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# 'If you want to know about me and Morrissey, Google it': Ex-Smiths guitarist Johnny Marr talks relationships and reunions



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He's worked with Modest Mouse, the Pet Shop Boys and Beck, to name a few, and recently released his first solo album. So why, wonders Johnny Marr, do people still hark on about The Smiths?

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Around half an hour into my conversation with Johnny Marr, things take a distinctly awkward turn. Up until this point, the hallowed ex-Smiths guitarist-turned-serial collaborator-turned-solo artist has been warm, chatty, full of sunshine and bonhomie. As we are introduced, I mention that we met once before about 10 years ago and Marr – looking sharp in dark jeans, Crombie-style coat, his hair sculpted into the customary Mod cut – does a valiant job of pretending to remember.

We are in Brighton where he is due to play a show. For the first time in months, the sun has come out. As we sit down in the bar at his hotel overlooking the sea, he chats happily about his recent move back to Manchester after five years living in Portland, Oregon; his occasional forays into teaching (in 2007 he was given an honorary degree at Salford University, since when he has

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been a visiting professor) and the joys of good health (this morning the teetotal, vegan Marr went for a six-mile run).

He orders a cup of hot water and then pulls a large, transparent bag of herbal tea from his pocket – "I'm very particular about tea," he smiles – and we both chuckle at how dodgy it looks. Everything is going swimmingly, which I'm pleased about as he's a proper hero of mine (I have never worshipped any band like I worship The Smiths). Soon, I'm pretty sure, he'll be inviting me round to meet the family.

But then I go and throw a spanner in the works, one so heavy that it causes Marr's face to darken and his hands to curl into angry fists. His expression tells me he would like to drag me over the road to Brighton Pier and dropkick me off the end of it. The spanner? That would be Morrissey.

It's no secret that Marr has spent 26 years trying to, if not entirely shrug off, move beyond The Smiths and their immense legacy. Marr was 18 years old when he and Morrissey first formed the band, and 23 when, to the despair of Morrissey and their legions of fans, he called it quits. He has since busied himself with assorted collaborations – initially with The Pretenders, The The and Electronic (with New Order's Bernard Sumner) and latterly with the American indie band Modest Mouse and Yorkshire's The Cribs.

In between times there has been session work with Paul McCartney, Pet Shop Boys, Talking Heads and Beck. He has worked alongside Hans Zimmer on the soundtrack to the movie Inception, for which they were nominated for an Oscar, and has fronted his own band Johnny Marr's Healers. Earlier this year, at the age of 49, he released his first proper solo album, The Messenger, which had critics rhapsodising about his chiming guitars that hark back to the old days of The Smiths, while being merely polite about his singing.



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And yet, as Marr forges determinedly forwards, the clamour surrounding The Smiths has never quietened. If anything, it has got louder. Long-term admirers continue to emerge from the woodwork, the latest being David Cameron who, in choosing "This Charming Man" as one of his Desert Island Discs, joins Russell Brand, Noel Gallagher, JK Rowling and Douglas Coupland among the ever-growing club of celebrity Smiths fans.

Meanwhile, rumours about an imminent Smiths reunion have circulated almost as frequently as books have been written and re-issued albums churned out.

Five years ago it was alleged that Marr and Morrissey were offered \$120m (£76m) to tour the US, which both flatly turned down. More recently, though, there has been a softening in their language on the subject; last year Marr told Rolling Stone, "I don't know about the possibility [of a reunion] but what I do know is that I understand how great it would be to make so many people happy" – prompting further speculation that a tour was on the cards.

So I feel duty-bound to ask the question: will it ever happen?

Marr looks at me stonily. "It's an impossible thing," he says blankly. "It's impossible for that group to re-form. That's it. That's my answer."

Hmmm. I decide to press on. Is he in contact with Morrissey?

The silence continues and Marr stares furiously out of the window. Eventually he asks: "Are people really interested in this?"

Well I am, I say, and I don't think I'm alone, given the 'will-they, won't-they' debates that bubble away online.

"I think journalists are interested," he says. "You're just interested in

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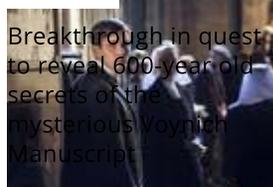
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asking the question, and really you shouldn't be. Because who cares about some emails that we send to each other every few years, that aren't particularly in-depth. I mean, is that interesting for people to read about? I don't think it is really. It's not as interesting as my new songs, and why some songs are called what they are. If you want to know about me and Morrissey, just Google it."

I'm sorry the question has annoyed you, I say, but Google isn't the most reliable source of...

"Listen, I'm not ruffled by this," he interrupts, sounding distinctly ruffled. "The difficulty here is that the answer is very boring. And I don't want to be boring. There have been emails. Just emails. That's it. That's all I can say."

OK, I reply. Perhaps we should move on.

"Yeah, let's do that."

The enduring problem for Marr is that, for the die-hard Smiths fan (and I'm not alone here; there are zillions), the dynamic that existed between him and Morrissey has remained endlessly fascinating. Like McCartney and Lennon, Jagger and Richards, Bacharach and David, they are among popular music's greatest pairings, a duo blessed with a rare alchemy. But then they fell out and Morrissey, aggrieved by Marr's sudden exit, made it clear their friendship was over.

Their only public reunion since The Smiths' split in 1987 has been a High Court appearance when the pair were sued by drummer Mike Joyce over unpaid royalties. Joyce won. Months later in an interview, Morrissey remarked: "The Smiths were a beautiful thing and Johnny left it, and Mike has destroyed it."

Since then, as Morrissey's post-Smiths stock has fluctuated – a situation not improved by recent intemperate pronouncements on



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the 2011 Norwegian terrorist attacks, the Duchess of Cambridge and Ukip – Marr has never been more popular, and has settled with ease into the role of indie elder statesman. This February he was given a 'Godlike Genius' gong by the NME at its annual awards party.

Which, of course, makes this a perfect time to be releasing his solo album. Still in combative mood, Marr wants it to be known that "just because I'm here now fronting my own band doesn't mean that what I've done in the past has been done with anything other than 100 per cent conviction. You ask any member of The The or Electronic what it's like to be in a band with me and they'll tell you it's fucking intense. I don't want anyone to imply that everything I've been doing in the past 25 years since The Smiths has been building up to this, because it hasn't."

Marr moved back to Manchester in 2010 from the United States in order to "write the kind of music I want to write. It's what I've done all my life. I go straight to the place that's going to be best for what I do".

Your wife must be very patient, I say.

"She is," replies Marr. "Neither of us have known any other way. Creativity always comes first."

Marr first met Angie when she was 14 and he 15. In a touching divergence from the usual rock-star narrative of debauchery and divorce, they have been together ever since. "Well I kind of arrived in Angie's life fully-formed," he explains. "I was a guy who was in bands. Tomorrow night I was going to get on a train and go to rehearsal and Saturday night I was going to blag some studio time and she was, like, 'That sounds good, I'll do that too'."

So why did they feel the need to come back to Manchester?

parents after many admitted they wouldn't know what to do

#### VOICES



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"I wanted to get a bit narky," he says.

Really, I say? Given the awkwardness of the last 10 minutes, I wonder if he's joking.

"It's too mellow in Portland," he continues. "As British people, being narky is part of our psyche. I needed to be bugged by traffic wardens and annoyed by newscasters and get a little bit of that attitude into my music. That said, all the songs on the album are commentaries and not complaints. [The song] 'Right Think Right' is a commentary on being a target of market forces and crass commercialism; 'Upstarts' is a jubilant celebration of defiance. None of these new songs are complaints because by nature I'm optimistic, even idealistic, and I think it's in our interest to try and make things better. I've always felt that way, even when I started out."

As a child, music was forever playing in Marr's head, an internal jukebox pumping out Sixties soul music and Seventies glam-rock. "I was wearing invisible headphones on a day-to-day basis, from before I went to school to when I went to bed," he reflects. "It got me through the day. I knew I wanted to make great records, which is something that's never changed. Then people started saying that I played guitar in a way they'd never heard before, I realised I had something distinctive. I understood my function completely."

It was May 1982 when the Wythenshawe-raised Marr – who was born Johnny Maher – famously knocked on 23-year-old Steven Morrissey's door to see if he wanted to work on some songs. The chemistry was instant: while Morrissey was channelling the spirits of Oscar Wilde and Joe Orton, Marr fed off the sounds of Phil Spector, Iggy Pop and Chic. Having initiated the working relationship, Marr continued to be the band's galvanising force.

"In many respects," he says, "I've run all the bands I've been in. A

great front man needs that other person. It's not enough to have a guy with a cute face standing behind a microphone. I see it like the classic romantic relationships with men and women, where the woman lets the man think he's running it. It's a classic matriarchal trait, and that's always been part of my personality."

Marr says the situation hasn't changed much, even now he's the focus of this latest project. "Through age and experience there's a practical aspect to doing it and a responsibility to your band. But I don't have to change who I am to do it. My real apprenticeship started at 14 when I was in bands with much older people, and it was terrifying then. Now I know how it works and, thankfully, there's a lot of love for me. When we play, people are up for a celebratory night. Which is nice."

It must be great to feel such goodwill from fans, though I wonder again what it must be like to be lauded for something you did nearly 30 years ago.

When I interviewed Marr 10 years ago he was sweet and indulgent of my fandom. "I'm the biggest Smiths fan in the world," he said kindly, as I babbled on about hearing "This Charming Man" for the first time. Today, I'd resolved to be more restrained, though clearly for Marr, true restraint now means not dropping the M-bomb.

I ask him if he's ever felt about a band the way people seem to feel about The Smiths. "Of course," he replies, smiling at last. "I felt that way about Patti Smith as a teenager. I love that that can happen about art. I'm a really big fan of David Hockney, and I'm really excited when he does something new. I'm a big fan of Nile Rodgers. I love thinking like a fan.

With The Smiths, I try to take it in the spirit that it's nearly always intended, which is with great affection. But I do feel that the people

who are talking to me – and, to be fair, to Morrissey, too – purely on that basis are probably missing out on some stuff. I think they should take at least one blinker off and listen to a Modest Mouse record."

Marr's children – son Nile and daughter Sonny – are now embarking on musical careers. Their dad is at once proud and alarmed. "When your kids gets involved in the arts – and specifically rock music – you can see a lot of sleeping on couches and dealing with certain, shall we say, problems," he notes. "They've grown up with it and they know it's not easy. They know it's not limousines and expensive clothes; it's getting in a van and driving for five hours to the next gig. I like to think that I've taught them that it's not all about fame and money. It's about being great at something, purely for the sake of being great at it. When I look back at what I've done, that's what makes me feel good."

*The single 'New Town Velocity' (Warner) is out on Monday. Johnny Marr plays at Finsbury Park with The Stone Roses on 8 June, Manchester's Parklife Heaton Park on 9 June and Glastonbury Festival on 29 June*

### **You can't stand me now**

Johnny Marr and Morrissey aren't the only guitarist and frontman pairing to have endured a fractious relationship...

### **Joe Strummer & Mick Jones, The Clash**

At the Clash's commercial peak in 1982 following the release of *Combat Rock*, drummer Topper Headon was sacked for drug use, and the intricate chemistry of punk's premier group disintegrated. Differences in creative directions mounted, and a year later guitarist Jones was dismissed by bandleader Strummer. The pair performed on stage together in 2002 shortly before Strummer died of heart failure.

### **Liam & Noel Gallagher, Oasis**

The Mancunian brothers were the charismatic driving force behind Oasis's massive mid-1990s success, but it was an unsteady partnership marred by endless bouts of fraternal squabbling. The volatile relationship of singer Liam and guitarist (and chief songwriter) Noel came to a head in 2009, minutes before a concert in Paris, when Noel quit the band following yet another row. "I simply could not go on working with Liam a day longer," he said afterwards.

### **Axl Rose & Slash, Guns N' Roses**

One of the more drawn-out arguments in rock rumbled through the 1980s and 1990s between Axl Rose – he of infamous frontman ego – and Guns N' Roses guitarist Slash. The latter left the group in 1996 and the pair have made claim and counterclaim about each other in the press ever since. When the band was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2012, Slash was on hand to receive the honour but Rose was a no-show.

### **Jim & William Reid, The Jesus and Mary Chain**

The noisy Scottish alt-rock group split shortly after a gig in LA in 1998 when guitarist William Reid stormed off stage after brother Jim turned up drunk and unable to sing. Notorious for their turbulent feuds, Jim later said: "After each tour we wanted to kill each other and after the final tour we tried". The brothers resolved their differences and reformed the band in 2007.

### **Pete Doherty & Carl Barat, The Libertines**

The combined songwriting talents of Pete Doherty and Carl Barat, who shared frontman and guitar-playing duties, and their frenzied performances drew a cult following for the bedraggled London band. Doherty's drug problems and spells in prison – once for burgling

Barat's flat – precipitated the end of the partnership. The song "Can't Stand Me Now" detailed the duo's difficult friendship.

*By Adam Barr*

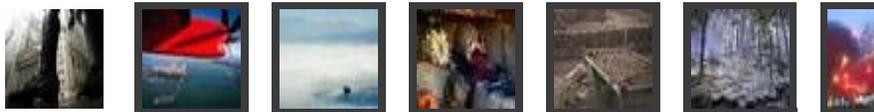
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