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Interview: Matt Johnson Illuminates On The The's Triumphant Comeback

By [Ken Scrudato](#) Published: October 24, 2021



Image by Prudence Upton

“The side of you they’ll never see / Is when you’re left alone with your memories / That hold your life together...like glue”

As the calendar ticked over to a new millennium, Matt Johnson seemed poised for another formidable chapter in his storied career as his musical alter ego [The The](#). He released his very well received sixth album [Naked Self](#) on Trent Reznor’s Nothing label in 2000, and it went to #45 in the UK charts (his first five had all gone Top 30); and a whole new generation had become retroactively infatuated with the post-punk era which birthed him, an infatuation that would carry on for the better part of the next decade. Yet following an appearance at the [2002 Meltdown Festival](#) in London – at the behest of [David Bowie](#) – The The disappeared from the stage, and mostly from the studio as well (save for a few indie soundtrack projects), for what would ultimately be 16 years. But then Swedish filmmaker, ex-girlfriend and mother of his grown son Johanna St Michaels initiated a documentary about Johnson, which would end up as 2017’s [The Inertia Variations](#) – and its success inspired him to revive the band.

What followed was an utterly triumphant 2018 reunion tour, fittingly titled *The Comeback Special*, and featuring band members from various eras – though it was not without its heartache, as Johnson’s father passed away just days before the opening show at London’s [Royal Albert Hall](#). Still, the inspiration would ultimately carry over to the recording of a new studio album, which is due at some unspecified date in the near future.

In the meantime, an appropriately ambitious multi-format document of [The Comeback Special](#) will be released this October 29 (via [earMUSIC](#)), including a 136-page art book, director [Tim Pope](#)’s film of the Albert Hall show, and six discs of exclusive content, including an interview + a half dozen acoustic performances at LA’s [KCRW](#). It’s almost as if Johnson is apologizing for being away for so long, and gifting his fans with something that just may very well make up for all the lost time.

As the release date neared, we caught up with him for a chat about what it means to be back, and how some things really do never change.



<https://youtu.be/r6eTIE2a1-U>

So what was it like, returning to Royal Albert Hall in 2018?

It was very, very positive, the band was absolutely brilliant. It’s a beautiful space, and it has a special kind of magic, a charisma to it. It’s part of the national psyche. I’d played there three times before, but this was much different. It was very intense, the fact that I hadn’t been onstage for more than fifteen years, and it was being filmed; and my father died just a couple of days before the concert, he was due to be there.

How did it feel to be touring after such a long time?

I felt extremely calm on the tour. There was a huge amount of warmth from the audience, it was very emotional actually.

Which were the most visceral songs for you to be up there playing again?

Well, I would say I tried to represent all the albums, but the one that was over-represented was [Dusk](#). And the reason is that it was written in the aftermath of my younger brother Eugene's death [in 1989]. Songs like 'Love is Stronger Than Death' really resonated again. But also, ['This is the Day'](#)...

Yeah, I wanted to ask you about that song. It really has taken on a life of its own, it captures something so essential about the act of self reflection. It was also a hit of optimism in very pessimistic times when it was released in 1983. What was going on in your head when you wrote it, and what does it mean to you now?

I wrote it when I was 21 years old, and in many ways the lyrics are more pertinent to me now. It was a very important time in my life, I had been on the dole, and was living in a bedsit, releasing records but making no money. The song coincided with a very big change in my life, falling in love with my first proper girlfriend, Fiona, moving in with her, and signing my first label contract.

What actually inspired those now immortal lyrics?

I was a daydreamer in school, staring out of windows and looking at blue skies. The plane was symbolic of freedom, and traveling the world, a sense of possibility and hope. I've always been a quite sentimental person, and the realization that life was very different on the inside looking out, than on the outside looking in. It's multi-layered – it was meant to be a positive, hopeful song, but also written from a very reflective, sweetly sad point of view. I never get tired of people telling me it has stayed with them through the years.



The The at the Royal Albert Hall

I've always felt like you had a unique ability to address the political by making it personal and philosophical. It's a very delicate dance. How do you see the world now in comparison to when you were writing songs like 'Armageddon Days'?

That song was a bit ahead of the curve, and it's now a very different world in many respects. But though the technology changes, the scenery changes...the human story remains the same.

The pandemic has certainly reminded us how much those in power still control our ultimate destiny...

The last nineteen months have been very hard, there's a tremendous amount of fear. You see people in the countryside by themselves fully masked up, people dying in hospital without their loved ones around them. Some of the side effects of these political decisions have been quite devastating.

We were facing down the nuclear age back when you first wrote the song. But now we face the apocalyptic in probably an even more realistic way, with these deadly viruses and escalating climate change. I think it's more likely that the Earth itself will destroy us rather than a nuclear bomb destroying us.

It's starting to look that way, the Earth is increasingly troubled by human behavior. But human civilization is like one of those giant supertankers – to change course is a slow and ponderous process. ['Lonely Planet'](#) was also a very emotional song to play on the tour, for those same reasons.

During the Reagan and Thatcher years there was this great exaltation of the individual – it was a very capitalistic idea. It's all about you, and your success. It stuck, and forty years later, we have absolutely no sense of community – everyone else can pretty much go to hell.

Thatcher did famously say that there is no such thing as community. Then came the privatization of everything, and the rape of other countries' resources.



https://youtu.be/Y4W_pLvLUS4

Rampant privatization is literally the destruction of community.

[Jeremy Corbyn](#) wanted to renationalize, stop the foreign wars, put money into proper healthcare and education – and he had his character assassinated. Then they brought back the neoliberals, the heirs to Tony Blair.

The media feeds all of this...

You can't have a functioning democracy without a functioning media. But that media is controlled by just a few individuals, and it encourages people to vote against their own interests. Nobody knows what to believe, which fosters the infiltration of conspiracy theories.

But the spread of misinformation seems sort of beyond reversal.

The division in society that's been exacerbated by social media...well, I'm a big believer in free speech and the exchange of ideas, but the hatred and the division right now is very disturbing to me. You're not allowed to hold a different point of view without being screamed down and abused.

Back to the concert film...how did you come to choose Tim Pope to direct?

Tim is a good mate, he knows what I like and what I don't like. We divided the show into three parts: political, emotional and metaphysical. Plus there was the encore. Tim really captured it beautifully.

Is this meant to be a beginning or an end?

A beginning. A new beginning, yeah.

So what can we expect from here?

A new album will be the priority.

And finally, the eternal question: Where does Matt Johnson end, and The The begin?

Wow, that is an interesting question. In some ways...if I could go back in time, I may not have used the name The The. Because my first album was actually under my own name. And who knew about search engines back in 1979? In some ways it's kept us an underground group. But it's always more than a solo project, it's a collaborative entity, a conceptual, collective group. I've gotten to work with a lot of brilliant people, directors, photographers, painters, poets...

It's always a party, huh?

We do have a lot of fun.



Image by Christie Goodwin