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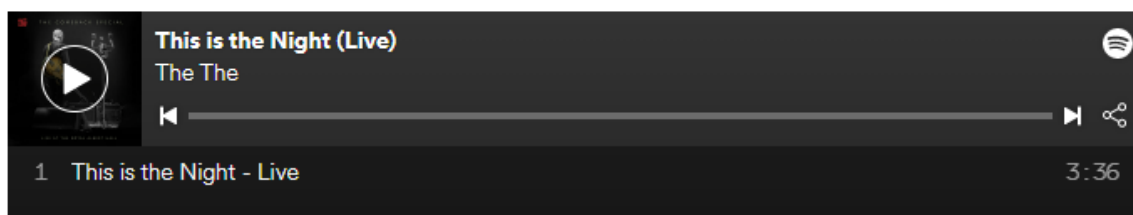
The The Front Man Matt Johnson Resurrects the Band for 'The Comeback Special' (FEATURE)

- [By Katherine Yeske Taylor](#)

When English alternative rock band The The released their 1983 debut album *Soul Mining*, founder and frontman Matt Johnson was praised as a particularly astute and exceptional songwriter. He maintained that reputation through 2000's *NakedSelf* album – then put The The on hiatus as he turned to film composing and other projects. So it was a surprise when he resurrected the group in 2018 for a triumphant U.K. tour, including a show at London's prestigious Royal Albert Hall that was captured in a live album, film, and deluxe book that are collectively titled *The Comeback Special* (releasing on October 29th).

Calling from his London home, Johnson explains that *The Comeback Special* was originally set for a 2019 release, "But because of Brexit and COVID and all the insanity, everything's been delayed and delayed," he says, "but in some ways, it's better now than it would have been. We had more time to mix and to edit the film. And then we created the really beautiful coffee table book that goes with it, as well. I think it's a case of making the best of these difficult situations."

With the finished project finally in hand, "I'm very proud of it," Johnson says. "I think it's a very good overview of my career so far. I tried to do new versions of the songs without disturbing the soul of the song, I wanted it to feel fresh and contemporary, rather than trying to recreate the earlier recordings."



Given The The's long history, Johnson had to be strategic about the set list. "I needed to get the balance between including enough better-known songs, but also some obscure songs from the earlier albums," he says. "I decided to divide the show into three parts: political, emotional, and metaphysical. All the political songs were in the first third of the show, then [we] shifted to the emotional songs, and then to the metaphysical songs. It gave the show some structure. Because songs were pulled from so many different albums and eras, I needed a concept that tied it all together, and I was very pleased with the way it all turned out."

Even so, Johnson admits that he's a bit surprised to find himself actively fronting The The again. After all, he says, "I'd pretty much retired [from music] in 2002. Until 2010, I

didn't even pick up an instrument." It wasn't until 2017 that he realized he needed the resurrect the band.

"I'd just been involved in quite a big documentary project called *The Inertia Variations*," Johnson says. "It was based around the poem called 'The Inertia Variations' by an English poet named John Tottenham. It's a beautiful meditation that's full of humor and pathos and insights about inertia, procrastination, and laziness. Ironically, a project about inertia stimulated my creativity. Unfortunately, during the making of that documentary, my older brother Andrew died, and I wrote a song for him called 'We Can't Stop What's Coming.' I performed that song, which was the first time I'd sung live in fifteen years or so, on a live broadcast from my studio. That really inspired me to want to sing again."

Johnson had his management set up a 2018 tour, but "I didn't know what to expect, really," he says. "But the shows were selling out in minutes everywhere, so there was a huge amount of interest, which I wasn't really aware of because I keep a bit of a low profile from the music scene. I don't read music papers. I don't really listen to music radio. I live a life very separate to the music industry. So I had no idea what interest it would be out there, so I was very pleasantly surprised."

Becoming such an esteemed musician is, Johnson admits, a far cry from where he started out: "I was a young working-class boy in East London. I left school at the age of fifteen; I didn't do very well at school – I left with no qualifications. There were not a huge amount of options." He adds that most people in his situation ended up working in factories the rest of their lives.

Johnson had a much different plan for himself, though. He'd begun playing in bands and writing his own songs when he was only eleven years old, so he was certain he could become a professional musician with something unique to say. "When I was a little boy, I was a big fan of John Lennon and The Beatles, and there was a wonderful quote of his that stuck in my mind as advice for a songwriter, which is basically, 'Just tell the truth and make it rhyme.' We all have our own version of the truth. All we can do is be true to how we feel and express it, rather than worry about expressing what someone wants us to express," he says.



https://youtu.be/Y4W_pLvLUS4

After leaving school, Johnson immediately got a job at a recording studio in London's SoHo district. That part of town, he recalls, "was a red-light district, so there was a lot of pornography and sex shops – but also the film industry; a lot of that was based there. So it was a very interesting place to work for a fifteen year old.

"Working in the studio, I felt very confident I could make a career for myself," Johnson continues. "It was a lot of work but also a lot of fun. I think that's the most important thing, is to do what you love doing. Don't worry too much about the financial side. Just have fun, and I think the financial side takes care of itself. As long as you feel happy inside and are doing what you should be doing, that's the most important thing, because happy people attract good luck."

This approach certainly proved correct in Johnson's case, as he went on to form The The in 1979 and release a string of critically acclaimed albums: *Soul Mining* (1983), *Infected* (1986), *Mind Bomb* (1989), *Dusk* (1993), *Hanky Panky* (1995), and *NakedSelf* (2000). Through it all, Johnson remained the band's leader and sole constant member. (The ever-changing lineup has included almost two dozen official members so far, including ex-The Smiths guitarist Johnny Marr from 1988-1994, and again in 2017).

Johnson is especially known for his insightful and often poignant lyrics that deftly capture the alienation, hypocrisy, and angst that have plagued the world. He says he's writing material for a new album now, and is finding that these current troubled times are still offering plenty of songwriting fodder. "Who'd have thought two years ago that we would have descended into a dystopian nightmare that shows no sign of ending?" he says with a sigh. "I'd much rather that the songs that I wrote were completely out of

date, because I've got children – I want them to grow up in a happy, harmonious society, not one that is on this trajectory.”

It seems, then, that this is the perfect time for Johnson to bring back The The and continue to offer up insightful, empathetic songs, just as he did in the past. “I hope that when people listen to the songs, they feel and they sense that it’s being written with a sincere desire to communicate,” Johnson says. The message he wants to get across now, he says, is that “We have to carry on our lives as much as possible. Not give in to this craziness. Hopefully, people can see through the manipulation and the propaganda and use common sense and be positive and live their life with a sense of joy, rather than with a sense of fear.”