

● It's time the tale were told . . . At last—four years after the Smiths split shocked the world—JOHNNY MARR steels himself to tell his side of the hitherto untold story of the band that illuminated '80s Britpop. DANNY KELLY helps him lay the ghost to rest in a no-holds-Marred two-part interview, continuing next week with Johnny's life after The Smiths. All pictures by KEVIN CUMMINS

THE BEST IS

"Journalists who lie/Are stealing their money."
Morrissey, February 1991

"There are more good things to talk about than bad things but, inevitably, people will find the bad things more interesting."
Johnny Marr, April 1991

This is it. The breaking of an awful silence; the removal of a particularly

impenetrable pair of dark glasses; the lancing of a persistent boil. Something like that. *This is it!* Johnny Marr and me and the story of The Smiths.

Let me explain. Marr and I are passing acquaintances, ships that have passed in the rock 'n' roll night. Our respective means of scrounging a crust have lead us into previous contact on a grand total of three occasions. As fate

would have it, though, all three were important junctures in the Johnny Marr Story . . .

The first was in February 1987, when The Smiths had just crashed into the Top Ten with 'Shoplifters Of The World Unite'. The guitarist, notoriously canny about the media, broke the habit of a career and talked to me at Tony Visconti's Soho studio. It was the only major interview he ever gave the national music press.

The second, some months later, was days after the *NME*

shocked the music world with our 'Smiths Split' scoop. An obviously distraught Johnny Marr rang the only person he'd ever met on the paper (me) to find out what the hell was going on, and to add his two penneth.

The third was last summer in Los Angeles when I witnessed a nervous Marr's first steps—after four long years—back into the unforgiving centre stage spotlight, the live debut of *Electronic*, the love child he spawned with New Order's Barney Sumner.

In the gap between those second and third encounters I have, I must admit, *pestered* Marr. A relentless mixture of journo and fan, I have nagged away at him to break the silence he has so studiously maintained about The Smiths these last four years.

During those years (while Marr was doing his 'have guitar, will travel' routine) the true story of The Smiths has become a prisoner of Morrissey's whimsical memory and busy tongue, and, worse, the loaded imaginings of hacks.

But now—at long bleedin' last and maybe just to shut me up—Marr has steeled himself and agreed to do a once-and-for-all, no-holds-barred interview about the band that, more than any other, illuminated '80s Britpop.

He has chosen his moment with care. The imminent release of *Electronic*'s second single ('Get The Message'); and the album that'll quickly follow, will place Marr at the creative crux of his *second* great band. It will confirm him as one of the most gifted and influential musicians of the last decade. Maybe *the* most.

Before we start, one more thing needs making crystal clear; Johnny Marr is a Very Happy Man. And why not? At 27 years of age (27? Shocking, isn't it?) he has it all, sorted. A career on the very brink of new pinnacles; a blessed marriage to Angie; a collection of guitars vast enough to satisfy even as voracious an axe-freak as he; a car too big for most of the streets of his native Manchester; a studio/refuge in the depths of his home. Did I say 'happy'? This, people, is the proverbial pig in shit.

But best of all, though, is Johnny Marr's healthy relationship with his past. He has refused to let it haunt or hinder him. Nor is he cramped, like some, by an undue reverence for Morrissey. Indeed, he (like all the Factory mafia) now refers to his former soulmate as 'Dorrissey' and has re-christened the limp lad's last 45 ('Our Frank') as 'Alf Wank'.

The point I'm making is that

what follows (very edited highlights of several hours of open, good-natured, sometimes earnest chat in Manc hostelrys and the Factory boardroom) was delivered without a hint of malice or glee. It is neither diplomatically neutered nor self-consciously controversial. It is Johnny Marr, once and for all, putting the record straight.

"I DON'T feel particularly comfortable turning myself into some sort of rock 'n' roll myth, but my life *did* unfold like a musician's fairy tale. I was playing guitar seriously when I was 11, but I can't remember a time when I didn't have one. I was one of those kids who always got the plastic guitar at Christmas. That's part of the myth thing too.

"Which I was aware of at the time; it was the way I lived. Everybody knew me as 'that c— who walks around with a guitar case who thinks he's gonna be a big success'. I developed a very thick skin."

This is nervy, routine business-avoidance. We're here to talk Smiths. Start at the start.

"I was born a poor black chile . . ." he grins, in one last attempt at stalling. "No, the start of The Smiths coincided with my finally leaving home. I was 14 or 15 and I left home—school too—pretty much to go and live with Andy Rourke. We were really close. I worked in various clothes shops while trying to write songs. We had a sort of sub-garage guitar funk group—me, Andy and Simon Wolstencroft who now drums with The Fall."

Was this youthful agglomeration blessed with a name?

"Yes, I cringe to remember, it was called Freaky Party."

Echoes of the first Mondays single . . .

"That's right, and funny enough, we didn't sound *that* dissimilar . . . funky grooves with like heavy guitar . . . It got boring, so, when I'd moved out of Andy's place, I decided to make a real go of it with someone who I knew took writing music and lyrics seriously. And that person, of course, was Morrissey."

Then a semi-celeb on the Manc music scene and relentless penner of missives to the music press. How did you go about recruiting him?

"I just decided to go round and knock at his door."

Pretty brave stuff for a 17-year-old . . .

"Yeah, I was brash in those days. I was inspired by a *South Bank Show* on Leiber & Stoller. One of them had just approached the other out of the blue. I saw that and decided to do something similar next day."

Did you know Morrissey at this time?

"I'd known of him for a couple of years because of his involvement in groups with Billy Duffy. When the time came, I just got his address and jumped on a bus and went round to his house and knocked on the door."

Was this the first time you'd met him?

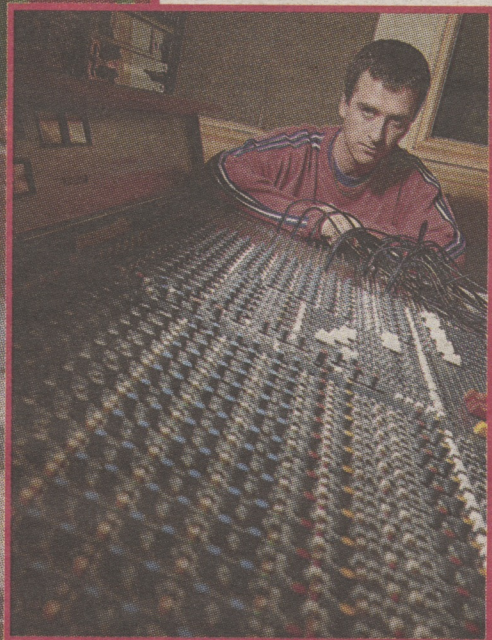
"Yes. I stood there and said my piece, along the lines of 'I know who you are; I'm a fabulous guitar player and I'm interested in forming a group . . . let me in!'"

"Which he did. It was very friendly and open. Next day he came round to my place and we put a couple of songs on to a two-track. It was the start of an obsession."

"Simon Wolstencroft wouldn't join us because we weren't funky enough! We picked up Mike



Johnny Marr revisits the Salford Lads Club, location for the familiar photo on the sleeve of 'The Queen Is Dead', The Smiths' third studio LP.



Marr The Muso, happiest at home in his newly-completed studio

FRET TO COME

Joyce from another group and got Andy, who I hadn't seen for a bit, to come in too."

Do you remember the first time you realised that something special was happening?

"Yeah, I do. It was when we went to do an early demo of 'Suffer Little Children' and 'The Hand That Rocks The Cradle'. It was the first time I heard Morrissey sing as I thought he could. From that moment on I knew we were different, and very, very good."

How did the pair of you work in those days?

"Initially, Morrissey gave me some finished lyrics and asked me to put some evocative music to them. In those early days it was mostly face-to-face; I'd play Morrissey some ideas and he'd like it... or not."

"We agreed on lots of things. Still do. We had a lot of common ground that was unusual. Like the girl groups - The Shangri La's, Shirelles and all that - who were very important to us, and the things that came out of the Brill Building. It went all the way through; we both liked the early Stooges, New York Dolls, early

"I thought we were all up our own arses! We had completely inflated senses of our own importance. Ultimately I was giving every single second of my life to somebody else. I started to feel very unnatural and very abnormal." Are we talking about Morrissey here? "Of course."

Stones singles. That's where we saw our musical fusion - between the girl groups and The Rolling Stones."

Really? Really?

"I'd have thought that would have been quite obvious."

IN 1983 The Smiths signed (because, Marr reckons, of the presence of The Monochrome Set and The Fall, and the prospect of artistic control) to Rough Trade. From that base they unleashed the succession of records that ensured them ever-swelling waves of fan hysteria, critical adoration and commercial clout. Morrissey used to moan, but really they had it easy. For Johnny Marr these were wondrous, uncomplicated times, a seemingly endless honeymoon.

What, for you, were The Smiths doing?

"I felt we were making rock music with some art in it."

That's a pretty unfashionable thing to say.

"At the time, it was a pretty unfashionable thing to do. I think that's what we did all the way through; we didn't do any mundane songs, and we were making music that said very different things about sex, politics and social stuff. The lyrics were unique to Morrissey, to his life, but the audience really picked up on them. It was brilliant; we were creating rock music with art in it."

In a world choking on eye make-up and Club Tropicana, The Smiths made it OK for music to be important again.

"Yeah, us and a few others - Aztec Camera maybe - stood up and said there was something of substance in this pop thing. We also made it cool to appear on *Top Of The Pops* again. The first time we were on it, we followed Marilyn. A sign of the times."

How big did you want to be? Guns N' Roses big?

"No. In America, I'd have been happy to leave a legacy like The Kinks, Roxy Music or T-Rex, a big British cult group. It was more important for us to get into people's households and record collections than to be playing basketball stadia."

"So I wasn't bothered about being as big as Guns N' Roses or U2. And I didn't want us flogging about on tour all the time. Which brings us to another classic Smiths myth; all our tours were instigated by Morrissey. We wanted to do them, but he was the instigator."

"There was this thing about me being the touring beast, always wanting to 'take my axe out on the road'. I'm not making out that Morrissey was a touring rock beast, but I did delight in seeing him onstage 'cos that's where he came alive, because of the adoration of the crowd. Anyway, there's nothing shameful about liking to play gigs."

What were your personal highlights of those golden years?

"The most important moments for me were in the studio."

Johnny Marr, Ultramuso, strikes again!

"Well, that's my buzz and I've never found one to match it. When your partner's vocal brings a piece of music together for the first time; that, for me, is the best bit of being in a group. Each of the LPs had those moments. It happened with 'That Joke Isn't Funny Anymore' and most of the 'Queen Is Dead' sessions. And the first American tour in '85 was a fantastic time. I got married on that tour."

And your favourite Smiths songs?

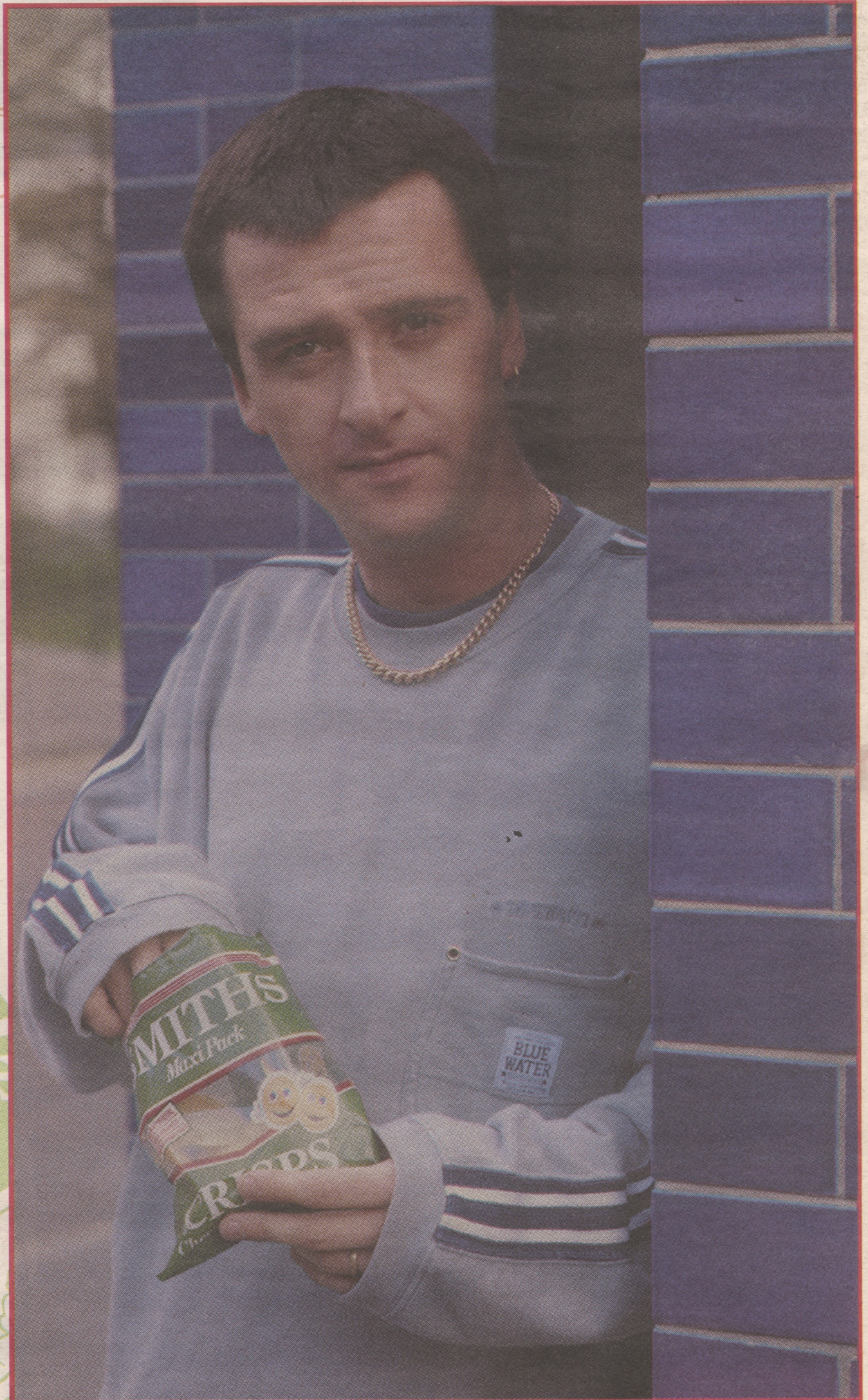
"'I Know It's Over'... 'That Joke Isn't Funny Anymore'... 'Hand In Glove'... 'Last Night I Dreamt Somebody Love Me'... 'Bigmouth Strikes Again'... 'Half A Person'... 'How Soon Is Now'... 'The Headmaster Ritual'... 'The Queen Is Dead'... loads more, really, loads."

SUCH FIERCE beauty couldn't endure. Could it? The novelty wore off; the grace, simplicity, honesty and excitement became routine; the sheer unmatchably effortless bloody perfection of it waned. The pressures mounted on Johnny Marr.

The band, managerless by choice, was becoming an administrative cuckoo, demanding ever more time and attention; Johnny, the group's doer, attempted to satisfy the monster. More crucially, his interest in other music (particularly dance) was causing him to fret about the straitjacket into which The Smiths so willingly padlocked themselves.

These were times of growing disillusion and depression, frustration and fear. Have you a list of Worst Smiths Times, of things you wish hadn't happened?

"No I haven't. I've made a point of dispelling them from my mind. I



Johnny outside Factory Records, home of New Order, Happy Mondays and now Electronic, proving he is not cramped by an undue reverence for his old group, nor indeed ex-soulmate 'Dorisey'

guess the real ugly period was the one before, during and after the last US tour. We were all of us - personally, professionally and in public - a mess."

This was the time when you were seeing off a bottle-and-a-half of Remy Martin a day and Andy Rourke was heading towards a smack habit. Too much too soon, or did you just get bored?

"Neither. It was more complicated than that, there was far more involved. It just became very, very unhealthy for all of us.

At first I just felt it in myself, but then I sensed it in the rest of the band too. I just stopped liking the other members of the group, and I stopped liking myself."

For even the affable, well-adjusted Marr, this is painful stuff, the remembrance of something precious (*his whole life* at the time) messily disintegrating.

"I should say this; we all of us wanted to get out of Manchester; we all wanted to be a success, make some money and have a good life. But that became all we lived for and that's the path to becoming completely self-

obsessed, shallow and lonely."

There's real regret here. What specifically was wrong?

"I thought we were all up our own arses! We had completely inflated senses of our own importance. Ultimately I was giving every single second of my life to somebody else. I started to feel very unnatural and very abnormal."

Are we talking about Morrissey here?

"Of course."

When we talked as late as 1987, you described him as your 'best friend'.

"Yeah, he was. I'm not sure that was a very good thing. He was my only friend really, my only *close* friend. And I'm not sure it was such a good thing for him either."

Did he have other friends at that time?

"No, he didn't. He's actually got more friends than he'd care to admit, but it's just that we saw too much of each other. We worked

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together for five years, every single day of our lives, and that was getting boring as well as depressing.

"And I was beginning to get this vision of the group turning into Queen."

You'd already perfected the Brian May solo on 'Shoplifters'.

"Musically, I felt that if we continued along the path we were going, we'd end up as some sort of dated anachronism. I wanted to change, but..."

His eyes drop to the floor before he continues.

"Look, there were two songs that I wrote that I wanted to use sequencers in, and a bass line with a groove. In consequence, both songs ended up as instrumentals - our only ones except for 'Oscillate Wildly' - 'Money Changes Everything' and 'The Draize Train', which I really loved."

Morrissey couldn't provide a lyric for these tunes? Or wouldn't?

"For whatever reason. To be honest, Morrissey encouraged me to pursue 'Money Changes' as an instrumental and really liked it. But as to why he didn't write words for it? Well, that's anybody's guess."

Did the evident bad feeling ever manifest itself in the work?

"Not in my music, no, not from my side. There's very little you can say with six strings and three pick-ups. What are you getting at?"

Just this: you say that 'Strangeways Here We Come' is now your favourite Smiths LP, but I think it's the band's worst. The tension between you and Morrissey is evident, audible. And your playing is nowhere near as good as on the other records.

"I dunno," Marr sighs. "You might have a point, but the idea that we were at each other's throats during the making of that LP is another misconception that I'm out to lay to rest. We weren't. We were, though, under great stress."

Attempting to follow up the best rock album of the '80s.

"Sure, that may have been niggling away in the back of our minds."

Were you and Morrissey still working together closely?

"Yes... on some songs."

THE SPLIT came in August '87. While other papers were blithely detailing the band's third US tour dates, NME, acting on information received and later confirmed by a

written statement from the band's camp, broke the news that Johnny Marr, at that moment abroad, had quit.

Within days, the newly-home guitarist was on my phone, clearly irate. He had, he maintained, said nothing about leaving the band and had returned to a *fait accompli*. But he had no intention of standing back while his erstwhile colleagues glided casually on, using the holy name.

With that, The Smiths effectively ceased to be. To the legions of grieving fans, Marr was the horned villain of the piece, the restless rocker who'd betrayed the saintly Morrissey.

And lately Morrissey has changed this accepted version of events. In a recent foreign interview he said that it was Marr's reaction in the NME that had sundered the group. Quite what he hopes to achieve by re-writing history is unclear, but Johnny Marr is cut to the quick.

What, then, were the mechanics of the split?

"I'd been thinking about leaving for ages and ages but nobody knew that. After 'Strangeways' I wanted a couple of weeks off; I was tired of the same old faces and they were tired of mine. If I didn't take a break, I was gonna freak out.

"So I went on holiday to



Johnny and Barney: the partnership of the '90s?

America. Not to work with Talking Heads, that came later, and *not*, as has been mentioned, with a bag of the band's money. When I got back I was greeted with the news that I'd split the group. As usual, *someone* in The Smiths camp was playing games in the press, a tradition that continues to this day.

"I got back to find no sign of the three people with whom I'd worked all my adult life, leaving me to answer this piece of blackmail in the NME, hoping presumably that I'd deny it all. It annoyed me; it was a real dirty trick. To this day I still don't know

how that story first got into the NME; what I do know is that very little got into the press without The Smiths having been the actual instigators.

"So my phone call was a reaction to a piece of blackmail from people who had been so close."

What do you think has motivated Morrissey's recent revision of the facts?

"I really don't know, but I don't think it shows him in a very good light. I do find it interesting that he decided to re-write the history, four years after the event, just when I'm about to put a record out. But I'm not afraid of the truth; I've got nothing to hide."

THE SMITHS split shocked like none since The Beatles, and the grief-stricken fans blamed Johnny Marr. From out of that ire and bitterness emerged the notion that The Smiths was *Morrissey's* group. That's an idea that needs crushing.

A cursory earful of the quartet's magical canon instantly spotlights the brilliance and centrality of Marr's tunes, arrangements and playing. And the sad sight of Morrissey's subsequent fumbblings in search of a partner with a mere fraction of Marr's energy, craft or sympathy cements that impression.

To the unbiased, the equation is simple. Johnny Marr was the irreplaceable catalyst that transformed Morrissey's glistering talent into the hallmarked gold of genius. No Marr, No Smiths...

Do you feel you've had enough credit for The Smiths' records?

"I've had plenty of flak! For leaving, for splitting the group.



During those obsessive years...

more, a month or two after the split." Marr's face splits into a melony smile: "He rang me to see whether I'd be interested in doing a Smiths farewell gig in London. That was the last time we spoke. I did send him a note telling him that 'Last Of The Famous International Playboys' was really good, a good 'un, something I knew he'd be proud of."

You're very offhand about this: the last time I interviewed you, you said that you 'loved' Morrissey.

"Did I? I must have been talking about my bottle of Remy Martin!"

Isn't what's happened between the pair of you a bit of a tragedy, a terrible waste?

"Not at all, because of the work. We came together to work and that's what we did."

His voice clenches with intent: "I'm serious. We did so much work, so many songs. Isn't that enough for people? Aren't there enough songs there - A-sides and B-sides (stuff like 'Asleep', 'Rubber Ring' and 'London') and stuff that didn't come out on albums? The people that mourned, and are still mourning, the demise of The Smiths can just lock themselves in a basement for the rest of their lives without running out of Smiths stuff to hear. That's what I say to people - *'isn't there enough there?'*"

THAT, THEN, is Johnny Marr's plea - that fantastic slew of music should be allowed to stand as an eternal epitaph to one of rock's very few truly unique groups.

It seems, I say, a fitting place to leave The Smiths, to move on. Johnny Marr grins, stretches and lets out a huge laughing sigh. He feels like a schoolboy who's

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From the public, the press and the group. As far as the band is concerned, I felt that I worked from before there was anyone else involved, for the whole five-and-a-half years, every single day, harder than anyone else in the group - and no one has ever mentioned that.

"I understand that they might feel I pulled the rug from under their feet and messed up their mortgages; I've never heard the end of that part of it. But not once have I heard my old mates defend me, say 'God, for five-and-a-half-years he worked like mad'. And that really hurts me.

"But to answer the question you probably meant to ask... No, I don't feel that I didn't get enough credit musically. I'm really happy and satisfied with the credit I've been given for making the music."

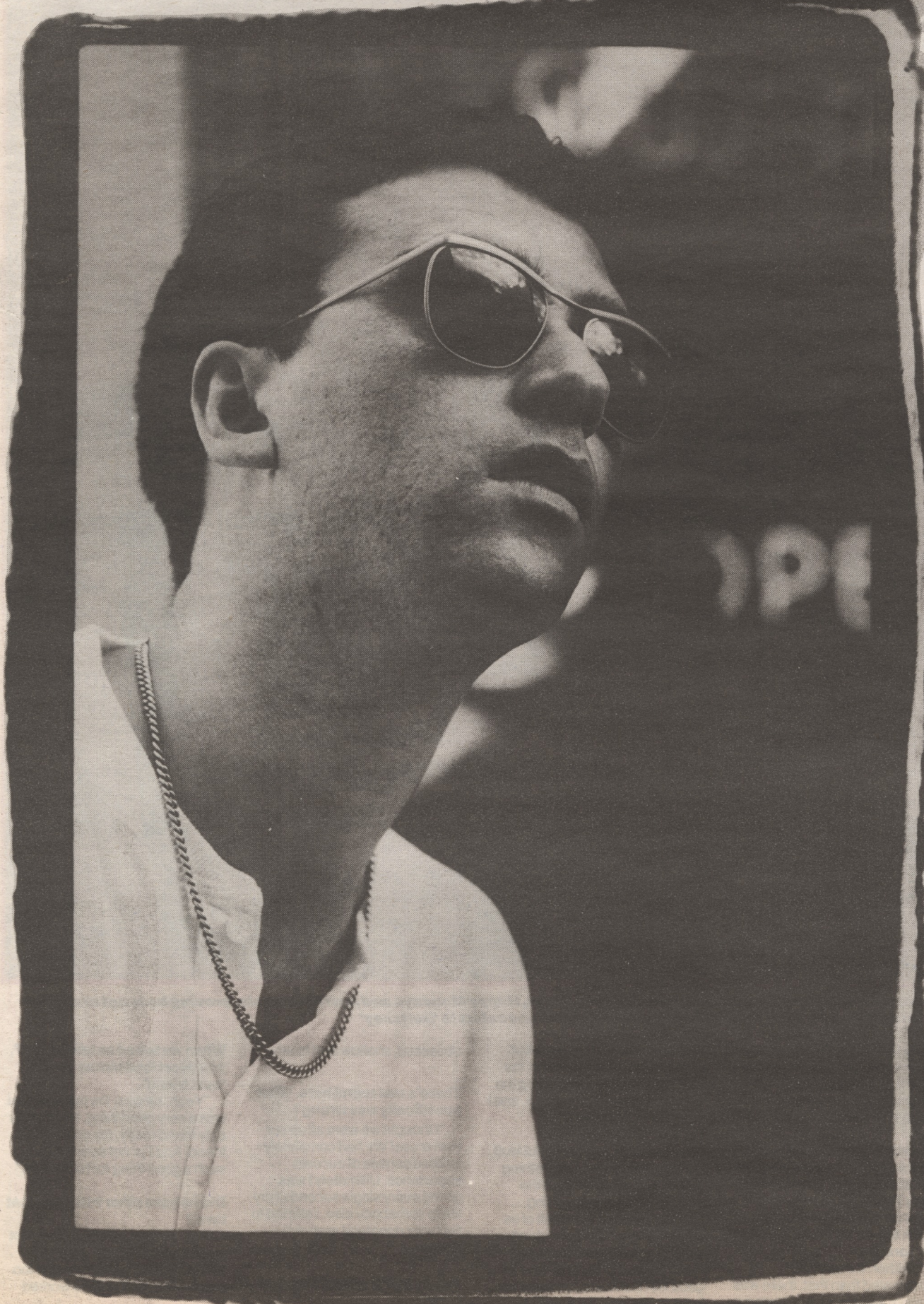
The split and its aftermath had a human cost, the rift between you and Morrissey. Have you spoken since?

"Yeah, I talked to him once

finished a cross-country run in the drizzle; his ordeal is over.

And his long-overdue public farewell to his ex-love, to his former obsession, can, and should, be put to good use by us all. For him, it was the last bit of unfinished business that needed dealing with before the bright new dawn of Electronic. For sane, normal music fans it was a dignified new light on a familiar and up-to-now one-sided legend. And for the die-hard Smiths-youth, it was, and is, a chance to finally join the rest of us in the '90s.

After this, none of us has any excuse for lingering longingly in the Smithfield. We know it's over. ● Next week: Part II: Johnny Marr on life after The Smiths; on working with Ferry, The Pretenders, Simple Minds, The The and Electronic; on conversations with Keith Richards and David Bowie; and on Morrissey's solo stuff. Plus: complete Johnny Marr post-Smiths discography!



Marr at 27 - A Very Happy Man...