

The Smiths: What difference do they make?

As far as the Doctor is concerned, any gay rockin' and rollin' is a cause for celebration.

BY DR. TANTALUS

What are we to make of The Smiths? One moment they appear poised for the type of mass cultural breakthrough usually reserved for knot-heads like Bon Jovi. They tour. They make videos. Their albums appear on charts in *Rolling Stone*. They release three minute epics like "What Difference Does It Make?", focusing on a gay coming-of-age, which establishes them as the reigning intellectuals in an admittedly narrow field of contestants. Yet turn your back on them for

Music

even a second and you may find cattle being slaughtered on your latest record. Radical gay vegetarianism? Or consider "Vicar in a Tutu." Radical gay vegie-antishamanism?

As far as the Doctor is concerned, any gay rockin' and rollin' is a cause for celebration. Enjoy it now; ask questions later. But four albums and multitudinous singles later the questions can no longer be left on the dance floor. Who the heck are these guys?

Square one finds us with a four member English band with your basic equipment:

Guitar, bass, drums and voice. Violin sections need not apply. Johnny Marr, lead guitarist, appears to receive credit for the songwriting while lead singer Morrissey contributes his lyrics and twisted psyche to the cause. Musically The Smiths mine a very narrow vein, with repeated guitar riffs leading generally mid-tempo numbers while Morrissey declaims his latest obsession over it all. Occasionally something hummable slips past the censors but Morrissey's voice, which is arresting rather than pretty, usually takes the songs back to their more ragged edges.

Although the Doctor has not taken a prescription of The Smiths in a couple of weeks it occurs to him that tunes in major keys are typically verboten. Clearly Morrissey's angst dominates the albums. One can only imagine what Tipper Gore might do upon hearing a record by The Smiths, but a warning label regarding depression might be appropriate.

Regardless of the narrowness of their range, The Smiths make music that is different than the usual claptrap that often confronts one on the radio, in local taverns and on MTV. This fact alone should deserve a Nobel Prize. How long must we endure faceless groups with German names that partake of endless chainmail posturing? At the very least The Smiths

appear to mean what they say and say what they mean, which these days is a rarity.

In fact The Smiths appear as if they wandered onto the stage by mistake. Nerds hit the big-time. This is refreshing, rewarding and downright compelling. Moreover, The Smiths seem to expect you to understand their lyrics. (And they call themselves a rock group?)

Such an attitude is apparently capable of producing music of genuine warmth and surprising subtlety. The catchy "What Difference Does It Make?" responds to his friend's shock with sympathy; "How Soon Is Now?" hypnotically weaves its way to the repeated plea of "I am human and need to be loved/Just like everybody else does;" "Reel Around the Fountain" shows Morrissey at love's playful best ("I dreamt about you last night/and fell out of bed twice."). In these songs, and a few others like it, Morrissey strips away his soul to leave only the most telling moments. His mirror of truth reflects a poignancy that others simply miss.

The problem with Morrissey's vision is that too often the mirror provides a sour and inward image. Death seems ever-present and is not regarded as an enemy but as a peaceful escape. In "I Know It's Over" on the recent "The Queen Is Dead" album The Smiths sing dreamily of "the soil falling over my head." Next to death, depression seems like a used car, but Morrissey makes the most of it whenever possible. In the "Headmaster Ritual" we hear "Belligerent ghouls/run Manchester schools" and think about the

pleasures of his childhood. Even worse, misogyny runs rampant in "Pretty Girls Make Graves" while self-hate erupts in "Bigmouth Strikes Again." He must be a fun date.

Naturally, the songs don't always end in doom, depression or death, but in the context of The Smiths that is where one suspects they will ultimately lead. There is a fine line between serious art, which is often propelled by tragedy, and self-pity, which runs on engines of its own. Too often The Smiths not only walk the line but seem to wallow all over it. And let me tell you, it's not a pretty sight. One need not beg for the return of the Partridge Family to wish that The Smiths would just kick out the slats and loosen up a little bit.

In conclusion, The Smiths occasionally reach moments of transcendence when they step back from their subjects and invest their efforts with a minimum of objectivity. Unfortunately, they far too often feel there is a point to be made about this terrible world in which we all reside and think there is nothing better than to take a sledge hammer to point it out. Intentions 10, Subtlety 0.

The Doctor, who always believes in his patients, will undoubtedly give The Smiths yet another chance to heal themselves and the next record may be no exception. But one wonders how long we can explore the same territory again and again without becoming terribly bored with it all or without the sort of group implosion that this trend implies. What difference do they make? Less and less all the time.

Bolder line

Alix is hot, Susan's not

True love and a couple of meals a day will keep my hunger away.

BY MEG GRACE

For those of you who have never heard Alix Dobkin, this is the album on which to discover her. And for those loyal Alix fans (like myself), this is her best!

On *Never Been Better*, her fifth release, Alix has departed from her usual folk format and teamed up with various synthesizer artists, including Sue Fink, Diane Lindsay and Carol MacDonald.

This is an exciting album. Every song is full of insightful lyrics and compelling music. Her songs evoke feelings that range from self-love to outrage. Speaking of violence against women, Alix sings:

I'm sick and tired of
violence and cruel ways
Don't you just hate
Living with these damned outrages.
(Some Boys)

In a playful vein, Alix sings of the "Pitfalls of True Love" with this tongue-in-cheek lyric:

True love and seventy-five cents
will get me on the subway.
True love and a couple of meals a day
will keep my hunger away
True love, true love, true, true love.

Singing her version of a rap tune, she gives us "Boy-Girl Rap," a powerful rap about the "shaky heterosexual state" in which

"all the
TV, movies, books and magazines, they
give us the same old dance, the same old

routines.

It's boy-girl, boy-girl, sure gets tedious, heavy-handed hetero harangue from the medias, tryin' to convince us a woman needs a man, and they go on and on about it ad nauseum."

Every song is worth mentioning on this album (but Jay said to keep this short), so get out to A Woman's Place Bookstore and get your own copy of this entertaining and potent record.

The Power of My Love For You is Susan Savell's debut release and she has gathered some rather impressive artists to join her including Rhiannon, Barbara Borden and Janet Small of the jazz group, Alive, as well as Linda Tillery, Mary Watkins and Terry Garthwaite. Unfortunately, none of these artists are challenged by the music they are performing.

Susan's songs are beautifully inspired. "Carry It On" is a "tribute to the spiritual and moral leadership of Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks and Harriet Tubman." "Simple Ceremonies" hopes to "serve as a call for those who care about healing and preserving the beauty of the earth." While the inspirations feel full of loving intentions, the music comes across as lilting and sappy.

If you are looking for spiritual support and encouragement, this album is for you but do not expect the quality of music to match the caliber of the intent.

ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE

New York photographer Robert Mapplethorpe takes on the codes of representation, of masculinity and femininity, sexuality and pornography, and manipulating the formalities of portraiture and still life, he creates powerful and provocative images. His work ranges from freezeframing the illustrious — Debbie Harry, Patti Smith, Lord Snowdon — to revelling in the sensuous — be it torso or tulip. The catalogue includes 60 duotone reproductions and essays by Alan Hollinghurst and Stuart Morgan.

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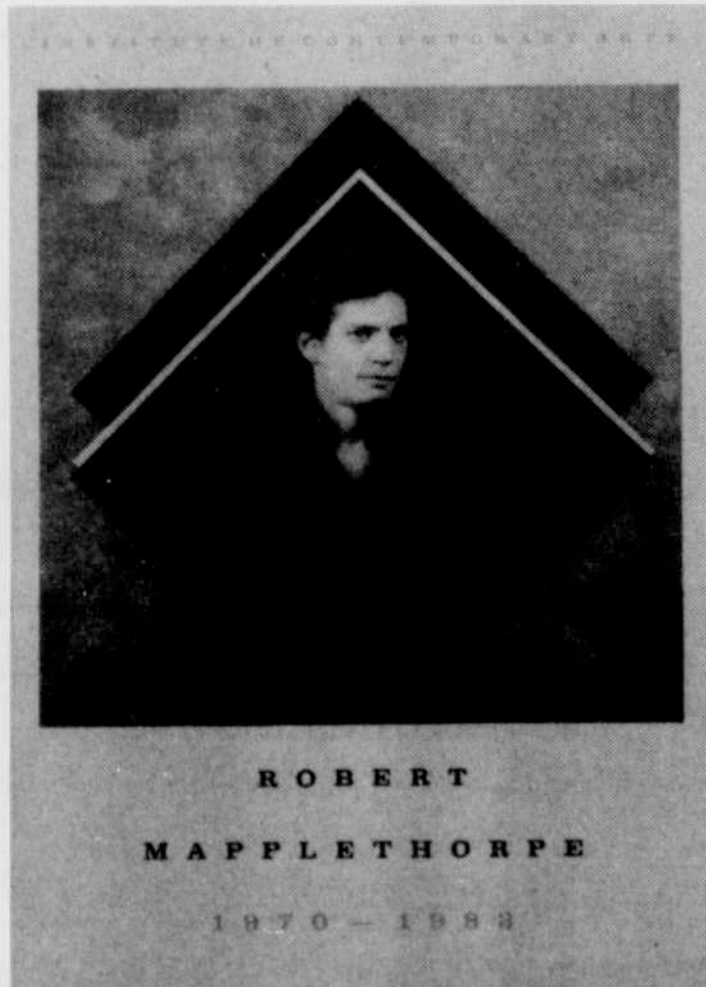
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