

# BEYOND QUINTESSENTIAL ENGLISHNESS

Wet Leg's idiosyncratic rendition of the Isle of Wight

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**ABSTRACT:** One of the most successful new acts in the international anglophone music scene in 2022 was Wet Leg, an indie (i.e. independent music label) ensemble led by singer-guitarists Hester Chambers and Rhian Teasdale. The band attracted attention for its effective pop-rock compositions and arrangements, the sardonic tone of lead singer Teasdale's delivery of their debut single 'Chaise longue' and the band's inventive music videos. One element that was prominent in the band's biographies was its origin in the Isle of Wight (IOW), a diamond shaped island lying off the south coast of England, close to the major port cities of Portsmouth and Southampton. The island provided both an insular context for the development of the band and an element of 'domestic exoticism' within the UK market. The latter aspect was also manifest in the band's decision to employ a female Morris (traditional folk dance) troupe to accompany its performance at the 2023 BRIT Awards, where it was awarded prizes for best group and best new artist. This article focuses on the role of the IOW in the band's biography, perception and oeuvre, with particular regard to its self-produced music videos, and the nature of the island as a repository of what might be regarded as quintessential English sensibilities that the band has inflected in ways that appeal to both domestic and broader audiences.

**KEYWORDS:** Wet Leg, Isle of Wight, cottagecore, Morris dancing, music video

[Note – all the videos referred to in this article are currently available on YouTube unless otherwise specified.]

## I. The Isle of Wight

The Isle of Wight (IOW) is 384 square kilometres in size and is separated from the southern English coast by the Solent Channel, which varies between 5 and 8 kilometres in width (Figure 1). The island forms part of the county of Hampshire and has a population of around 140,500 (Census 2021), the majority of whom live in the island's two major towns of Ryde and Newport (with populations of 32,070 and 25,495 respectively) and nine smaller centres.<sup>1</sup> The median age of the population has advanced significantly over the last decade, rising from 46 in the 2011 census to 51 in 2021. The number of people aged 65-74 rose by 26.7% and those aged between 35-49 fell by 18.8% in the same period, with 16-24 year olds now only constituting 9.6% of the population. The IOW continues to have a high concentration of

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<sup>1</sup> Brading, Cowes, East Cowes, Newport, Ryde, Sandown, Shanklin, Ventnor and Yarmouth.

residents identifying as 'white' (in comparison to other areas of south-eastern England), with 97% self-designating as that in 2021 (Populationdata.org.uk, 2021). The island has regularly returned Conservative party candidates at general elections since 1987<sup>2</sup> and 62% also voted to leave the European Union in the UK national referendum in 2018 (10% above the UK average of 52%).

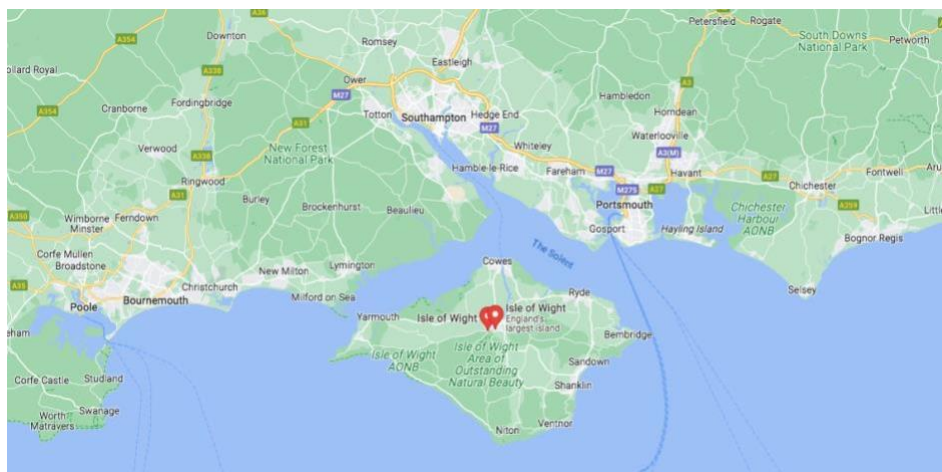


Figure 1 – The Isle of Wight and the adjacent Hampshire coast (Google Maps, 2023).

Tourism is a major element of the IOW's economy and, thereby, its way of life. Orientated to farming and fishing for much of its history, the island developed as a tourist destination in the 19th century largely due to its association with royalty, with King George IV becoming patron of the Royal Yacht Club at Cowes in 1820. Queen Victoria consolidated the endorsement by having a summer holiday house constructed on the island in 1851 (in which she died in 1901). Piers were constructed in several coastal towns in the mid-late 1800s in order to encourage and facilitate visitors from the mainland, and tourist numbers consolidated throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, with increasingly fast and reliable ferry services running to the island from Portsmouth, Southampton and Lymington. An estimated 2.6 million tourists now visit annually, contributing close to half a billion pounds to the island's economy (Tourism Teacher, 2023) and providing considerable – albeit markedly seasonal – employment opportunities. Along with material heritage tourism (focussed on old towns, buildings and monuments), coastal and nature-oriented tourism is a major draw. The latter aspect was recognised by over 50% of the island being designated as an Area of Outstanding National Beauty (AONB) in 1963 and by the north coast being designated as the Hamstead Heritage Coast in 1974 and the south-west being designated as the Tennyson Heritage Coast in 1988. The Landscapes for Life organisation has characterised that:

*Visually, the AONB is dominated by chalk in the sharp upfold which forms both the island's eastwest backbone and southern expanse of wide green downs, and its most famous landmark, the bright white stacks of the Needles. On the north coast, the AONB protects the low clay cliffs, salt-marsh and mud-flats of the Hamstead Heritage Coast. In the south, the complex landscapes bounded by the Tennyson Heritage Coast range from sandy bays to high unstable*

<sup>2</sup> With the exception of the election of a (centrist) Liberal Democrat in 1997-2001. Prior to 1987, the constituency oscillated between returning Conservative and Liberal candidates.

*sandstone and chalk cliffs, cut by wooded 'chines'. This complexity gives rise to chalk downland, arable farmland, wooded dairy pasture, small areas of heathland and hay meadows, sea cliffs and creeks... The AONB landscape is of considerable scientific and ecological importance and includes exceptional flora-rich chalk grasslands, the north coast's major estuarial habitats and the geologically notable southern cliffs and landslips. (Landscapes for Life, n.d.)*

Unsurprisingly, given those attractions, the quality of the natural environment is the second most valued aspect in tourist destination attribute surveys, second only to the warmth of welcome perceived by visitors (Visit Britain, 2018).

The island's predominant (although by no means exclusive) political orientation and its economic focus on heritage products are reflected in aspects of internal identity perception. Research conducted on the island by Grydehøj and Hayward in 2010 revealed a common feeling that the one of the main appeals of the island was that it was like England used to be at an earlier time, when life was (supposedly) less frenetic, and when reported crime levels were lower. As the researchers stated:

*Although the time by which the IOW is said to lag behind the British mainland is usually given as 20 or 30 years, our contributors are not expressing nostalgia for the early 1990s or the early 1980s. Rather, they are harkening back to an earlier age of manorial agriculture as well as the timeless Victoriana of the British seaside holiday culture – i.e., the “staged authenticity”... of (supposedly) “quintessential Englishness”, performed for tourists and increasingly adopted and internalized by islanders over the past century.... In fact, there is a feeling that the island is England par excellence. Just as “the island is 20 or 30 years behind the mainland” has become a descriptive cliché, there is also a “the island is England in microcosm” cliché. (Grydehøj and Hayward, 2011. p. 193)*

Indeed, it is notable with regard to the above that while the Green Party's increased local support over the last two decades<sup>3</sup> can be seen to mark a significant shift in the political landscape, its campaigning has been fundamentally in tune with the traditional IOW values discussed above by stressing the island's rural environments and tranquility as core local assets (see, for example, IOW Green Party, 2021).

## II. Wet Leg's musical context and oeuvre

Singer-guitarists Hester Chambers and Rhian Teasdale met while studying at the IOW's independent music college Platform One, located in Newport, in the early 2010s. While they stayed friends after leaving, they mainly performed separately for several years, Teasdale often appearing as a solo keyboard and vocal performer and Chambers working with various musicians, including a band entitled Red Squirrel in 2012-2013.<sup>4</sup> Teasdale was also involved with island band the Plastic Mermaids in 2016-2017 (and intermittently since). The duo formed Wet Leg in 2019 and signed to the well-established and highly successful UK indie

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<sup>3</sup> The Greens gained 1.3% of the vote and 7<sup>th</sup> place in its first outing in the 2010 general elections but rose to 3<sup>rd</sup> place in the 2015, 2017 and 2019 elections (with 13.4%, 17.3% and 15.2% respectively).

<sup>4</sup> The latter's output is of particular interest for the current article as the band produced five music videos that featured imagery of island coast-scapes (*Face like thunder*, *Dark words*, *Headlights and campfires*, *Above mountains below seas* and *Fish boy*) that prefigured Wet Leg's use of similar imagery.

(independent) music label Domino, best known for developing The Arctic Monkeys.<sup>5</sup> The band's initial career phase coincided with the global COVID-19 outbreak and the imposition of restrictions on socialisation and movement in the UK between early 2020 and mid-late 2021. As a result, it had to rely on music videos, airplay and media coverage to promote its recorded material in the absence of live performance opportunities.

The duo's debut single, 'Chaise longue,' released in June 2021, became an Internet hit (with its accompanying music video having received 9.7 million views to date), creating interest in their eponymous debut album, released in April 2022. The album received critical acclaim for its inventive spin on the late 1990s' and early 2000s' indie rock canon and for its distinct, idiosyncratic songs.<sup>6</sup> The album achieved chart success in the UK, Western Europe, Australia and New Zealand and awards recognition followed. The band were nominated for the 2022 UK Mercury Prize and were successful in the 2023 Grammys (winning Best Alternative Music Album and Best Alternative Music Performance) and in the 2023 BRIT Awards (winning Best New Artist and Group of the Year). The endorsement of celebrity performer Harry Styles further boosted the band's profile, with the singer covering their song 'Wet dream' for a BBC Live Lounge session in May 2022 and with the duo, augmented by three further IOW musicians (guitarist and synthesiser player Josh Mobaraki, bassist Ellis Durand and drummer Henry Holmes), being selected as support act for Styles on a series of European, US and Australian gigs in late 2022 and early 2023.

Wet Leg's musical style can be characterised as post-punk, featuring short duration tracks, moderately fast tempos (mostly 130-160bpm) and relatively simple chord progressions and riffs. The band's arrangements feature sharp textural changes between sections, for example moving from bass, drum and vocal verses directly into louder guitar driven choruses. This device draws on common practice from grunge era bands as well as electronic dance music tracks that feature distinct shifts in regular 4, 8 or 16 bar sections. The guitar parts are prominent, with a mix of chordal strumming, short repeating riffs and looping melodic motifs that add counter melodies to the main vocal lines, which are often semi-spoken.<sup>7</sup> Reference points for the guitar work and overall sound include bands such as the B-52s, the Au Pairs and the Pixies (particularly the melodic and riff based parts) and Teasdale has also cited subsequent bands The Black Keys, The Strokes, Kings of Leon and Black Rebel Motorcycle Club as conscious influences (Brayden, 2022). Direct reference points include 'Chaise longue' having the same chord pattern, similar tempo and overall rhythmic groove as the Modern Lovers' 1972 track 'Roadrunner' (which in turn shares a very similar chord pattern to the 1968 Velvet Underground song 'Sister Ray'). 'I don't wanna go out' also features a guitar riff closely similar to David Bowie's 'The man who sold the world' (1970). The latter two reference points highlight the band's accomplished blending of art rock sensibilities with an energetic, post-punk live band sound. These aspects are enhanced by Dan Carey's production of the majority of the album. Known for his production work with contemporary Irish post-punk band Fontaines DC and spoken word performer Kate Tempest, the verse sections of songs are relatively uncluttered while the production of the heavier instrumental sections of tracks such as 'Being in love' and 'Oh no' is thickly layered. Complementing this, Josh Mobaraki's production of 'Angelica' features rich and hazy guitar textures reminiscent of those featured on My Bloody Valentine's *Loveless* album (1991).

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<sup>5</sup> See *Music Business Weekly* (2022) for discussion of the label and its commercial operation.

<sup>6</sup> See Werthman (2022) and von Pipp (2022) for examples.

<sup>7</sup> See Reynolds (2022) for discussion of Wet Leg and "speech song" style in UK rock music.

The post-punk aspect flows through to the band's gender politics (Kearney, 1997). Despite the seemingly demure nature of Chambers' and Teasdale's cottagecore attire in contrast to some Riot Grrrl fashion styles (Havlin, 2016), the duo's public statements, including their critiques of music industry sexism (see Hiatt, 2022), identify them as openly feminist performers.<sup>8</sup> Appropriately in this regard, their song lyrics criticise assumptions of gender roles and related male behaviour, address aspects of female sexuality and friendships, use profanities and – memorably – include a recording of Teasdale giving her “longest and loudest scream” of frustration in the recorded version of ‘Ur Mum.’ Wet Leg's breakthrough track, ‘Chaise longue’ merits particular analysis for both its lyrical idiosyncrasy and the musical architecture that supports it. Based on a repeating I-IV chord progression in the key of G with a fast (160bpm) 4/4 rock beat, the arrangement alternates between a thin bass and drum texture in the verses, over which Teasdale declaims the song's lyrics in a cool, clearly enunciated, semi-spoken style. The choruses repeat the song's title and feature a blues-flavoured guitar riff (utilising the flattened and natural 3<sup>rd</sup> and flattened 7<sup>th</sup> of the scale), a distorted guitar texture and multiple vocal parts. The song's lyrics are notably fractured. The song commences with a simple first verse that calls out to the singer's parents (similarly to the opening lines of the Talking Heads' 1977 track ‘Pulled up’), identifying that the vocal protagonist has graduated from university. Verse 2 shifts the song's address, opening with a quotation from the film *Mean girls* (Mark Waters, 2004) “Is your muffin buttered? / Would you like us to assign someone to butter your muffin?” followed by a simple repeated call and response between Teasdale (“Excuse me?”) and Chambers (“What?”) before the chaise longue motif enters the lyrics with reference to a partially unclad individual sitting on a chaise longue who the singer suggests should be “horizontal now.” The sexually connotation of this comment is emphasised by the intensity of the guitar parts that lead into the assertive chorus with its repetition of the term chaise longue (eight times). The third verse echoes the structure of the first, ending on a similarly suggestive note that kicks off the second chorus, which is repeated until the song's conclusion, reiterating the title 32 times in what becomes something of a nonsense mantra that reflects the composition's origin in an extended jam<sup>9</sup>. While Teasdale has described the band's songs as marked by a sense of “linguistic silliness” and “humour” (Brayden, 2022) they might also be described as ‘droll’ in the sense of being dryly whimsical – as in the drolls performed by mid 17<sup>th</sup> century English itinerant players (short, comic sketches that reworked elements from previous texts (Frances, 1932; Halliwell, 2009).

The band's musical influences and its incorporation of references to US cinema in song lyrics, in motifs in music videos and in press interviews about the band's cultural influences (e.g. Bromwich, 2020) point to the manner in which the band can be understood as both a product of the specific (and essentially conservative) island context from which it emerged and the highly international nature of global media in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Arguably, it is the combination of the two that produced the band's distinct cultural personality and, thereby, its expression of an IOW identity in a musical package that has appealed to international music consumers and critics.

### III. Place, place mythology and popular music

Popular music reflects place and manifests place mythology in various ways. These include

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<sup>8</sup> See, particularly, their comments in Hiatt (2022) and Wolf's reading of the band's work (2022).

<sup>9</sup> As Teasdale has detailed, when she visited the IOW at Christmas 2018 Chambers would “make up the *chaise longue* for me... make it into a bed... We would stay up really late at night and bake cookies, put tiny gems onto our guitar pedals, have really silly midnight jams... and ‘Chaise longue’ was just the result of that, kind of off-the-cuff and improvised” (ORM, 2022).

the identification and promotion of geographically localised music scenes (e.g. San Francisco in the 1960s or Manchester in the late 1980s and early 1990s) and/or the close association of individual acts with places and/or the music scenes they have been influential in creating (such as Bruce Springsteen and Asbury Park/New Jersey from the 1970s to present). Particular songs originated within these scenes can both resonate with local audiences as expressive of place and can also – to varying degrees – appear as exotic to broader audiences, dependent on their degree of removal from the locales in question. Differences in insider/outsider perception can be significant here. The Beatles' 1967 single 'Strawberry Fields forever', for instance, may primarily evoke a mythical psychedelic England for non-local audiences (with the song's designated place being read as a fantasy location) whereas Liverpoolians may be aware of the song's reference to a local Victorian mansion that operated as a Salvation Army children's home (facilitating a more complex reading of the song). There is also an interleaved tendency whereby local place mythology and exoticism blur to produce what has been termed 'domestic exoticism.' Toru Mitsui (1998) coined the term when discussing an aspect of 1980s' and 1990s' Japanese popular music wherein the music and cultural associations of a particular region (in this case Okinawa, in the nation's south) became popularised by main island artists (such as, most notably, The Boom), leading to a vogue in styles associated with the southern island and related tourism. In an increasingly crowded popular music marketplace, a relatively unusual regional identification and/or association with an emerging local scene can also help gain media attention, as in the case of Wet Leg.

Wet Leg's formation in the Isle of Wight by two resident performers (Chambers being born there and Teasdale moving there from the northwest of England at the age of eight) has been cited multiple times in media coverage. This does not so much reflect any notable pedigree for popular musicians on the island (late 20th century funk-rock band Level 42 being the only other well-known act to emanate from there), as the *lack* of a recognisable music scene. As Teasdale has lamented, "We didn't have a music venue on the Isle of Wight growing up. But they're so important. They provide a community for people" (Holden, 2021). Indeed, in addition to the lack of an internal music scene, the island exists outside the circuit for established national and international touring bands in the UK, meaning that people have to take the ferry and connecting train or coach services to reach gigs in Southampton or Plymouth or to go further on to London. These factors are closely – if paradoxically – associated with the island's most enduring association with popular music, to date, the (original) IOW Festivals held between 1968-1970. The event was first held on a farm site at Newport, attracting around 7,000 attendees. An estimated 80,000 attended the 1969 festival (headlined by Bob Dylan) and between 150,000-200,000 attended in 1970 (headlined by Jimi Hendrix, The Who and The Doors). Perceptions of the visitors' 'anarchic' behaviour, related litter and pollution issues and a more pervasive sense of 'invasion' severely rattled the island's conservative mainstream and led the IOW MP, Mark Woodnut, to move a private member's bill in the UK Parliament in 1971, proposing that powers of veto over such events be given to the IOW Council.<sup>10</sup> Speaking in support of his Bill, he described the 1969 and 1970 festivals as marked by "indescribable squalor and filth" and argued that they caused "chaos" in "a small community of 5,000 people out in West Wight" (Hansard, 1971).<sup>11</sup> The *Isle*

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<sup>10</sup> It is a distinct possibility that the upheavals also contributed to the minor traction that the secessionist Vectis National Party gained in 1967-74, premised on a combination of nostalgia for "quintessential Englishness" and a desire for a special status for the island that would allow it to exercise more control over its borders (see Grydehøj and Hayward, 2011, pp.183-187). Indeed, the Party's 1970 manifesto specifically expressed its opposition to "large scale 'pop' festivals."

<sup>11</sup> His original bill also sought to give the Council a range of draconian powers (including prohibiting camping on the island, restricting transport access to it, charging landing fees and restricting wharf use.

of *Wight County Act 1971* was approved by Parliament and imposed a highly restrictive regime with clauses II5 [1-13] requiring advance notice of application to Council for large outdoor events and prescribed financial penalties for transgressors and (in an extension of its original focus) also added provisions that any premises that wished to operate between midnight and 5am was required to receive specific approval before opening.<sup>12</sup> The net effect of the Act, and of the Council's active application of it, was to depress live music performance on the island for the next three decades.<sup>13</sup>

The IOW festival was revived in more modest form in 2002, within the terms of the Act, and with a more sympathetic council. A second summer event, Bestival, commenced in 2004 and ran until 2017 when it relocated to Lulworth in Dorset. Following IOW Council research that revealed that nine million pounds had been injected into the island economy by the 2002-2007 IOW festivals (IOW Directorate of Legal and Democratic Services [DLDS], 2008), the Council investigated possible liberalisations (or a repeal) of the Act in a policy commission 'blue paper' (DLDS, 2008). The Council responded by formulating and publishing a 'Guidance' document in August 2008. The cover image of this showed a happy and orderly crowd at the 2008 Bestival and item 1.1 of the document stated that the Council "recognises and supports the positive impacts of well managed festivals and events upon the cultural, social and economic development of the Island." Overall the document offered clear application guidelines and a fast-track application option, further softening the restrictive regime instigated in 1971. The resurgent festivals appear to have been appreciated by island youth and, indeed, Chambers has identified that attendance at Bestival and at the IOW Festival in the 2010s/early 2020s was significant for introducing the duo to a range of established acts (ABC, 2023). But despite the occasional succour and inspiration offered by these festivals, Chambers has described the island as like "one big sleepy town" (Diffus, 2020) and Teasdale has identified the chief difference between the mainland and the island as the "slower pace of life" on the latter, quipping that "stepping off the ferry onto the island is like stepping off a traveller" (Holden, 2021).

Media surprise at the emergence of an accomplished popular band from the island reflects the dominant British perception of the IOW as a rural, conservative, southern English 'backwater' with a high proportion of older residents and holiday makers (as famously noted in Paul McCartney's composition 'When I'm 64' [released in 1967], in which its ageing vocal protagonist envisages having to "scrimp and save" for two weeks holiday in a cottage on the IOW once he has retired).

#### IV. Cottagecore aesthetics and the IOW landscape in Wet Leg's videos

It is notable that despite the strong emphasis on the IOW in the band's publicity, their song lyrics do not include references to specific aspects of the island in terms of places, events, institutions etc. Local themes have primarily appeared in the band's music videos, mostly produced during COVID lockdown, when it was based on the IOW for an extended duration.

The band's debut video, *Chaise longue*, directed by Teasdale,<sup>14</sup> established a distinct

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<sup>12</sup> NB a wide number of what were identified as "bona fide" establishments – such as licensed clubs, sports clubs, religious organisations etc. were excluded from this - Clause 8(1).

<sup>13</sup> Despite minor modifications to the Act in 1980, 1986 and 1990.

<sup>14</sup> Who had previously worked as wardrobe assistant on music videos such as Ed Sheeran's *Bad habits* (2021) and a number of television adverts.

aesthetic for the band, one that both complemented the aforementioned pastoral nostalgia often associated with IOW culture and adopted styles from the contemporary *cottagecore* aesthetic. While complex, the latter can be characterised as a romanticised approach to rural living centred on the cottage as an idealised, small-scale dwelling associated with traditional crafts. It has been particularly evident in visual media via Tumblr (where its aficionados appear to have initially developed it in the late 2010s), Instagram, and, more recently, in TikTok videos. The majority of cottagecore aficionados (or, at least, those represented in social media) are young women. One important component of cottagecore is fashion, with long dresses and skirts, loose-layered ensembles, wide brimmed hats and simple accessories being prominent. Colours tend to be muted, such as olive-green, pale pink, beige, ochre etc. Hairstyles are natural and long hair is frequent. These styles project a comfortable rural context in which women appear as confident and self-sufficient rather than overly glamourised or sexualised. While cottagecore is a recent phenomenon that has been tied to the enforced domestic focus of the peak COVID period (Bowman, 2020); it has developed two distinct variants since its inception. The first is a Western European form premised on traditional pastoral lifestyles. Its British version has also been dubbed *Cotswold-core* (Lorenz, in Wicks, 2021), in reference to the comfortable rural existence and pastoral landscape associated with the eponymous uplands of South-Western England. The second is a North American variant described as either *prairie cottagecore* or, more simply, *prairiecore*, in which traditional rural clothing styles, prairie architecture, simpler (Shaker-like) furniture and sweeping plains and dense woodlands are prominent.

While there is no distinct cottagecore style of music, tracks deemed complementary to it generally feature acoustic or semi-acoustic instrumentation, gentle dynamics, soft vocal delivery and pastoral-themed and/or emotionally sensitive lyrics.<sup>15</sup> In terms of the commercial mainstream, Taylor Swift's album *Folklore* and her visual styling in 2019-2020 was also associated with the aesthetic (Munzenrieder, 2020). As a number of critics and researchers have observed, the cottagecore movement is philosophically and ideologically complex (Jonsson, 2022; Mason 2022). It can support nostalgic, rural imagery (resembling that activated by Nazi propagandists in the 1930s) but can also suggest a retreat from externalised ideologies in favour of an introverted, peaceful and harmonious self-sufficiency. Diverse groups have also engaged with it, for instance, a queer cottagecore culture has emerged that has been particularly evident on TikTok (Ryan and Tileva, 2022) and a fledgling community of Black women have inserted themselves into established iconographies and contexts, typified by the Cottagecore Black Folks Instagram Page.

Wet Leg's debut video avoided the option of visually illustrating the song's lyrics (with chaises longue notably absent from the screen) and, instead, develops a quirky identity for the band by coalescing various filaments of cottagecore imagery around a rural IOW house and surrounding fields and laneways in which the singers lip-synch to the song. The most obvious markers of the cottagecore aesthetic are Chambers' and Teasdale's hair and dress styles, the traditional rocking horse and rocking chair that appear onscreen with them, and the exterior scenes. The house – owned by Chambers' mother – merits particular comment as it is a significant element within the video. It both has its own presence and its covered deck effectively provides a proscenium arch for duo to perform under (Figure 2). The dwelling in question is Mole Hill House, a medium size dwelling on a wooded rural block on the western edge of the IOW's Hamstead Heritage Coast. While the cottagecore aesthetic does not prescribe particular architectural styles for the rural homes it is often applied to, it

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<sup>15</sup> For instance, Spotify's 'Cottagecore Inspired' playlist includes two tracks by Gabrielle Aplin ('Home' and 'Please don't say you love me'), the Oh Hellos' 'Hello my old heart' and Maisie Peters' 'Places we were made.'



does have broad principles, with Longobucco (2022) asserting that:

*The cottagecore vibe is perhaps one of the best examples of the successful intersection between design and function. The look is void of unusable corners or too-precious finishes, instead opting for a utilitarian ethos...*

Mole Hill House sits somewhat awkwardly with regard to that characterisation. The central part of the dwelling is a square, Edwardian-era, brick house that has been expanded with a curved, first floor frontal extension flanked by small, porthole-like windows that give the house-front an 'owlish' aspect. Unlike the typical English rural house, but similar to some North American prairie homestead designs, the dwelling also has a wraparound covered deck. The house thereby appears quirky rather than neo-traditional. Indeed, in combination with Teasdale's sardonic delivery of the song's lyrics, the music video is unsettling, in the manner of Andrew Wyeth paintings such as 'Christina's world' (1948) and is also evocative of a number of folk horror films, such as M. Night Shyamalan's *The Village* (2004). In these regards, the setting and the video shot there succeed in delivering on Teasdale's intention to "create a world around our band... a weird prairie cottagecore world" (Orm, 2022), an aspect that was carried through into the band's subsequent music video, *Wet dream* and the duo's faux documentary production *Searching for Mop Man* (2022).



Figure 2 – Exterior of Mole Hill House with Teasdale and Chambers, still from the *Chaise longue* video (2022).

The *Wet dream* video opens with the duo emerging from the house clad in similar cottagecore outfits to the *Chaise longue* video. One significant difference is that the pair both sport inflated lobster claws on their hands. The video features Teasdale miming the song's lyrics in various rural locales accompanied by other band members pillow fighting, eating at a table and reclining in the boot of a car and with Chambers and Teasdale waving their claw hands around (Figures 3-4). The lobster claw motif and the meal-table scene (reminiscent of the Mad Hatter's tea party in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*) give the video a softly surreal feel akin to that of early-mid 1980s MTV videos (such as Blondie's *Island of lost souls* [1982]) while the outdoor scenes invoke comparison to Robin Hardy's British film *The Wicker Man* (1973) or John Philbin's US feature *Children of the corn*. (1984) Similarly, the lobster motif recalls the scenario of Georgios Lanthimos's *The Lobster* (2015), (whose lead character turns into a lobster

when he cannot find a new romantic partner).<sup>16</sup> The overall impression is of light-hearted absurdity that only obliquely converges with the lyrics' repudiation of a former lover's right to incorporate thoughts about the singer into his erotic dreams in scenes showing the male band members asleep (in a large bed or in a car boot).



Figures 3 & 4 – frame-grabs from the *Wet Dream* video.

Wet Leg expanded their “world” beyond the cottage and field setting in subsequent videos. Two, self-directed ones – *Oh no* and *Angelica* (both 2022) – were shot in iconic IOW coastal locations; another was set and shot in a small IOW country town (*Ur mum* [2022]) and one (*Too late now*) took them off island, being shot in Croydon (South London).<sup>17</sup> While similar in being filmed on or adjacent to iconic IOW coastal structures (and thereby enmeshing local place mythology in the band's oeuvre), *Angelica* and *Oh no* differ markedly in tone and theme. The former was shot on the picturesque downs around St Catherine's Lighthouse,

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<sup>16</sup> While Teasdale has not acknowledged any specific reference to the film (von Pipp, 2022), it is notable that in the meal scene she can be seen miming the phrase “I'm turning into a fucking lobster”.

<sup>17</sup> The video, directed by Fred Rowsin, features the band dressed in dressing gowns shuffling through a cold, urban neighbourhood like puzzled aliens before transitioning to rural settings. Teasdale and Chambers then appear in a large pink bubble bath on a hill before disappearing off into the sky.

near Ventnor, on the southern tip of the island. For the song about the complications of female friendship, the band dispensed with narrative motifs and pseudo-surrealism in favour of a simple video featuring Teasdale and Chambers dancing, play-fighting and hugging in the sunshine, enjoying the bucolic coastal landscape (Figure 5). By contrast, the *Oh no* video expands the theme of the song lyrics, about smart phone addiction, through a striking juxtaposition of location footage and visual overlay. The video was shot on a grey and blustery day on the lower platform of the Needles chairlift at Alum Bay, an imposing concrete and metal structure on the western tip of the island, upon which Teasdale and Chambers dance in thick rope suits, giving them unsettling, yeti-like appearances (Figure 6) and in which Teasdale mimes the lyrics (which are also displayed at the bottom of the screen in karaoke mode). These aspects are striking enough – the bleak, industrial functionality of the lift station accompanied by fantasy/folkloric figures – but the image is further complicated by the overlay of comments received on the band's social media feeds that variously praise, critique and/or express disinterest in the group (Figure 7). The combination of the highly local and the global media messaging creates a rich representation of an island band thrust into a global media space.



Figure 5 – frame-grab from *Angelica* video.



Figure 6 – frame-grab from *Oh no* (with Chambers appearing yeti-like).



Figure 7 – frame-grab of Teasdale from *Oh no*.

The band's most recent IOW themed video (to date) – *Ur mum* – shifted focus to small town youth, boredom and relationships. The video opens with an aerial shot of a small (unidentified) town accompanied by the caption 'Somewhere in the Land of Leg' (Figure 8) and goes on to show an interaction between Teasdale, in role as a diffident, young shop assistant, and an arrogant young male who invites her to see his band perform at the county hall, only to find Wet Leg onstage when he arrives. Directed by Lava La Rue, the video contains numerous allusions to the lyrics of the song and of other songs by the band and has been explained by its director as being:

*about bringing the viewer into the Wet Leg world... Artistically it shows where the aesthetic of American indie films like Napoleon Dynamite fit perfectly in the scape of rural British settings – this concept first came to me when the band*

took me to IOW for the first time – I saw the connection and it all clicked into place. (AP, 2022)



Figure 7 – Opening caption from *Ur mum* video (2002).

In addition to the music videos, Chambers and Teasdale consolidated their blend of soft surrealism and unsettling rural mystique with *Searching for Mop Man*, a short, spoof-documentary mini-series (produced in association with Spotify) chronicling their search for a faux folkloric figure, known as the 'Mop Man.' The series<sup>18</sup> commences with the duo in a bar on Sandown Pier deciding to abandon their musical career in order to search for the titular character. Like their two first music videos, the mini-series is also shot substantially in and around the Mill Hill House. Featuring fake interviews with a number of the band's friends about their supposed acquaintance with the Mop Man in his youth, the sequences also identify the duo's growing obsession with mops. In one scene that anticipates aspects of the BRIT Awards performance discussed further below, they are shown on the deck of the Mill Hill House, facing each other and tapping mops together in a short, Morris dance like sequence. The duo goes on to visit a local Mop Man obsessive, who has recorded brief video sequences showing a character wearing the same mop outfit that the duo wore in the *Oh no* video (Figure 8). In one notable comparison, an 'interviewee' identifies that mop man is like Swamp Thing and the Abominable Snowman, except for the fact that he cleans up around him... Blurring the band's actual career and their fiction, one sequence purports to show an interview with the original director of the *Oh no* video (an individual identified as 'Jack Beret') in which he reveals that his grand vision was to represent a band on the symbolic precipice of their career before the duo stepped in at the last moment and inserted sequences of them "prancing around as mops." The duo is then shown unsuccessfully searching for a "mop nest" in woods at night (evoking *The Blair Witch Project* [1999]) before heading to a beach and deciding to abandon their quest (with the Mop Man, unbeknownst to them, lurking in the background). In addition to satirising up their own creative output, the video introduces an absurd quasi-folkloric figure who joins the duo's fictional island drolls.

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<sup>18</sup> Now available in a single ten minute compendium version on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=swiaqiSLRco>

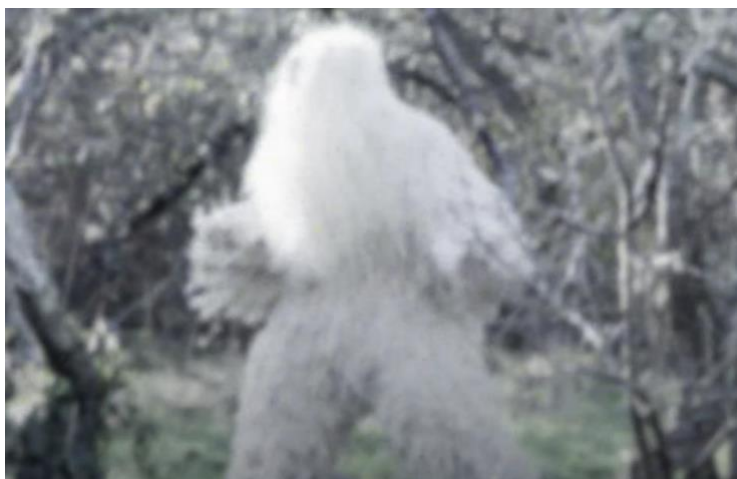


Figure 8 – Frame-grab of the Mop Man from *Searching for Mop Man* (2022).

## V. Into the Vernacular

One way in which *Chaise longue*'s international breakthrough has been acknowledged is through a variety of parody videos produced by other artists, six of which have been uploaded to YouTube (to date). Parody music videos have been present since the 1980s and have been the subject of both popular media attention (e.g. AP, 2017; Campbell, 2020) and critical analysis for their modes of address (e.g. Curry, 1990), copyright implications (Erickson, Kretschmer & Mendis, 2013/2014; Erikson & Kretschmer, 2018), production motivations and aesthetic outcomes (e.g. Edgar, 2018) and the use of individual videos for publicising health matters or socio-political issues (e.g. Austen, Beadle & Aquino et al., 2017; Araüna, Tortajada & Figueras-Maz, 2020). Parody videos usually play off the recognisability of a previously circulated music video to produce sonically and/or visually modified versions for satirical, critical and/or humorous purposes. While many of these are individually produced responses to particular videos, such as the various parodies of Robin Thicke's 2013 *Blurred Lines*<sup>19</sup>, others have been produced by professional parodists, most notably 'Weird Al' Yankovic, who first came to prominence with his Michael Jackson parody *Eat it* in 1984.

*Chaise longue* parodies range from Patrick Fitzgerald's *Wet Boebert*, which retains the visual and music track from the original video but substitutes the lyrics with a critique of the under-educated, Q-Anon sympathising, US senator Lauren Boebert, to more inventive reworkings such as Jon Swanstrom's *Trone Noir* (i.e. 'black throne'), credited to 'Moist Limb'. *Trone Noir* features a reworked music track with a more dissonant distorted guitar overlaid in the chorus sections of the song. The video uses chromakey imagery to overlay the original video track to deliver a horror style music video (reminiscent of Rob Zombie music videos such as *Superbeast* [1999]) in which Teasdale is substituted by a male character with garish face make-up and Chambers is replaced by a scary figure whose face is covered by hair and wears a basket over her head. By contrast, Harrie Hayes' *Cat Mom*, works within the mildly surrealist parameters of the band's video work by substituting the lyrics of the original audio track with a narrative about cat protection and providing a new visual track of Hayes

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<sup>19</sup> Which can be accessed through You Tube's search function under 'Blurred Lines parody'.

miming the revised lyrics (with a carp superimposed on her head), intercut with shots of cats. By contrast, the Twangster Family's *Off the naughty list* features a quirky American backwoods house as the setting for a Christmas-themed song.

Two video parodies made by amateur female performers from the IOW are particularly pertinent for the focus of this article. The most straightforward is Monkton Arts' playful song about their café mimed by its workers in situ. As its YouTube note declares: "a change of words to the wonderful Wet legs, chaise longue... we are on the Isle of Wight, they are from the Isle of Wight so why not." By contrast, *Screening saves lives*, a video featuring two female performers from Cowes – Lou Waldegrave and Emma Norton – emphasises the importance of regular cancer tests by relating their own experiences in new lyrics set to the original music track.<sup>20</sup> The video features the two miming in floppy hats, dresses and bright socks in a back yard and a playground and approximating Teasdale's and Chambers' dance moves from the original video during the central instrumental break. The video succeeded in gaining public attention both on the island (Dyer, 2023) and nationally, being reported on by the BBC (2023). As Waldegrave has commented:

*we both absolutely love Wet Leg. I think they resonate so strongly with women of all ages, everywhere, because they are living proof that the extraordinary is possible! They have always retained their modest, unassuming demeanours, and I think perhaps Islanders hold them so close to their hearts because they have never pretended to be anything else other than what they are, and remain very true to their roots. They have shone a spotlight on this Island and the pride that many local people have for them is now incredible. (p.c. March 28, 2023).*

As the comments indicate, there is a sense of community affinity with the band that has encouraged local appropriation of the song/video as part of modern IOW culture. These engagements suggest that the *Chaise longue* video operates as a 21st century equivalent of a folk *song* in the IOW in being a text commonly known in a community that is subject to revision and/or parody as part of shared cultural experience.

In terms of their immersion in local culture, the duo has also notably played with elements of insider/outside knowledge about the island. In a Twitter post on April 14 2022, for instance, the band opened with an ambiguous phrase: "Good deey ol' wettie, ol' pal." But while the archaic spellings of "deey" (day) and "ol'" (old) suggest IOW dialect, the central term "wettie" is actually a neologism for Wet Leg aficionados. Similarly, in an interview with the German video music magazine *Diffus*, Teasdale stated that 'wet leg' was an alternative IOW term for "overners" (meaning migrants from the mainland), since they "had to get a leg wet to get over the sea." Chambers' facial expression while her colleague made this statement suggested a degree of amusement at the explanation. The band, more convincingly, have identified that the name arose from experimenting with different emojis, with the 'wet+leg' combination particularly appealing to them (*On the Wight*, 2021)<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> Currently available at <https://www.facebook.com/iwcponline/videos/1204654586840940>

<sup>21</sup> *On the Wight's* lack of familiarity with the (supposedly) slang IOW term suggests that the emoji explanation is the correct one. It should also be noted that the term 'wet leg' is not listed in W.H. Long's extensive 1886 volume *Isle of Wight Dialect, and of provincialisms used in the island; with illustrative anecdotes and tales*.

## V. Morrising the Brits

When Wet Leg were invited to perform 'Chaise longue' at the 2023 BRIT Awards (henceforth BRITs) event they retained some motifs from the video but departed significantly by having the song accompanied by a Morris Dance troupe performing a specially choreographed routine. This was a first for the BRITs and was also relatively unusual in British popular music in general.<sup>22</sup> Morris dancing is a traditional English form that involves small troupes of dancers patterning figures by means of steps, hops and leaps, often wielding handkerchiefs, sticks or swords and wearing leg bells. There is a well-established tradition of Morris performance on the IOW (documented as dating back to 1595) that has enjoyed a local revival since the 1980s (in line with a similar national trend) with a number of troupes performing regularly on the island in recent decades (*Folk on Wight*, 2020: 3-5).

Morris dancing and its late 20th century revival has been regarded as culturally problematic for celebrating a form of traditional (i.e. white) Englishness at the time of an increasingly multicultural society and for the (once common but now declining) practice of using 'blackface' in some contexts (Forster, 2020). It has been derided as inauthentic, irrelevant and 'uncool' at the same time has been embraced and developed in a number of non-traditional and more inclusive ways. As Spracklen and Henderson (2013: 235) have identified:

*far-right political parties such as the British Nationalist Party (BNP) have attempted to co-opt morris dancing and English folk music as an authentic white English tradition that needs to be protected and celebrated... For English nationalists, morris dancing is part of a narrowly defined Englishness that promotes whiteness and racialization under a loosely defined banner of English ethnicity... and the English become a folk to be preserved from the evils of modernity such as globalization and multiculturalism.*

By contrast, a number of troupes have vocally opposed BNP co-option (see, for instance, Blackthorn Border Morris, n.d) and several have been more inclusive and have included performers of Afro-Caribbean and Asian ancestry.<sup>23</sup> The Boss Morris troupe that appeared on-stage with Wet Leg is distinct from more orthodox troupes by virtue of being an all-female, experimental ensemble based in Stroud (in the Cotswolds) led by Alex Merry, who has summarised that:

*We're a group of female creatives who share an artistic and progressive vision of Morris dancing... We work hard and take joy in both learning and sharing traditional Cotswold dances, and we also choreograph our own dances inspired by modern music and electronic tracks.* (Wilks, 2023).

Along with unusual, highly stylised costumes and face make-up, they also regularly include figures dressed as a stylised owl, a minotaur and Jack-in-the-Green (a performer dressed as a tree), who also appeared onstage at the BRITs. Merry and the troupe's choreography for the song had to engage with the difficulty of adapting a style usually performed by dancers in close proximity to each other to the long, thin T-shaped stage space they were assigned

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<sup>22</sup> Although the KLF featured Morris dancers in their 1991 *Top of the pops* performance of 'It's grim up north' and Yard Act included Morris dancers in their *Overload* video (2020).

<sup>23</sup> See Asian Culture Vulture (2014), for instance for discussion of the involvement of South-Asian performers in an English Morris ensemble touring India.



to perform on. The BRITs performance featured the band – notably *not* dressed in cottagecore outfits but with the women wearing gowns and the men in more casual attire – performing on a stage liberally adorned with foliage. In a theatrical gesture that linked the dancers and musicians, the number began ambiguously with two individuals, with their heads in shadow, wearing hats and dresses similar to those worn by Chambers and Teasdale in the original video, standing on a catwalk stretching from the (unlit) rear music stage to a frontal area. As the band commenced performing and the stage lights came on to illuminate Chambers and Teasdale on-stage, the figures skipped forward, discarding their hats, and joined a line of white clad dancers wearing garlands and waving handkerchiefs flanked by large animal figures. Midway through the number, the dancers congregated in close proximity on the catwalk to perform more traditional Morris dance steps before returning to a frontal configuration and then returning to the catwalk where they fell to the ground at the song's conclusion (Figures 9-11). The overall spectacle was both striking – in the context of the usually predictable BRITs – and also complex with regard to the lack of obvious association between the disparate elements aside from the band's synthesis of broad elements of English cultural tradition with the specific musical genres employed in the band's work. Indeed, the on-stage combination manifested a mildly surrealist dissonance similar to that evident in their *Wet dream* and *Oh no* videos, creating an emergent folk-fantasy aesthetic.





Figures 9-11 – frame-grabs from performance of ‘Chaise Longue’ at 2023 BRITs event.

Wet Leg’s collaboration with Boss Morris’s was mutually beneficial. In addition to giving the band’s BRITs’ appearance a surprise twist, it gave the troupe’s profile a significant boost and also gave Morris dancing some popular cultural cachet (Adams, 2023; Daly, 2023). While UK indie band Yard Act referred to Morris dancing in the lyrics to their song *The overload* (2022) and featured four male dancers and a costumed accordionist in the video for the song, their reference was far from celebratory. Yard Act’s song lyrics conflate the (politically problematic) punk band Sham 69<sup>24</sup> and Morris dancing as the vestigial remnants of British performance culture in a period of decline. By contrast, Wet Leg’s employment of Boss Morris at the Brits was respectful and celebratory. Indeed, the connection was so well received by the Morris community that it prompted artist and Morris enthusiast Alan

<sup>24</sup> Despite lead singer Jimmy Pursey’s disavowal of right-wing extremism, the band’s gigs were frequently attended by groups of skinheads prone to violence and their appearance at London’s Rainbow Theatre in 1979 was disrupted by National Front affiliated skinheads rushing the stage (see Tranmer, 2018 for a nuanced discussion of extremism in British popular music and Sham 69’s ambivalent position within it).

Courtney to commemorate it in a digital artwork rendered in a style closely similar to renown English artist Banksy's 2021 'Staycation' series.<sup>25</sup> The image neatly evoked the Brits performance via the surreal image of two Boss Morris troupe members dancing on the springy surface of a large chaise longue (Figure 12).



Figure 12 – Digital mural image (Dorset Morri'arty/Alan Courtney, 2023)

## Conclusion

The videos, BRITs awards' ceremony performance and media profile of Wet Leg discussed in this article represent a droll, idiosyncratic expression of IOW identity in the popular cultural sphere. Unlike previous re-imaginings of the IOW – such as novelist Julian Barnes' (1998) fantasy of the whole island being turned into a historical theme park named 'England, England' – Wet Leg's rendition of the locale as a "weird prairie cottagcore world" reflects both Chambers' and Teasdale's lived experiences on the island and their incorporation of international media referents. Despite the modest budgets available to them, during the peak COVID period Wet Leg produced a batch of highly evocative video texts that collectively offered an early 21st century fantasia of 'Isle-of-Wightness'. The deployment of the cottagcore aesthetic in an island heavily permeated by senses of quintessential Englishness provides a subtly modernist inflection to the latter that managed to render it cool by association with the band. As feminist performers, Chambers' and Teasdale's values are also notably distinct from the more cosy mainstream culture that the island presents to tourists and have been perceived as inspirational in that regard (cf Waldegrave, above). These aspects have informed the highly positive local reception the band has received, as exemplified by contributors to the local online magazine *On the Wight*. The magazine has warmly covered each step of Wet Leg's career to date and produced a notable characterisation of the *Oh no* video as having "a look of the future, as seen in 1970, (and adding, "and we love it") (*On the Wight*, 2022). In these regards, the "world" emerging from Wet Leg's music videos, the BRITs' performance and various public statements represents a distillation of the IOW's quintessential Englishness in a manner that is far more contemporary than nostalgic – an indie version of the IOW that circulates in a distinctly contemporary media space.

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<sup>25</sup> In particular the image of a couple dancing on top of a bus shelter accompanied by an accordionist painted in Great Yarmouth (see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A\\_Great\\_British\\_Spraycation](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Great_British_Spraycation)).

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## Wet Leg Discography

- 2021 'Chaise longue' (single) (Domino)
- 2021 'Wet dream' (single) (Domino)
- 2021 'Too late now' (single) (Domino)
- 2021 'Oh no' (single) (Domino)
- 2021 'Angelica' (single) (Domino)
- 2021 'Ur mum' (single) (Domino)
- 2022 *Wet Leg* (album) (Domino)
- 2022 *Apple Music session: Wet Leg* (EP) (Domino)

## Wet Leg Videography\*

- 2021 *Chaise longue*
- 2021 *Wet dream*
- 2021 *Too late now* (Fred Rowson) 2021 *Oh no* (single)
- 2021 *Angelica*
- 2021 *Ur mum* (Lavaland)
- 2022 *Live on the porch* (Joey Julliard)
- 2022. *Searching for Mop Man* (Joey Julliard)

(\*All videos directed by the band unless otherwise identified)