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Stronger Than Death: Here’s Why We’re Excited For The The’s Comeback

Annie Zaleski [@anniezaleski](#) | April 6, 2018 - 4:09 pm



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On Monday, The The announced [North American tour dates](#). Although comeback and reunion gigs are rarely seismic events these days, this news felt like a sudden thunderclap: The eight shows mark the UK band’s first Stateside concerts since 2000, when founder/sole permanent member Matt Johnson was supporting *NakedSelf*, The The’s last proper studio album.

In a Q&A accompanying the tour press release, Johnson explained that the death of his brother, the artist [Andy “Dog” Johnson](#), who passed away in 2016 after spending nearly four years with a brain tumor, galvanized The The’s return. “The whole situation caused me to reflect deeply about what I want to do with my life, and so I decided to put a toe back in the water to feel the temperature,” he wrote. In a 2017 [Financial Times](#) interview, Johnson was less measured, and stressed the “urgency” he felt after losing his brother: “I’ve got to get back to what I love doing. I feel in a way as if someone’s turned on the oxygen supply again. I feel energized and excited.”

That Johnson was jolted out of his inertia is somewhat of a small miracle. Back in the early '00s, post-*NakedSelf*, he retreated from music, due to a combination of industry disillusionment and unresolved grief over the sudden 1989 death of his younger brother, Eugene. Johnson wasn’t as reclusive as other artists (e.g., Jeff Mangum, Kevin Shields) but he also didn’t seem interested in creating music again either. The The seemed to be permanently on the shelf collecting dust.

“The problem is when you take time away from doing something, the harder it is to get back into it again, Johnson told [The Vinyl Factory](#). “It’s a bit like if you’re an athlete, you’re used to training, but if you take a month off you feel a bit uncomfortable, then six months to a year later you forget how you did it. That’s what happened to me, I didn’t even pick up a guitar for seven years.”

Yet fans never forgot The The; in fact, Johnson noted in his press release Q&A that “the loyalty of many members of my audience has been a pleasant surprise.” But calling this devotion “loyalty” is a mild understatement: The band’s June Royal Albert Hall show sold out in seven minutes, while in 2017, The The’s [website crashed](#) and was taken offline because so many people tried to buy a 7-inch of a new song, “We Can’t Stop What’s Coming,” which Johnson wrote for brother Andy.

Outside of this fan support, The The’s overall legacy and musical impact have both receded into the rearview mirror, especially in America. Part of this is visibility: Although the jaunty, accordion-heavy stroll “This Is The Day” appeared in ’00s TV commercials for Dockers and M&M’s — and Manic Street Preachers covered the song in 2011 — the band hasn’t graced the charts since a 1995 Hank Williams cover, “I Saw The Light,” became a mild modern rock hit.

As that song implies, it’s also difficult to plop The The down on any sort of musical continuum, much less identify antecedents *or* descendants. The eclectic worldview of Tom Waits is certainly a touchstone, and Johnson has [mentioned](#) the Beatles’ *White Album*, Syd Barrett-era Pink Floyd and Can as influences. But during The The’s roughly two-decade initial run, Johnson zigged and zagged through musical styles and eras.

He approached music as if he was looking through a pair of cracked eyeglasses, and his penchant for solitary songwriting and experimental recording techniques insulated The The from orthodoxy. Even as the band operated within the mainstream music business — for example, they opened for Depeche Mode in 1993, as the latter enjoyed huge US success — Johnson’s records were always more like statistical outliers on a data set.

This singularity is both a blessing and a curse. Although it’s one major reason why The The’s return is so exciting, being difficult to categorize has been a hindrance, too. While cult bands such as Talk Talk are cited for sonic innovations, The The haven’t received the same kind of notoriety bump. Even the band’s biggest mainstream overtures were tough to pigeonhole. The The’s highest-charting alternative single, the 1993 No. 2 “Dogs Of Lust,” is a roadhouse blues number with distorted harmonica courtesy of then-band member Johnny Marr. Yet band’s next-biggest hit, the 1990 No. 7 hit “Jealous Of Youth,” boasted horns, a Waits-like growl, and funky guitar that sounds like the Cure on a tropical vacation.

Matt Johnson was a precocious musician who started playing in bands at age 11. His dad owned the East London pub the [Two Puddings](#), and encouraged Johnson and his three brothers to be creative. (In fact, Andy “Dog” Johnson’s primal drawings graced the covers of several The The albums and singles, capturing the gnawing unrest and emotional bloodletting at the music’s core.) The The’s early output is very much of a piece with the primitive electronic music percolating in England: The frayed-nerve “Controversial Subject” hews toward the grating synth experiments burbling out of Sheffield, as does the buzzing “Untitled,” a greyscale song appearing on the 1981 compilation *Some Bizzare Album*.

Burning Blue Soul, released in 1981 as a Matt Johnson solo album (but frequently lumped in as a The The release) is also an uncompromising, abrasive collection of post-punk growth fits and starts. After scrapping an album called *The Pornography Of Despair*, Johnson emerged with The The’s proper debut, 1983’s *Soul Mining*. It’s safe to say this LP contains his most accessible entry points, and reveals how Johnson always chose his collaborators wisely: Although built on moody soundscapes and a melancholic ache, “Uncertain Smile” has a tickling-ivories bridge from Jools Holland, while the sprawling “Giant” builds on electro-funk beats and vocal loops, and boasts a frenzied sticks interlude from “Frank Want,” aka the experimental musician J.G. Thirlwell.

Soul Mining also felt very prescient, as if Johnson was predicting musical trends. The rain-on-tin rhythms introducing opening track “I’ve Been Waitin’ For Tomorrow (All Of My Life)” — courtesy of Orange Juice drummer Zeke Manyika — presage Ministry’s industrial work by several years; “The Twilight Hour” heralds the gothic world music of Dead Can Dance; and “The Sinking Feeling” sounds like the Smiths gone sideways.

The The’s next album, 1986’s *Infected*, was the band’s most contemporary-sounding record, a beat-driven collection full of danceable electronic excursions and soul-drenched pop stomps. Yet *Infected* too felt perceptive and future-thinking: The rhythmic lift of “Angels Of Deception” forecasts the UK’s looming “baggy” pop scene, while the funk-sharpened Neneh Cherry duet “Slow Train To Dawn” repeats the phrase, “I’m so lonesome I could die,” a sly interpolation of a Hank Williams song.

Infected also contained piercing condemnations of modern capitalism — Johnson references a “western guy” with no morals but a hearty appetite for excess — and Margaret Thatcher’s political machinations. Of note is “Out of the Blue (Into the Fire),” which features a self-aware protagonist that realizes too late that casual sex doesn’t lead to fulfillment. “John Lydon told me it was the most spiteful record he’d heard in years, a huge compliment!” Johnson told [Uncut](#) in 2016.

Lydon should’ve withheld comment until hearing 1989’s *Mind Bomb*, which was an even darker lyrical and sonic detour. Johnson pulls no punches condemning racism, religious greed, moral bankruptcy and political oppression — themes tied together on the almost jazzy strut “The Beat(en) Generation,” on which he laments that “youth, oh youth, are being seduced/ By the greedy hands of politics and half truths,” and implores people to “open your eyes, open your imagination.”

Mind Bomb also benefits from the fact that Johnson had finally put together a permanent band, led by ex-Smiths guitarist Johnny Marr. This core group produced music for twilight hours — ink-stained chamber music, velvety soul-funk, and fire-and-brimstone twang — with precision that left nothing to ambiguity. On the seething piano dirge “Good Morning Beautiful,” Johnson barks as if he was the devil himself broadcasting live directly from hell, while Marr’s electric guitars on “The Violence Of Truth” scar like jagged glass in skin.

Released four years later, *Dusk* was just as introspective, although its melancholy came from a much different place: Johnson was dealing with the death of his younger brother, Eugene. That event precipitated the surprise modern rock Top 15 hit “Love Is Stronger Than Death,” whose funereal organ and slightly unfocused vocals convey Johnson’s deep grief. On other songs, the musician made it clear his strident worldview was also shaken: The chorus of the minor-chord chime “Slow Emotion Replay” goes, “Everybody knows what’s going wrong with the world/ But I don’t even know what’s going on in myself.”

As with *Mind Bomb*, *Dusk* took a holistic approach to darkness. The swinging piano cabaret number “This Is The Night” winks to vaudeville; “Lung Shadows” is shiver-inducing spy noir that’s the sonic equivalent of fog rolling in; and “Sodium Light Baby” boasts fat psychedelic blues guitars. Strangely enough, *Dusk* was the band’s biggest U.K. hit, landing at No. 2 on the album charts.

Post-*Dusk*, The The’s first iteration started winding down. The band released *Hanky Panky*, a sincere if anachronistic Hank Williams covers record. Johnson scrapped another intended album, *Gun Sluts* — which he described in *Uncut* as “my version of [Lou Reed’s] *Metal Machine Music*” — and aligned with Trent Reznor’s nothing records for *NakedSelf*, a somewhat overlooked collection of electro-rock songs. In 2002, Johnson performed the last The The show to date, at the David Bowie-curated Meltdown Festival, as a duo with J.G. Thirlwell.

During the ensuing years, The The’s songs have remained almost shockingly relevant. “Almost daily people write to me saying that these songs could have been written yesterday. My answer is, everything goes in cycles, and human nature doesn’t change that much sadly,” Johnson told [The Vinyl Factory](#). “As a species we are evolving technologically far more rapidly than we are morally, ethically or spiritually.”

The The's political commentary scans especially familiar. *Infected's* "Heartland" lashed out at the UK's mid-'80s politics, but the song could be written about America in 2018, between its references to people wishing for a "utopia" that doesn't exist and its criticism of class divisions: "The hearts are being cut from the welfare state/ Let the poor drink the milk, while the rich eat the honey." The deceptively danceable "Armageddon Days (Are Here Again)" is another resonator, as it points out religion's hypocrisy: "Islam is rising/ The Christians mobilizing/ The world is on its elbows and knees/ It's forgotten the message and worships the creeds."

How Johnson maps out his unsettled personal emotions is even more resonant. On *Mind Bomb*, the searing Sinead O'Connor duet "Kingdom Of Rain" analyzes a dissolving relationship from the perspective of both parties, creating welcome parity. The introspective "August & September," meanwhile, finds a man grappling with letting an ex go, with the kind of clarity few have in the moment: "What kind of man was I?! Who would sacrifice your happiness to satisfy his pride?" And it's easy to see why "This Is The Day" has continued to endure: The song's premise is deeply relatable — someone's perfect façade hides an imperfect inner life — but its lyrics are an optimistic pep talk, and reiterate that there's no telling what a new day might bring: "This is the day, your life will surely change/ This is the day, when things fall into place."

In the last few years, The The has been slowly creaking back to life, on Johnson's own terms. He started with composing movie soundtracks and recording [downloadable](#) shortwave radio broadcasts. Dubbed *Radio Cinéola*, these mixes of archival footage, collaborator interviews and sonic ephemera are described as "something of a cross between an EP and a jamboree bag." In 2015, Johnson did a 12-hour *Radio Cinéola* broadcast — covering political musings, poetry, and musical detours — that was later turned into a [lavish boxed set](#). A Swedish documentary on him and the band, *The Inertia Variations*, premiered in 2017. The The's activity is ramping up even more this year. In addition to tour dates in the US, UK, and Europe, Johnson is planning to record a new The The album, while an authorized band biography, *Long Shadows, High Hopes*, is coming from Omnibus Press in June.

While all of this activity could be viewed as a grand attempt to boost The The's legacy, it's clear that's not the case. Johnson's distaste of fame is well-documented, and his return to the spotlight is a move driven by art and creation rather than commerce or nostalgia. "People are terrified of being forgotten," he told *The Vinyl Factory*. "They want to be in the public eye and stay there. There is a sort of desperation and I find that quite horrific, really."

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