



The Smiths and Morrissey

by Eugenio Filice

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A promotional photograph of The Smiths created in 1985. Left to right: Andy Rourke, Morrissey, Johnny Marr, and Mike Joyce.

The short-lived, but intense, creative union of singer and lyricist Stephen Patrick Morrissey (b. 1959), guitarist Johnny Marr (b. John Martin Maher, 1963), drummer Michael Joyce (b. 1963), and bassist Andrew Rourke (b. 1964) began in 1982, when they formed the Manchester pop group, The Smiths.

By positioning themselves in opposition to the new romantic groups of the early 1980s, represented by such bands as Duran Duran (formed 1978) and Spandau Ballet (formed 1979), The Smiths brought to the British pop scene a refreshing class of independent, punk-inspired music.

The Smiths reacted against mainstream pop by reverting to a quasi-conservative and old-fashioned style of music-making, based on 1960s pop. They refused to employ machine-generated sound, such as the synthesizer, and were reluctant to nourish a burgeoning music video industry.

When The Smiths disbanded in 1987, they had produced seven albums: *The Smiths* (1984), *Hatful of Hollow* (1984), *Meat is Murder* (1985), *The Queen is Dead* (1986), *The World Won't Listen* (1987), *Louder Than Bombs* (1987), and *Strangeways, Here We Come* (1987).

After the group's demise, Morrissey began a solo career that has been mixed, yielding both successes and failures. His solo albums include *Viva Hate* (1988), *Bona Drag* (1990), *Kill Uncle* (1991), *Your Arsenal* (1992), *Beethoven Was Deaf* (1993), *Vauxhall and I* (1994), *Southpaw Grammar* (1995), and *Maladjusted* (1997).

Although The Smiths are now defunct, their astonishing, intellectual, and highly original body of work endures. The energy and verve of the music was the outcome of an impassioned and direct presentation of vocals and sound.

The Smiths expressed bravura by steadfastly avoiding trite and stereotypical lyrics. Even when Morrissey wrote about a common subject matter such as love, he stated unconventional ideas in surprising ways. In "Is It Really So Strange?" for example, he uses surprising images such as the murder of a horse and a nun to prove that he is in love.

Morrissey also animated his lyrics by drawing upon tortured personal experiences, for instance, his acknowledged alienation from others, as highlighted in the immensely popular ballad, "How Soon Is Now?" Moreover, as one commentator has observed, their music "archly expressed" queer subtexts.

Provocative hints of transvestism may be found in such songs as "Sheila Take A Bow," "Vicar in a Tutu," and "The Queen Is Dead." Morrissey also often broached the subject of masculinity, a theme exceedingly relevant to gay men.

Images of rough boys, such as James Dean and those populating the "sex and violence" books by Richard Allen (b. James Moffat, 1922), may be observed in such titles as "Rusholme Ruffians," "Sweet and Tender Hooligan," and "Suedehead" (found on Morrissey's solo recording, *Viva Hate*). Also from his solo career is

"Piccadilly Palare," which recovers *polari*, a form of "gay speak" used by rent boys in the 1960s.

A certain degree of homoeroticism also permeated The Smiths' album covers, as well as their concerts. The album covers frequently featured single portraits, often of brawny men, such as porn actor Joe Dallesandro on *The Smiths* and an unidentified Jean Cocteau model on *Hatful of Hollow*.

Inspired perhaps by Oscar Wilde, whom the lyricist avidly read and studied, The Smiths at their early concerts showered fans with gladioli from the stage. In turn, The Smiths' disciples exhibited great loyalty and admiration. They returned the symbolic gesture of camaraderie and tenderness by thrusting flowers at Morrissey's feet. Numerous men attempted to cross stage barriers (and often succeeded), in order to hug or kiss the "unloved," apparently miserable singer.

Morrissey has fiercely cultivated what some observers have called an androgynous persona. His appeal to gender rather than to sexual orientation has allowed him to manifest an emotional and sensitive demeanor, while maintaining a largely heterosexual following.

Although he has been featured in countless publicity photographs, as though he were a pornographic pin-up boy/sex-symbol, Morrissey has resolutely professed celibacy.

Morrissey has also always deflected questions regarding his alleged homosexuality. He once remarked, "I don't recognise such terms as heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, and I think it's important that there's someone in pop music who's like that. These words do great damage, they confuse people and they make people feel unhappy, so I want to do away with them."

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About the Author

Eugenio Filice is a doctoral student in art history at McGill University. He is currently preparing a dissertation on representation of gay men in contemporary Canadian art, and on the revival of figurative painting that occurred during late 1970s and 1980s.