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A Typically Hectic Day in the Life of The The's Matt Johnson

Finding a moment in his busy schedule to chat, Johnson details *The Comeback Special*, a new multimedia package that was three years in the making.

There is no typical day in the life of Matt Johnson, the brains behind the iconic British post-punk act [The The](#). On a random Thursday, Johnson drops off his youngest son at school, then cycles over to his studio in London near the city's financial district.

Johnson's friend and sometimes-collaborator Johnny Marr stops by and the two go for lunch ("We make each other laugh," Johnson notes). He then has a series of interviews to complete for the multimedia project he's just released, *The Comeback Special*, which is a live album, DVD, and coffee table book.

After the interviews, Johnson will be working on a series of bootlegs he's preparing for a Christmas release. He'll end the day at home in time for dinner with his family and to play a board game, read his son a bedtime story—they're currently working through Greek myths—then watch a movie and wrap up the day at midnight. This is early for Johnson, who generally doesn't get to bed until much later, as there are so many different things he needs to tend to. "The days are pretty sociable," says Johnson. "There are always people coming and going, which is nice. But, I don't get enough time by myself. I'd like a bit more time to meditate and reflect, because it's always a bit frantic with lots going on. I tend to need deadlines, because creative projects—unless they have a strict deadline—can start to run on too long."



https://youtu.be/Y4W_pLvLUS4

This was the case with *The Comeback Special*, which was captured in 2018, and isn't seeing a release until three years later. The project marks Johnson's triumphant return to the stage after a 16-year absence from live shows. The audio for many of that run's tour dates was recorded and the June 5, 2018 performance at the Royal Albert Hall in London was captured on film. The aim was to put together a nice multimedia package for fans that includes a 24-song album—complete with between-song banter—and a professionally captured concert film by renowned music video director Tim Pope.

Johnson's time in lockdown (a "detour into dystopia," as he calls it) afforded him the opportunity to spend more time on editing and mixing, making *The Comeback Special* a much bigger and even better project than it was originally intended to be. Johnson sifted through assets such as artwork, photographs of rehearsals, and lyrics to all the songs on the set list, and from these he put together a 136-page coffee table book which additionally includes various contributions by band members and collaborators. The [box set](#) collection also has audio portions such as soundchecks from the tour, sessions from Johnson's shortwave broadcast series Radio Cinéola, a conversation with Johnson and Pope, a guided audio tour of the book, a radio performance from KCRW's "Morning Becomes Eclectic," and a 10-inch vinyl of two remixes.

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"We felt because of the delay of this release, it would be nice to do something really special," says Johnson. "It was a very successful, enjoyable tour, so it was really lovely to have a permanent record with an object that people would want to own. I was always a big fan of The Folio Society books and Criterion Collection DVDs and Blu-rays, physical objects where a lot of love and care and attention was paid. So that's what we decided to do, make a conscious decision to make it as high-quality as possible so that it's an object people will feel happy having on their shelf." Even though Johnson is ecstatic with the final product, he admits *The Comeback Special* has been one of "the most difficult and bedeviled" projects he's ever been involved with. This is primarily due to the COVID- and Brexit-caused slowdowns in production for physical items in the UK, which pushed back the drop date for the project even further. "Everyone I know, we were all in the same boat," says Johnson. "Now, it's become quite frantic with everybody trying to catch up with all the delayed projects."



photo by Christie Goodwin

While the supply chains were lagging, Johnson was not. The The may not release albums at a steady clip, but Johnson is very active: In addition to broadcasting his aforementioned Radio Cinéola program, he scores soundtracks on a regular basis; he creates collectable lyric postcard bundles that come with their own Spotify playlists (one of his many, many merchandise ideas that range from screenprints to mugs and pencils); he's been the subject of a documentary with 2017's *The Inertia Variations*. And he went through major surgery as a result of a horrifying-looking throat infection, which he shared pictures of on his [site](#).

Johnson isn't returning to the concert stage just yet, but he has been making the rounds on theater stages where *The Comeback Special* film is screening in the UK followed by a Q&A with Johnson and Pope. This is another item on his self-imposed and voluntary never-ending to-do list, making every day begin early for him, and end late. This is partially because he's not done with his tasks for the day, and partially because of hyperactivity, an issue he feels he shares with most of humankind. "The digital communication systems we're enslaved to, they've been a bit of a curse, even more than a blessing," says Johnson. "It's affecting people's concentration and their discipline. I'm continually checking stuff that comes in or did not come in or expect something at any moment. I find it very, very distracting.

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“If I could go back in time and simplify life,” he continues, “I probably would, even if it meant getting rid of the internet and mobile phones. Most people feel frazzled and overwhelmed and distracted. Many people I talk to, we don’t know how to stop or how to get off. I don’t know what the answer is, probably to increase personal discipline with meditation and exercise and drinking less alcohol, watching less television and reading more books. But it takes a massive amount of discipline. Life in the world is becoming increasingly complicated and spread about.”

For now, Johnson keeps adding to his repertoire. He’s turning *The Comeback Special* screenings into a double-feature with the inclusion of the 1993 tour film *From Dusk ’Til Dawn*, also directed by Pope, for a special event in London in mid-December. Says Johnson, “I love being in the studio. I love experimenting with instruments and recording equipment. I love soundtrack work. I also really enjoy playing with the band and performing shows, and writing and singing lyrics. It’s all different aspects of a career.” **FL**

[Matt JohnsonThe The](#)