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Matt Johnson on Making The The's 'Comeback' Grand, New Music

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In 2018, Matt Johnson performed live for the first time in 16 years. Taking a partial hiatus from music, the mastermind, singer, and songwriter behind [The The](#), marked the special occasion with a handful of North American dates and three sold-out shows in London, including one on June 5 at the Royal Albert Hall. To make the evening more monumental, the show was filmed and would be released a year later. *The Comeback Special* concert film circles around The The's nearly two decades since their 2000 album *NakedSelf* and chronicles the band's entire catalog of music spanning nearly 40 years.

When the film was shelved because of COVID, that spring, Johnson was also admitted to London's Royal Hospital with a rare, aggressive throat infection, but the unexpected diversions ultimately worked in Johnson's favor, leaving him time to mend and expand the project into the multi-layered platform of art he envisioned.

The sole, constant member of The The since its inception in 1979, Johnson enlisted previous members bassist James Eller, keyboardist DC Collard and drummer Earl Harvin, and new guitarist Barrie Cadoga to set the darker scenes around the 24-song set, featuring The The songs "This is the Day," "Infected," "The Beat(en) Generation," and "I've Been Waiting For Tomorrow (For All My Life)."

A longtime collaborator of Johnson's, Tim Pope—who has also done music videos for The Cure, Neil Young, The Psychedelic Furs, and dozens of artists throughout the past three decades—knew how to capture the film exactly how Johnson wanted, tapping into three main elements—the political, the emotional, and the metaphysical. The two first worked together in 1986 when Pope shot several earlier music videos around The The's second album, *Infected*, for the tracks "Heartland," shot in South London, "Out of the Blue," which was filmed at a brothel in Harlem, New York, and scenes set in Bolivia and Peru— even filming some scenes in Iquitos, where the 1982 Werner Herzog film *Fitzcarraldo* was made, for the lengthier track "The Mercy Beat."

"We had very different looks for each of those," says Johnson of grainier quality of the '80s videos compared to the crisper resolution of *The Comeback Special*. "Luckily, because of new technology, with the low light performances, we are able to keep this film as we designed it rather than in the past when you had to add an extra light for the camera."

Also complementing the more noir setting of the new film, Johnson and Pope incorporated the vignette “Conversations by Candlelight,” their chat over a bottle of Jura whiskey. Produced off the Inner Hebrides island of Jura in Scotland, where George Orwell penned his 1949 dystopian novel *1984*. “We chose it [Jura] because we’re living through increasing totalitarian nightmare,” says Johnson. “There are governments taking more powers from the citizenship.”

Their conversations, along with another whiskey-induced Radio Cinéola broadcast with Matt Johnson and Tim Pope, featuring an acoustic sampling of select *Comeback* tracks, are part of an accompanying 136-page art book documenting the story behind the *The Comeback Special*.



Creating a more multi-platform release during the pandemic, Johnson compiled as many mediums, creating an even grander *comeback*. The book features hundreds of photographs, film stills, and previously unseen artwork by Johnson’s late brother Andy Dog Johnson, who passed away in 2016. A number of hand-numbered autographed art prints—“Mobilise,” “Globalise,” “Hypnotise” and “Homogenise”—capturing moments from the concert, were also up for sale upon release.

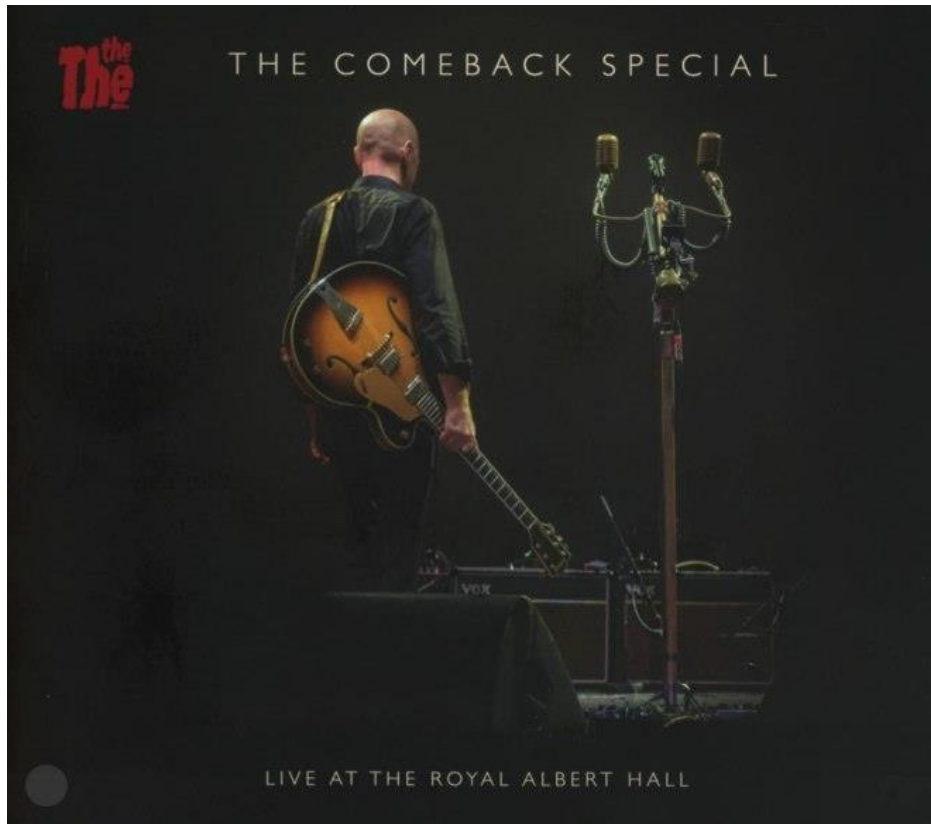
Along with the CD of the 24-song set, *The Comeback Special* also features a foreword by Pete Paphides and another Radio Cinéola broadcast with Matt Johnson and Jackson Ewald Johnson, who provide a guided tour of the book, an interview and performance with KCRW in LA, featuring a stripped-back performance of six The The songs, including “The Beat(en) Generation,” “Heartland,” and “This Is The Day,” and other audio extras.

“It’s a nice career overview,” says Johnson of the multimedia experience around *The Comeback Special*. “These are all fresh versions of the catalog, but it covers pretty much the entire catalog of past eras for most albums.”

The Comeback Special tells the story of Johnson, The The, and something greater. Always inspired by the times, many of the songs have greater resonance today since the social and political climate has shifted very little since he first wrote many of them.

“We’ve seen extreme overreach by governments, and corporations funding the government against the population,” says Johnson. “It’s very concerning when rights get stripped away. “It’s like what happened after 9/11 when they’re stripping everyone’s rights in the name of security, and it’s the same thing with COVID with this massive

surveillance architecture, where people are being traced and tracked. Then there's the cashless society, or digital currency, which means that everything you do, everywhere you go, and every purchase you make is being monitored. I do not trust the people in power—anywhere."



Johnson still feels hopeful but is still wary of underlying motives around safety and security. "We have to be very very careful, but not too frightened, not too scared," he says. "We need to be positive and get on with our lives in a positive way."

"Social" intolerance is another hindrance to any societal growth. "One thing I find very disturbing in the last few years is extreme intolerance of anyone with an opposing view," shares Johnson. "I believe in freedom of speech and freedom of expression, but the level of hatred and the 'canceled culture' has become the digital version of book burning. Someone's got a point of view, you disagree with them, so you work to get them shut down, gagged, and thrown off the internet. The level of hatred people have is very worrying."

NakedSelf track "Global Eyes" speaks to what is transpiring today, says Johnson, in lyrics *Mobilize, globalize, hypnotize, homogenize / Shut your eyes don't criticize*. "There was the Telecommunications Act of 96 where they consolidated or basically destroyed independent journalists and broadcast. And it was obvious we were heading towards this globalized world where the very powerful were consolidating things globally, so this has been something that's been on most of our minds for a long time. That song seems to be the most relevant at the moment."

He adds, “There’s a lot of very relevant information outside of the mainstream. What is today considered a conspiracy theory, in a couple of years time is considered a conspiracy fact or a prophecy. A lot of that is just pure propaganda. You’ve got to dig further uphill to have a better idea of what’s really going on.”

Today, Johnson, who is now 60, has little time to look back on the past 40-plus years of The The’s history and the time since 1983 debut *Soul Mining*, unless he’s remastering older pieces of work. “I’m constantly thinking of ideas,” he says. “I’ve got to redouble my efforts to finish it all, because I’ve got a big archive of material of half-finished demo ideas.”

Forward-facing, Johnson has his plate full with a back catalog of music partially that needs to get out, including new music for The The, continuing his [Radio Cinéola](#) podcast on Apple, and screening *The Comeback Special* as a double-feature, along with the 1993, Pope-directed *From Dusk 'Til Dawn*—used on the band’s tour the same year—in London December 2021.

“It’s not really linear,” says Johnson. “I still feel that I’ve got more music in me to express. I feel a sense of dissatisfaction with what I’ve done so far in my career. There’s a lot more I’d like to do, and hopefully, I’ll be able to do that.”



https://youtu.be/Y4W_pLvLUS4

Photos: SRO PR