left? Dark modern-fantasy in a world where music is magic, where a song can save your life or end it.

Collects Phonogram: Rue Britannia #1-6.

Phonogram, Vol. 1: Rue Britannia Details

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From Reader Review Phonogram, Vol. 1: Rue Britannia for online ebook

Nikki says

You can see in Phonogram the seeds of The Wicked + The Divine, I think, and an earlier stage of McKelvie's art which isn't quite the style he uses for The Wicked + The Divine or Young Avengers, but which is attractive and clean. The aesthetic is different, since it's all black and white; it looks quite striking, but I think I do prefer comics in colour. It makes things easier to read, for me: I had a tendency to lose panels and not read in the right order, for some reason, with Phonogram.

The story itself, well... I know the glossary says that you don't really need to know Britpop to get it, but I feel like you do need more knowledge than I have. I was toddling and learning to talk and think in the 90s, and even once I was at school and other kids were listening to music, I would still rather have been reading. So a lot of the references and the nostalgia stuff, the whole attitude, was just not in my frame of reference.

The magic system, the goddess and aspects of her, the links to music — it was a cool idea, but not elaborated enough. So lacking that, sympathetic characters or a nostalgic link, I felt like I didn't really have a way into the comic. It was interesting, but not my thing. Worth a look, though, if you're a fan of Gillen and McKelvie as a team, and especially The Wicked + The Divine.

Three stars from me mostly because: a) it involves a guy having periods as a punishment for being an asshole, and b) the art.

Originally posted here.

Sesana says

I usually really like Gillen's writing, and I love McKelvie's art. When they work together, it usually makes me very happy. See Young Avengers, or The Wicked + the Divine. Seriously, please do. Great books. This one just kind of zipped right past me.

The idea of a magical system based around magic was really interesting to me, but I never felt like I got enough information to truly understand how it worked. Which is a shame, because I would have been much happier spending six issues learning how to work a musical genre as a class of spell than in the actual story here. Also, many of the music references were beyond me. They're from a time in my life when I was far more likely to be listening to showtunes than the radio. Which is basically like my entire life, to be honest. Never much liked Britpop as a genre, either. The point is, even with a glossary, I didn't understand what was being referred to on a visceral level, the way I might have if I'd lived and breathed Britpop the way that I think Gillen at least did. So not the book for me there.

Still, I can't discount some of the more interesting ideas. Retromancy as a sort of nostalgia vampirism is particularly cool. Becoming so identified with one thing, from one particular time in your past, that you begin to lose yourself. An aspect of a goddess becoming intertwined with pop culture. Cool stuff.

It might have helped matters if the main character weren't so plainly awful. I hated him and his self absorption, his smugness, and his conviction that he's that much better than anyone else he comes in contact with. In fact, I'm trying to think of any character in this book that I had more than benign disinterest in, and...

Nope, nothing. I'm coming up totally blank here. No, a book doesn't necessarily have to have characters that I can like, but it has to be damned good for me to get over it.

It makes me sad to say this, but this really wasn't my thing. Both Gillen and McKelvie will both do so much better in their future, fortunately.

Justin says

I was ready to hate this book. I was intrigued by the first issue of the comic, but by the time I had finished the second, the Pitchfork-esque celebrations of musical superiority had reached critical mass. Something happened, though, as I got near the end of this six-issue collection. I found myself looking up the mentioned bands. I found myself actually understanding the various metaphors, even though I stand firmly on the outside of the story's cultural inner circle. By the time I finished the book, I realized to my surprise that I enjoyed it despite trying really hard not to.

The story arc begins with an avatar of a musical goddess sending a phonomancer (someone who can use music as a medium for arcane practice) on a quest to find out what has happened to one of her aspects, Britannia. Feel free to ignore this setup, though, because it has precisely nothing to do with the proceedings, other than to introduce protagonist David Kohl and give an overview of the setting. The book, for all of its fantasy trappings, is actually a fierce paean to Britpop music and an introspective exploration on what it meant and still means to its fans. David's race to stop the dead goddess from being resurrected as a monster is a thinly veiled history of Britpop's rise from the foundation of 1960s British guitar rock as a response to American grunge, its relatively quick decline and fall, and the state of the genre after it started feeding on itself instead of on a cultural identity. The most interesting part of the story is the consequences David faces if he cannot find Britannia in time: the destruction of his own essence, as his memories are altered and blurred until he is lost and transformed into someone completely different. Someone, for example, who hums along with Ocean Colour Scene and doesn't mind listening to Kula Shaker. The fight to hold on to himself leads him to questions that every scene kid, no matter what the scene in question is, must eventually face. What happens when you get old, and the music you've loved so deeply and understood so intimately becomes a relic of the past? What's the next step, when you can no longer define yourself by the trappings of pop culture once it inevitably leaves you behind, or vice versa?

These parables are so thinly veiled that it's easy to get lost in the dreamlike twists and turns of the narrative, if you're not keeping an eye on the big picture. Furthermore, even though there is a handy glossary at the back for readers that aren't familiar with Britpop, there is still an excessive amount of musical preening. Obscure Britpop references are tossed recklessly around, with an indifference bordering on disdain for the comfort of anyone who may not be familiar with them. Or maybe I just felt that way, since I grew up on the other side of the pond, listening to reviled Seattle grunge instead of Pulp, Blur, Elastica, or Kenickie. I eventually realized that the story isn't about excluding anyone, though. It's simply a love letter to a musical era that passed by largely unremarked on, except for by those in the thick of it, and those who wandered in too late on the heels of "woo-hoo" and "Wonderwall." Taken solely on those merits, this is a subtle and powerful work of storytelling.

The black-and-white art is fantastic. The pulp feel is wholly appropriate, somehow, and the realistic style conveys some remarkable articulation and emotion. The reader immediately learns almost everything about David Kohl by the expression on his face in the first page of the first volume. There are a few jarring shifts between pages and a handful of awkward action panels, but they're balanced by some very expressive character art. Honestly, the covers alone almost make up for any other artistic problems.

Taken all together, this is a remarkable graphic novel. It's bound to alienate some readers who either aren't familiar with or don't have any interest in the British guitar pop of the early 1990s, since the actual story doesn't really hold up without at least a passing appreciation for it. But reading this with an open mind (and a tolerance for having your own musical tastes sneered at, just a little bit) opens up a surprising deep and heartfelt piece of music journalism in comic form.

Roberto says

I absolutely had to give this no stars. Even though the book includes a glossary of the bands mentioned and referenced throughout the book, the reader is still required to have an extensive idea of the music at the time. I consider myself to be pretty musically in tune, but there were so many insider references that I found it a chore to finish. And when I reached the end, there was very little pay off. I didn't like the main protagonist. The overall book seemed to relish in its own smart-thinking and indie-credibility cool that the main character exhibits.

I thought the premise of the book showed promise and something that would've been up my alley since I enjoy pop music history, but ultimately it's so convoluted that I couldn't enjoy it. The dialogue tried to be smart, but seemed disingenuous. I contrast that with Joss Whedon's writing on Buffy, which seems more real and funny with all its pop references. It flowed much more naturally.

Overall I wouldn't recommend this book unfortunately.

Lawrence says

1993. The world was in the throes of a musical phenomenon known variously as "the Seattle sound" and/or grunge. As a convert to The Smiths a year or so earlier, I wasn't feeling ready to trade in my quiff and paisley shirts for a goatee and a lumberjack costume. Late one night, I happened on a video called "Animal Nitrates" by a band called Suede. It was ridiculously dark, grimy and homoerotic, and I was totally fixated. I bought the album on tape the next day.

Fast forward a year or two later and I was deeply obsessed with "indie" guitar pop from England. I resolutely DID NOT BUY AMERICAN RECORDS and albums and CD singles by Suede, The Auteurs, Blur, Oasis, The Bluetones, Sleeper, Radiohead, Elastica, Marion, Gene, The Boo Radleys, Ride, Geneva etc. were my constant companions. New Zealand was a strange place to be a Britpop fan - despite being hugely popular in the UK, it was very much outsider music in New Zealand, and it was rare to hear it in public or meet other fans as obsessive as myself. By 1997 it was pretty much all over - albums like OK Computer and Urban Hymns reset the template, Oasis' much-hyped Be Here Now was unlistenable, dance music was making a(nother) resurgence, and the latest crop of British indie guitar bands weren't actually that good.

Fifteen years later, and it's hard to even remember what a big deal this music actually was. The fact that bands like Geneva and Echobelly had chart hits and played Top of the Pops seems hilariously subversive on hindsight.

Anyway, enough preamble. If you are unaware of any of the above bands, Phonogram is going to be a hard sell. The premise - "phonomancers" - magicians who use musical memories to make music - is an interesting one. Our (rather unlikable) protagonist, David Kohl, is a Britpop survivor who has "centered himself" around the now-dead scene. The book is littered with references to the music of the time, and if you're not/were not a

fan, you're probably going to find it tough going. If you were a fan, then the attention to detail in both the art and the dialogue is utterly incredible, and will have you pulling out that first Kenickie album for it's first spin in a decade. Highly recommended, but like a lot of those mid-'95 b-sides, "for fans only".

Cale says

This book reminded me of a Steve Martin routine, when he tells a joke specifically for a plumbers group, only to get no response at all from the audience. I am so not conversant in BritPop (I recognized a few names from the glossary, and could even name a couple of songs from the more mainstream artists, but most of these were a foreign language), so it was like reading a comic in a foreign language. I get the main story and some of the resonances, but I've never been more aware of unfathomed depths below my understanding of a comic before. The story at the top level is okay, and has a couple moments, but without really understanding those references and that time, I didn't get the love for this book. The art is good, though the black and white of the world is a little less appealing than McKelvie's work on the Wicked and the Divine.

Eilonwy says

I read this because I needed another fix from the same guys who are currently doing The Wicked + The Divine.

This was not what I expected -- I thought there was going to be more magic than there was -- but it was very good in its own way, with a surprising depth in its message.

I'd recommend this to anyone who has ever strongly identified with a particular music scene, only to realize how quickly it passed.

And after I reread it, I may be able to come up with a more coherent review. :-)

Chris Lemmerman says

An intriguing book. I'm sure most of the meta-commentary and musical references were lost on me, but what I did understand was interesting, and a clever way to use the comic book medium. Also McKelvie art is always a treat, even in black and white.

Caroline says

I am not the target audience for 'Phonogram.' That's pretty clear, because the book is largely driven -- not just in atmosphere but in plot -- by references to a whole lot of bands I have never in my life heard of. These bands were apparently popular in the UK in the 1990s, a decade that I spent entirely in college towns in the Southern U.S., listening almost exclusively to jazz standards and Billy Joel albums, and attending a total of two concerts of popular music: a show by a local ska band, and a Lisa Loeb/ Sarah McLachlan concert that my ex-boyfriend dragged me two years after we broke up. I know this description sounds like it's

exaggerated for effect, but it is literally true. Those were my '90s.

And yet I enjoyed 'Phonogram.' I'm pretty sure (I hope) that series creators Kieron Gillen and Jamie McKelvie would take that as a compliment. A note in the back of the book says: "Everything you need to know about a band is right there in the narrative, and should be able to be grasped by the context it's in." That note precedes an extensive glossary, and listening suggestions, indicating that Gillen & McKelvie hoped that some people outside their target audience would be their target audience -- which, while it really isn't necessary, is a nice touch. It's refreshing for a book that relies so heavily on allusion and cultural coding to feel like it's actually trying to include readers, instead of excluding them. A lot of writers of 'mainstream' superhero comics could learn from this approach, as those stories are all too often meaningless to people who haven't been reading about the same characters since they were 10 years old. 'Phonogram' actually fools me into thinking I know something about Britpop. It's a tricky exercise, but Gillen and McKelvie pull it off.

It's probably starting to sound like I don't actually want to talk about what happens in 'Phonogram,' and there's something to that. I'm not sure what **does** happen in this book. I just know that the central character, David Kohl, is a fascinating (and totally reprehensible) son-of-a-bitch, and that I could look at Jamie McKelvie's striking, imaginative black & white art all day.

Mike says

So. This is a book about a rogue wizard who draws magic from obscure British music, and is cursed with the menses until he can go back in time and save the personification of said obscure music from.. something.

That's the actual plot.

Tim says

Phonogram is a sly commentary on the Britpop years (1992-1998, at a pinch) with a dash of magic realism thrown in for good measure.

It looks back to when the retro-futurist strain of indie - drawing on mod, New Wave and both summers of love for its music and fashion cues - made it unexpectedly big. As is the way of trends, Britpop then become creatively bankrupt pretty much as soon as the name was coined. It sometimes led to literal bankruptcy, such as in the case of the Creation record label.

A whole tranche of bands - some deservedly, others tragically - were drawn down into a Sarlacc Pit of mediocrity, commercialism and Gallagheriana.

That Phonogram tells this story using the device of a 'phonomancer' (a magician of music) exploring the memory kingdom of Britpop with Luke Haines of the Auteurs acting as Virgil to his Dante not only adds to its charm. More, it lifts it out of being merely illustrated music journalism to being a wise, funny meditation

on the perils and seductions of nostalgia.

I suspect it's readership will be confined mainly to men of a certain age - but at least it will unite music and comic nerds.

Nick says

I've considered the Phonogram series one of my favourites for a while and still feel that way, though volume one isn't perfect by any means. It's bewildering at first, even for someone like me who can grab all the pop culture references well beyond the standards of the era like Oasis and Blur. It makes more sense when we meet the self-absorbed characters but wow, I can't imagine how confusing this is for someone with only a passing knowledge of 90s British pop music, even with a packed glossary to help.

Ten years after the marketing pizzazz of Britpop fizzled out (and right as it was being exported to us in Canada, already past the point it was cool for the rest of the world), David Kohl's still hung up on the scene. He probably has a real job now but we never see any of that, just the times he's skulking about clubs for past glories, talking to his friends either too daft or stubborn to give it up too, or getting into spats with rivals from the old days. They're all phonomancers, see, a musical affinity that produces magic, albeit the sort that produces something that amounts to a singular, personal feeling on the dancefloor.

The magic is never explicitly explained in the comic but Gillen more or less confirmed this explanation in one of his newsletters from last year. Phonomancy is something with the potential in all of us, the sweeping feeling of being such a fan of some part of culture to the point of identifying with it stronger than anything else. It's a feeling of transcendence, magic on earth for as long as the moment lasts. As one matures, it tends to taper off and I can relate to that. I still regularly find new songs that stir something in the soul but the idea of a particular time and place as completely central to me feels so distant now. At one time it was everything, though, and that's the feeling David can't let go. He should have moved on by now but he's stuck, remembering the era as less the hullabaloo about the stadium bands and more as the intimate club nights and breakout shows by underground faves like Kenickie. The fanzines rather than the Melody Makers. Jamie McKelvie's iconic black and white art has a wistful feel to it. Could well have been pulled from a zine of the era if we didn't know better.

Phonogram is ultimately critical of the myopia of living in this nostalgia for too long. David is a total jerk and the comic makes no attempt to hide it. He fancies himself the savior of the spirit of Britannia, projecting the idea through an old flame of his, Beth. She's now living a simple married life, one he reads tragedy into rather than normalcy. There's a terse visit where he comes away convinced her phonomancer spirit needs to be restored and the eventual point where he thinks he does could just as easily be read the other way. (view spoiler)

There's a lot to sink into but it's indeed very much a product of its time, the period near the mid-00s where writers on the Internet honed their craft on lengthy culture manifestos. Some of that seeps into the later passages, wielding a bit of a ponderous hammer. The last issue took the phonomancer idea too literally and while I'm sure it was meant to be somewhat lighthearted, just dragged the story out. These quirks bothered me more the first time I read this, much less since. There's a certain feeling of longing for a meaningful moment in culture that's captured here, one that only grows in power once it grabs hold.

Bill says

After running out of "The Wicked + The Divine" issues to read, I went back to read this work by the same creative team. "Inaccessible" is a good word to describe this for anyone who wasn't a fan of the '90s Britpop music scene. There's still some interesting observations here about how connected music is to our memories, and how much of our identity is wrapped up in what we like (or didn't like) at various points in our life. If the past, and our memories, were to change, would we still be the same person? Intriguing questions to raise, but the onslaught of music references leave those ideas buried and incomprehensible. Okay, yes, there's a list of references in the back, but when you have to explain things how something was cribbed from the cover of an obscure music magazine, you've lost me.

The art might have saved this, but it's oddly bland and lifeless for a book about music. There's still some good work with character expressions, but half the time they are smirking and it just gets old. It's like an "uncanny valley" full of snarky animated bodies. Meh.

Kelli says

I wanted to really like this, but it just fell flat for me. It seemed like Phonogram was Gillen's exploration of the power of music in connection to our identities and how nostalgia shapes us, but it doesn't quite succeed. There are mages who wield their magic through music, called phonomancers. One, David Kohl is looking for the Goddess who gave him his abilities, the queen of Britpop Britannia. The magic is never explained or really used so we're not really sure what the phonomancers do and the memory kingdom aspects are just confusing because we don't know the characters very well. There are lots of references to past events and relationships, but because there isn't enough explained I ended up not caring about anyone.

I think I would've enjoyed it more if I was knowledgeable about the Britpop that's constantly being referenced. Each band acts akin to character traits, so not knowing most of the obscure ones made it difficult to follow. There is a guide at the end that's almost 4 pages, but I didn't know about it until I was finished and just didn't care enough to add more.

TL;DR: Really interesting concept, but execution didn't quite connect.

Jennifer says

I have no idea what this book was about. Seriously, no idea whatsoever. I read it, and the entire glossary in the back, and I still don't know what I read. But I think I liked it.

The difference, I think, between Phonogram and Scott Pilgrim is that Kieron Gillen seems to *realize* that his protagonist is a jerk, and doesn't make excuses for him. And, despite my best intentions, I found myself somewhat charmed by David Kohl. I liked the magical mumbo-jumbo, I liked the jokes, and I absolutely adored Jamie McKelvie's beautiful art. I can't say I loved this, because I don't know what *happened* in it, and as I am one of the least musical people I know, all of the musical references flew entirely over my head. But I do think it's an artistic accomplishment, and I'm very glad I read it. I only wish I was able to get more out of it.

Chad says

When I read this in 2015, I assumed I missed a volume because I didn't know what the hell was going on. Now reading it again 3 years later as the first volume of the Complete Phonogram, this is a terrible introduction to these characters and world. All of the characters are douche bags. The magic system is incomprehensible. I didn't know what the hell was going on. I learned more reading the Goodreads blurb than I did reading the comic. If this wasn't from the creators of Young Avengers and The Wicked + the Divine, I would have dropped this in a heartbeat. That being said Phonogram, Vol. 2: The Singles Club is actually pretty great and much more accessible. Gillen should have led with volume 2. The saving grace here is Jamie McKelvie's clean simple lines.

Jedhua says

ESTIMATED DNF RATING: {1/5 star to 1.5+/5 stars}

STANDARDIZED RATING: <1/5 stars>

Joe Henthorn says

Finally got round to reading this - the Gillen/McKelvie ur-text - after reading and loving Young Avengers and the first arc of The Wicked and the Divine. It's considerably darker in tone than their more recent comics, thanks to the almost comically unlikeable protagonists and the stark, monochrome art. But still, just as enjoyable as I expected... and just as witty, just as funny, just as sad...

What I wasn't expecting was just how well it captures that giddy, dizzy high of being in love with music. It's literal magic, what they are doing here, transmuting sound into ink and speech bubbles and losing little in translation! One particular sequence stands out where our aging anti-hero applies his eyeliner, paints his nails and slips 'The Collected Poems of Sylvia Plath' into his back pocket in the most indiscreet manner possible, before climbing down the steps to a former Britpop club to dance by himself with the common people. The four or five page sequence is told almost entirely with McKelvie's black and white artwork, but it's somehow one of the loudest and brightest bits of comic writing/illustrating that I've ever seen.

Paige says

DNF'd.

I wanted to like this because it had a great set up for things that I LOVE (Britain, music, records, etc.) but I absolutely HATED the main character, couldn't figure out what the hell was going on with the magic and the rules of this world, and just didn't understand what was going on. You're thrown into this story with little to no information backing it, and maybe it comes up later, but I was too bored and confused to stick around to find out.

Kaitlin says

I picked this up a while back after seeing the new arc start and wanting to read more from Gillen and McKelvie as a duo (I adore Wicked + Divine). This was written quite a while before Wic+Div and yet you can definitely see how some of the ideas from this bleed into their newest series. However, for me, this just kind of lost me in a lot of places and sadly I couldn't connect to a lot of what happened or the characters.

This promises a story where there is music-based magic and although, in a way, there is, it's really not the focus. The focus here is Britpop and if you like Britpop then you'll more than likely 'get' this a lot more than I did and it'll work much better for you. Honestly, so many of the references to real bands from the Britpop time I hadn't ever heard of, and of course I knew I was missing a lot because of this. The story has some cool elements, we have ideas of getting stuck in the past and forgetting to evolve and develop as new trends and themes come along. We also get creepy nostalgia-vampires and some goddesses of music... Sadly, although these sound cool they never delivered for me and I felt that the narrative was much more condescending and annoying than it was engaging or exciting.

I actually do like the art of this a lot, I knew I would as of course I adore the Wik+Div art and this is very similar just in black and white. For me, the artwork brought this up to the 2*s I gave it and whilst the story in this volume wasn't 'my thing' I have heard good things about volume 2 and I do hope that it will all start to make a bit more sense when I read that one (which is also full-colour so that's cool). I wanted to love this, but I think maybe I'm just not able to get the references and such so I am missing a lot of the story. Like I say, if Britpop is your thing, or you at least have an understanding of it and some of the music associated with it, maybe you'll like this more. 2*s overall.
