

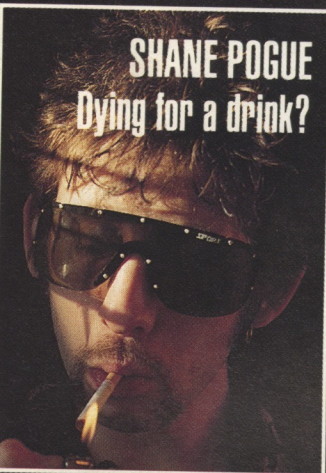
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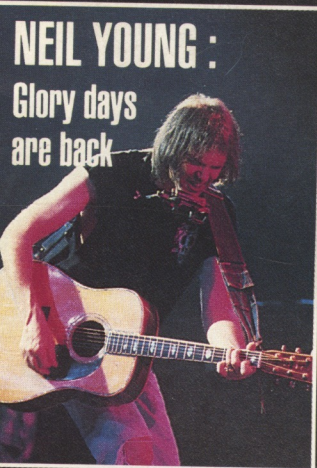
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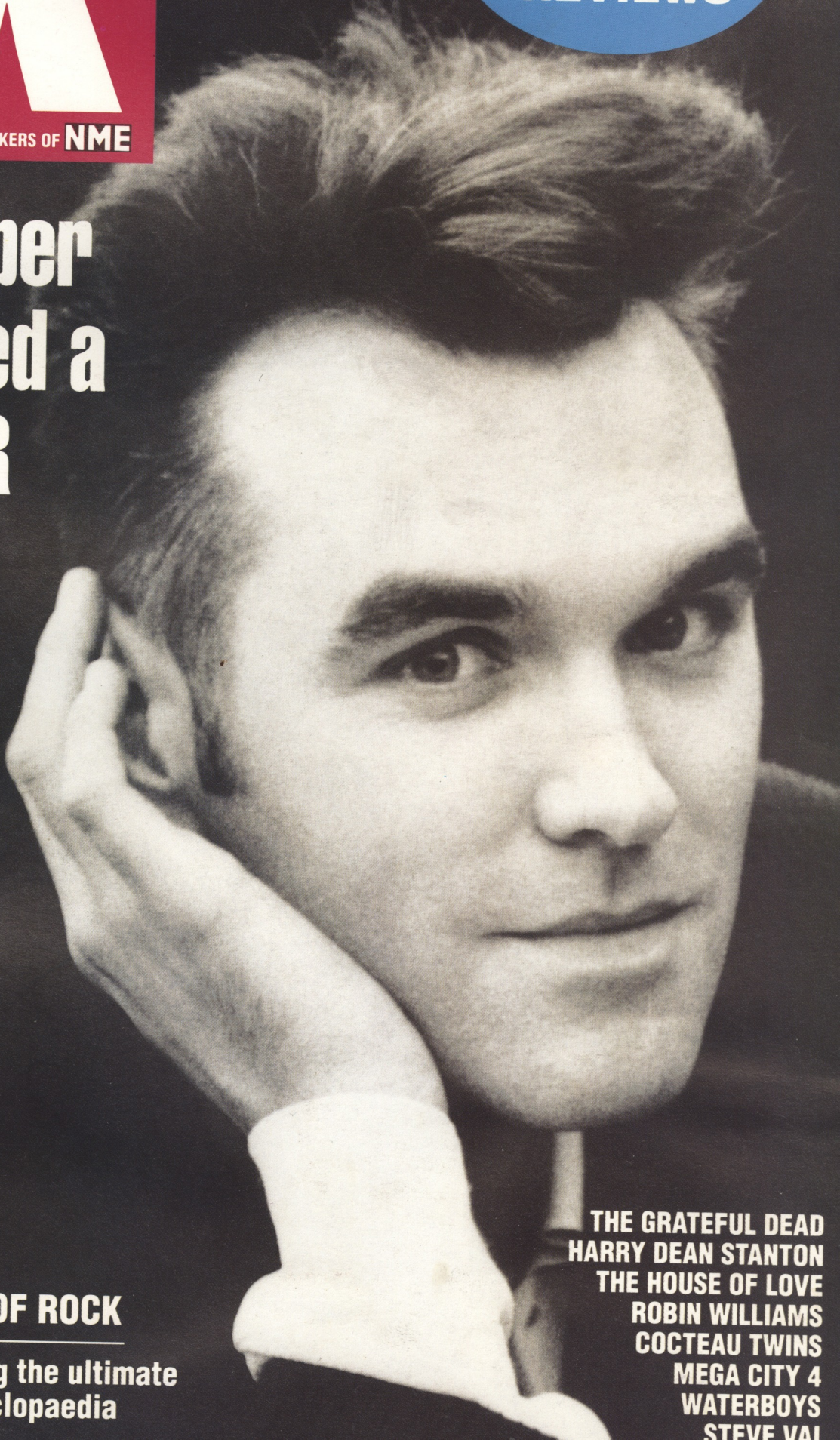
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BONA CONTENTION

MORRISSEY COULD PROBABLY HAVE DONE WITHOUT THE LAST YEAR, AND THERE'S A BEEN A FEW NONE TOO KIND HACKS AND HACKETTES WHO SAY WE COULD DO WITHOUT HIM. THE MUCH MORE SOLICITOUS LEN BROWN SHARES A CUP OF ROSY WITH THE HERO OF BED-SIT LAND WHO IS QUITE HAPPY NOT BEING PART OF THE MANCY CROWD, NOT PLAYING WITH JOHNNY MARR AND NOT HAVING A WHIPPET.

PICTURES BY KEVIN CUMMINS AND PENNIE SMITH.

WHEN I FIRST MET MORRISSEY, SOME 30 MONTHS ago the selected venue was the scene of Oscar Wilde's arrest at Chelsea's Cadogan Hotel. Our second discussion, in late '88, centred on the desecration or decoration by Smiths' fans of Oscar's tomb in that Parisian boneyard Pere Lachaise.

So I was naturally astonished, having been summoned by Terrace Stomp (sic) himself to Reading, not to find him tethered to Wilde's slop-bucket in cell C33 of Reading Gaol. Instead, we tracked him down to the sleepy, rural Tudor pile that is Hook End Manor. This former stately home was domicile to flying fingers Alvin Lee, ex-lead axeman with Ten Years After, later Dave Gilmour, and is now a classically English retreat-cum-studio run by Morrissey's latest co-writing conspirators Winstanley and Langer of Madness/Costello infamy.

"Originally it was a home for monks," explains Morrissey, as if 'monastery' was dirty word. "Since I've been here several people have had certain visitations at night time, including me..." Hold the gossip column... "Mozz in monkey biz at monastery!"

"... It happened for each person at ten past four in the morning," he continues, in that goose-soft Percy Sugden-style brogue. "It felt like a hand on your chest, as if you were being woken or stirred. The conclusion I've come to is that it's the ghost of some misguided monk going round waking people up for prayers."

You can tell by the way that Morrissey moves that he's relaxed here. It's a *Draughtsman's Contract* type of place and he's recording his follow-up album to 'Viva Hate'. Gathered around him, in his ongoing search for musical soulmates to replace Johnny Marr, are characters such as Mark Nevin from Fairground Attraction and Bedders from Madness. You can almost hear the creatives juices flowing.

But working at Hook End means that the Mozz had to kiss goodbye to his old haunt, The Wool Hall in Bath, scene of both 'Strangeways, Here We Come' and 'Viva Hate'. "That was enough," says Morrissey, pouring the Darjeeling, "it was time to try a different bed and the one here's quite comfortable."

Despite the monk?
"Because of the monk!"

BONA CONTENTION

"I'm deeply apprehensive. I know you're fully aware of the current climate that surrounds me in the press. It almost means that flattering articles can no longer be written about me. But, while I admit that 'Ouija Board Ouija Board' wasn't

'Chirpy Chirpy Cheep Cheep', I do think the backlash has been slightly overdone."

Morrissey doesn't like doing interviews - "I'd rather just disappear into the woods and stay there" - particularly when circumstances demand that he's defensive.

The last 12 months, by his own high standards, have been a mix of the unremarkable and unavoidable, with perhaps only the strange beauty of 'November Spawned A Monster' to remind us of his uniqueness. Things seemed to reach a post-Smiths low when, following what he describes as a "condemning, disgraceful" interview in *The Face* - "I could tell you things about Nick Kent that would take the frizz out of your Afro!" - he seemed to scrap his scheduled 'Bona Drag' studio album overnight.

Instead, EMI are now ready to launch a rather obvious compilation LP, also called 'Bona Drag', comprising of B-Sides and singles from 'Suedehead' through to 'Piccadilly Palare'.

Steven Patrick, defend thyself.



PENNIE SMITH

"People will view it suspiciously in England but not in the rest of the world where all those funny little singles were never released. It was initially for the rest of the world, but EMI were determined to release it here."

Not that it's a bad collection of songs, just rather unnecessary. Why include 'Viva Hate' tracks like 'Suedehead' and 'Everyday Is Like Sunday' once again?

"Why live? Why dress yourself? Why shave?" he chuckles quietly. "I have no answer except to say that if 'Bona Drag' and 'Piccadilly Palare' had not been released the only visible sign of my personal existence this year would have been 'November Spawned A Monster'. So they'll remind people that I'm a faintly living person although I'm not sure about that myself. Let them mock, I don't mind."

It's probably because your output's been so prolific over the years that this recent lull seemed more like a definite crack in your career.

"But if you're examining other artists, they disappear for two or three years, to tour Bangkok or live in large houses. Throughout the '80s it was so constant - then for a slight second it looked as if there was a lull - let's face it, there was a very attractive lull - so people started saying 'ah-ha, the acrobat falls'..."

"And yet, if I was turning them out like a cracker factory people would say, 'Why doesn't he go away? Why doesn't he have a slight rest? Pass me that bread knife!'"

It's probably because you seem to lead such a disciplined life. People probably think, 'Old Morrissey, all that time on his own, he ought to be able to knock out a couple of albums a year. He hasn't got a drug problem, he hasn't got a drink problem.'

"Life would be so colourful if only I had a drink problem."

EASY MEAT

Many critics, having cremated The Smiths, initially decided that the band's components couldn't succeed apart. Morrissey's single life has clearly upset those arguments although he's always struggled to achieve a wider audience. Every single charges high into the charts before rapidly plunging downwards like a stockbroker from a city high-rise. 'Piccadilly Palare' should follow suit.

"It's not a particularly strong record," admits Morrissey candidly. "It's not overwhelming, the subject is even slightly dated. 'Piccadilly Palare', which will receive blanket horrendous reviews, is a song about male prostitution. But I'm not running around in the street saying 'Look at me singing about male prostitution, isn't that incredibly unique!' I don't want plaudits for examining a new subject, but I will say that even coming across a pop record with a reasonably unique situation is in itself interesting."

It seems EMI don't have particularly high hopes for 'Piccadilly Palare' either, according to Morrissey. There will be no video - a temporary end to his successful association with director Tim Broad - and Morrissey himself is pretty confident it won't be Top Five.

"People often say to me at bus stops, 'Why are you releasing this record?' But I don't mind that 'Ouija Board Ouija Board' never received an Ivor Novello award. I never believed that sitting on top of the pop arena was a nice place to be."

But are you now going out of your way to be less successful?



Although Morrissey happily argues that The Smiths were "immensely danceable" he's still unfashionably and consistently hostile towards the House movement in general. He

rest of us. They think they're being protective but they're not, they're being insulting (sic). They're the type of people who will condemn me for even considering writing a song about a person who is, inverted commas, incapacitated etc."

Apart from Mary Margaret O'Hara, who joined him on 'November Spawned A Monster' - "she's the oddest most eccentric person I've ever met, I went into the vocal booth and said 'Just simply give birth', which she most expertly did, while I stood behind with a mop and a bucket" - he rather arrogantly but somehow indisputably suggests that few other lyricists have the capacity, perception or the nerve to tackle such sensitive subjects within the single format.

"I heard that new Prefab Sprout album the other day," he says, "which has been bombarded with plaudits. And I literally slipped into a coma, I mean, it was so absolutely lifeless. I met Paddy Ashdown once and thought he was a very nice person, but that doesn't really excuse the fact that, in a position of national attention, he's released a record

being irritatingly kind to you.

"Oh God, let's go and pick some apples..."

Despite the backlash, the setbacks over 'Bona Drag' and the somewhat distinct lack of enthusiasm for 'Piccadilly Palare' from either the artist or EMI, Morrissey had one great moment in the last year.

"Standing next to Joan Sims when we made 'Ouija Board Ouija Board'. Mainly because she was so excellent, so enormously gifted, and here I was, a silly sausage from somewhere near Manchester."

And despite mediocre reactions to his solo work from the uninitiated in this country, in America the Mozzer's star is definitely rising. 'November Spawned A Monster' was universally acclaimed, at a rare radio interview in Los Angeles he was mobbed by one thousand Angelinos, and The Smiths back catalogue is in "massive ascension".

So, with his second solo studio album scheduled for release next February, Morrissey will be taking the stage again (Wolverhampton aside) for the first time in four years. In America he's set to play 26 dates, mainly in stadiums larger than the 5500-seaters The Smiths played in '86. In Britain, thankfully, he's considering less hangar-like, more intimate venues.

"Being English I can see the depressing connotation of me playing Birmingham NEC. I can see the depressing connotation of me racing to Wembley. I don't want people to feel they're coming to visit me in Birmingham NEC, I want people in Doncaster feeling I'm coming to visit them."

In the meantime he declares his private life as uneventful as ever: "Even people who quite like me feel slightly weighted down by all that solitary monkishness... No, I haven't found religion, no I haven't found love. I haven't even got a whippet!"

And, at last, he seems to have accepted that Johnny Marr has moved onwards and is unlikely to work with him in the foreseeable future: "Within me, and I know within him, everything has been resolved. It almost doesn't matter any more... No, I don't think he'd expect me to enjoy Electronics."

The only real doubts that remain about Morrissey concern the future direction of his music. There's no indication, no evidence on 'Bona Drag' or 'Piccadilly Palare' that Morrissey's going to seriously alter his sound, although 'Get Off The Stage', a folkist rant against rock senility co-written with Andy Rourke, does have pretensions to polka.

I put it to you Morrissey, that the artists who've survived, who've managed to garner respect amidst the wrinkles, are those who have been able to re-invent themselves, to present different personas and carry their music in new directions.

"I know I've reached the stage where other artists would bleach their hair or buy a fancy costume," he replies, tugging at that chin. "But I'm not inclined towards either presenting a new persona or

even presenting myself as the person Smiths' apostles felt they knew more intimately than their own friends. Inexcusably I can only simply be me, which is a full-time occupation and causes terrible back-ache.

"But there's a famous quote, in *Far From The Maddening Crowd* by Thomas Hardy, where Bathsheba Everdene says, 'I shall be breakfasted before you have risen and, in short, I shall astonish you all'. It has no relevance of course but I honestly do believe that, once they've raked away all the nonsense, I'll still be here.... Stop smiling!"



Morrissey: "It takes guts to be gentle and kind."

practically splutters when I regurgitate those old rumours of liaisons with outfits such as 808 State.

"I've been told that when you're coming down from Ecstasy you should slip on 'Viva Hate' and it's like being slapped back to reality with a wet dishcloth."

From the way Morrissey often talks, about the ashes of pop being all around us and about his lack of faith in the originality of other artists, you're always half expecting him to flamboyantly announce his retirement.

At 31 years of age, it often seems as if the solitary garret-bound life of a novelist would be more appealing to him. And yet he still appears to relish his platform in pop as a lyricist - "the reason I'm not considered danceable is because there is lyrical content" - a vocalist, and an agent provocateur.

"People find me enormously irritating. If you don't have 100 per cent passion for every move I make then I'm the most irritating person you could hope to hear of. I know this because people write and tell me."

You receive hate mail?

"Yes, especially after *Top Of The Pops*. It's usually people's parents who write, 'Every time I walk past my daughter's bedroom I hear this person having their legs sawn off, which ultimately leads me to the stereo and turns out to be you singing'. They say, 'I don't like it! I don't want it in my daughter's life! Leave the country!' It's a tremendous accolade. Inadvertently, accidentally, I still have this unsettling edge and I do think it's a strength."

Likewise the subject matter of many of Morrissey's lyrics provokes hostile reactions. Some DJs deemed the subject matter of 'November Spawned A Monster' unsuitable material for a pop song.

"It's that attitude that excludes those people who are inverted commas, italics, whatever, less fortunate than the

that's disturbingly middle-aged."

Whether you prize or despise Morrissey's 'way with words' he's unquestionably unique as a lyricist. His musical partners may keep changing - the 'November Spawned A Monster' and 'Piccadilly Palare' 12-inchers find him working with old and new characters from Stephen Street and Andy Rourke through to Alan Winstanley, Kevin Armstrong and Mark Nevin - and there may be a lack of stylistic direction, but he's always attempting to tackle original, controversial subject matters with a remarkable combination of humour and sensitivity.

'November Spawned A Monster', for instance, saw him clambering inside the head of a wheelchair-bound individual, and having the rare capacity to relate his perceptions. Similarly, 'At Amber', on the B-Side of 'Piccadilly Palare' addresses an "invalid friend".

Were you referring to one person in particular?

"No, if you're a genuine artist you have a very powerful...oh God...vision of most situations, whether or not they're painful, as in my case they most often are. I don't have to know people. It's a matter of understanding many extreme situations in life. And if you see someone in what we oddly refer to as an unfortunate situation, someone who's wheelchair bound, if you're very perceptive and sensitive you can fully imagine the lifelong frustrations of constantly being discussed by other people, and constantly having people

"I think a lot of people are getting away with murder ... there are no real honest faces or even minor celebrities."

Morrissey



"No, but I do hear certain opinions. I think there's always a danger in trying to give an audience what it wants. I think it's more interesting to give an audience something it might not want."

This attitude must sound somewhat painful to the bigwigs of EMI. For here's a man who many feel should go all the way - hell a PSB-style Elvis crooner would do it - yet who's defiantly anti-careerist and, today at least, against success. So are you just happy to hold onto the following you already have?

"Yes I am, even if it decreases I won't mind that much."

There seems to be an edge of revenge about Morrissey's current stance, an affirmation of his staunch individuality against the ever-tightening business demands of being a 'pop' star.

"I can only control it by not being approachable, by not being at Stringfellows, by not sitting on somebody's desk at EMI. I came to the conclusion that if, when these sessions are finished, I took the label off the master tapes and put Tina Turner's name on them and sent them to EMI, the results would be staggering. Television advertising, all those things that, if they really happened, I'd hate every minute of it."

Your wardrobe would be radically different too.

"Not necessarily!"

If Morrissey needed any reminder of the downside of the music business he got it earlier this year when the 'Fifth Smith', 'Queen Is Dead' era (and Wolverhampton reunion) guitarist Craig Gannon successfully sued Morrissey.

"Yes, he did win his case against The Smiths which was heart-breaking, deeply sad, and an outrage of public justice. His lawyer, my lawyer, everybody involved knew he didn't have a leg to stand on yet, through some perversion of justice, he walked away with £42,000.

"It made me very unhappy because it seemed a perfect example of how nauseous this business can become. And it reminds me that, like it or not, however much I kick, however much I back-pedal, that I am finally a part of this business.

"It's the thing that most wears me down but my opinion is that Craig Gannon didn't really win because... he's still Craig Gannon. Ha ha!"

When the laughter stops and his attack of bitterness subsides, I half mention that such cruelty contradicts the spirit of one of Morrissey's great one liners: "*It takes guts to be gentle and kind?*"

"Oh it does but you know I've never been cruel unnecessarily," he chortles.

Minutes later, referring to his former friend and hairdresser Andrew Berry, I suggest that Berry takes credit for that floppy-haired Happy Mondays look.

"Yes, but he probably takes credit for the Zeebrugge Disaster. And rightly so!"

FEAR OF MANCHESTER

"I think the backlash came at the right time," he says, more relaxed now, sitting on the cream sofa opposite me, flicking that cockatoo quiff to one side. "It's been useful, it's proved I'm not part of this whole suffocating wave of Manchester monstrosity. It really emphasises that, whether you like me or not, I remain an individual...individually nauseating or individually interesting."

Flowered Ups and Farms aside, the last 12 months of celebration have been dominated by Mancunian candidates. Practically every mad sod in the city has swarmed up the charts - Mondays, Roses, 808 State, Charlatans, Northside, and even Manchester's old guard appears to have been rejuvenated: The Fall, New Order, James, ACR. But Morrissey, somewhat predictably, has remained apart.

"If I was herded in with those groups, believe me, I'd emigrate to Norway. I'm not impressed and that's why I'm seen as the person outside the gates with arms folded.

"I'm not the enemy of those groups but I still have a boring old-fashioned notion of talent. I still believe in songs. I don't want to sound like a member of Fleetwood Mac, however hard that may be, but I just don't hear a commendable impressive voice."

But surely, to their strange supporters, those bands might have the excitement of The Smiths. People need new things to cling to...

"Understandably so. I don't expect people to remain with one hundred per cent memory of The S-S-Six asterisks. People must go on to groups that are alive and kicking. I understand that but I still have not heard a song and I don't believe, the groove in inverted

commas is enough. I think a lot of groups are getting away with murder, the level of publicity is outrageous, and there are no real honest faces or even minor celebrities."

What about Frank Sidebottom?

"Trust you to cripple my argument."

Don't you consider the Mondays or the Roses to be significant?

"But to me it's the revenge of the daft. We had a period in Manchester where people were trying to be almost restricted by their own intelligence. Suddenly it somersaulted and was replaced by this strange thug element, which is mildly interesting, almost worth examining. I'm not saying there's anything terribly inferior about the football mentality or the drug mentality but it's outlandishly limited. Taste has completely disappeared.

"The most interesting aspect about the whole Lancashire movement is that it's remarkably non-revolutionary. There is not one single revolutionary record. To me the reason why these groups have been embraced by the Sunday supplements is because they're very tame. If the music had matched what we'd been led to believe about these groups I'd now be standing in the middle of Market Street in bellbottoms.

"If you examine the new Manchester movement, the music is retrogressive, the attitude is retrogressive and the influences - Hendrix, The Beatles, The Stones, The Doors - are very retrogressive. It actually begins to make my New York Dolls obsession look slightly modern."

So is there nothing in terms of style or fashion that really commends itself to you? Surely the clothes you wore back in your teenage years were equally outrageous and strange?

"Yes, I can hear lots of people saying, 'Ah that's because you're too old' but whether you're 50 or 15 I feel I can identify ugly clothing. It's an outstandingly unflattering fashion unless the shape of your body is triangular."

"No, I haven't found religion, no, I haven't found love. I haven't even got a whippet!"

Morrissey

