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MUSIC

Angst lang syne

Don't miss Morrissey in concert—even if you're no longer 16, clumsy and shy

BY CHRISTOPHER MCQUAIN

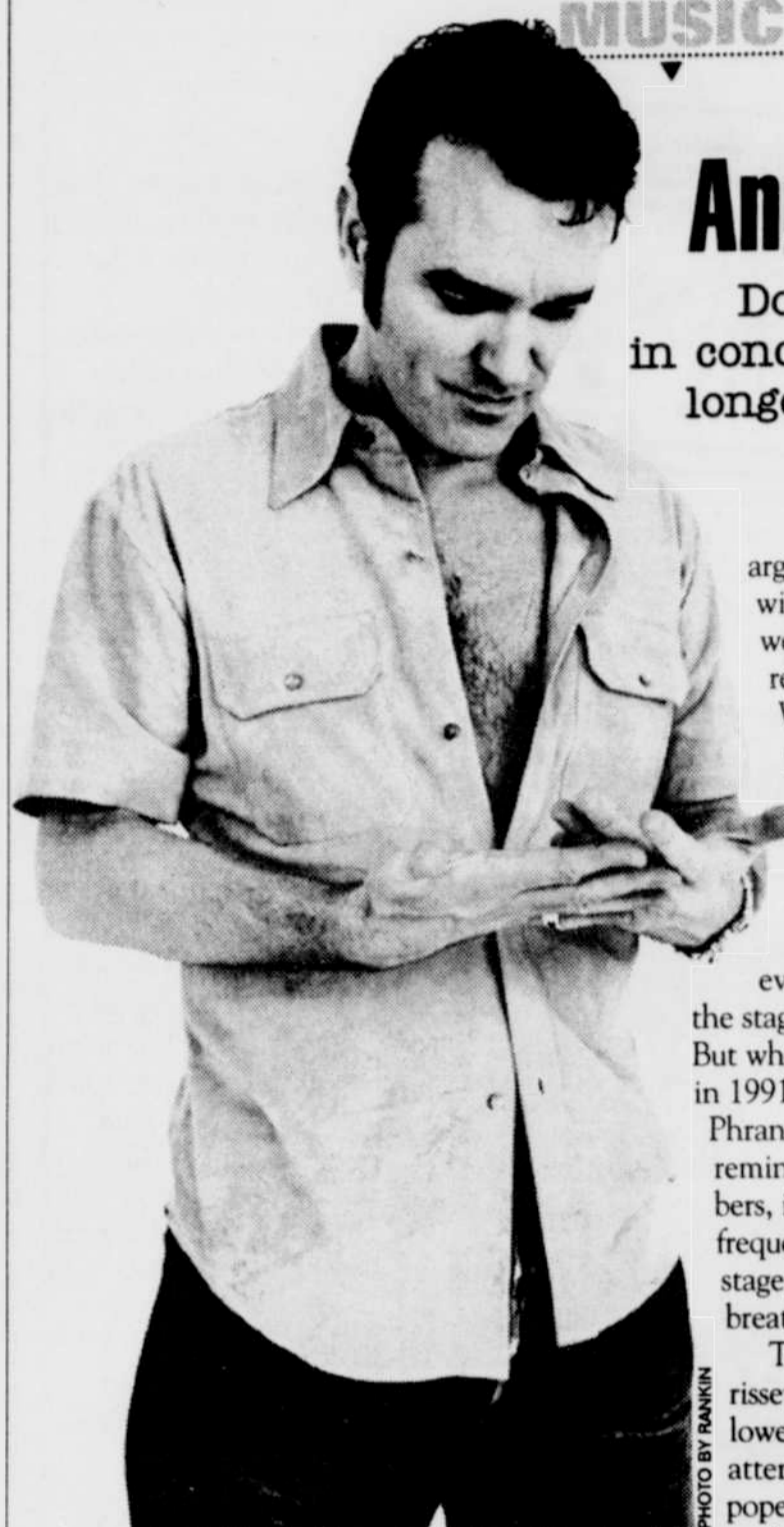


PHOTO BY FRANKLIN

arguably the most passionately (if not widely) loved group of all time. Worries were quickly dispelled, however, by the release of Morrissey's first solo album, *Viva Hate*, in 1988. Not only did it prove that he would have no problem finding musicians as willing to follow his vision as the Smiths had been, the album hit No. 1 on the UK charts.

Smiths concerts had always been events, with fans of all genders showering the stage with flowers and notes for Morrissey. But when he embarked upon his first solo tour in 1991—handpicking lesbian folk singer Phranc as the opening act—the scenario was reminiscent of Beatlemania. Audience members, in hopes of touching their idol, would frequently dodge security to clamber onto the stage, often leaving Morrissey gasping for breath beneath a heap of adoring fans.

Today, with the aid of the Internet, Morrissey's touring and recording schedule is followed by fans worldwide with the sort of attention usually reserved for royalty or the pope; punch "Morrissey" into your search engine, and you'll come up with hundreds of fan sites, news groups and chat rooms.

For over 15 years, both as the lead singer of the Smiths and as a solo artist, English pop star Morrissey—who will perform at the Roseland Theater in Portland on Feb. 2—has provoked strong reactions from audiences with recordings and live appearances so unique and powerful they can only be attributed to a true icon. Though never much more than a cult object in the United States—and a fervid cult it is—Morrissey is a legendary star internationally and has always been capable of provoking controversy with his incisive lyrics and outspoken views on sex, gender, class and race.

In 1983, during the bleak Thatcher era of unemployment and social service cuts, Morrissey (who dropped his first name, Steven, before he began performing) started writing songs with guitarist Johnny Marr. Shortly thereafter, they formed the Smiths.

A four-piece group with guitar, drums, bass and vocals, the Smiths was Morrissey's nostalgic pop revenge upon what he saw as the impersonal, mechanized pop of the 1980s. Influenced heavily by England's working-class-realist "kitchen sink" films of the 1960s and musical eccentrics (such as the Buzzcocks and the Fall) of the 1970s, Morrissey wrote cleverly cutting lyrics of adolescent anxiety, sexual skepticism and unrequited love.

Musically, the Smiths paid tribute to the most noble pop moments of the preceding decades. Motown girl-group simplicity, Who-Kinks melodiousness, glam swagger and punk attitude all weave their way through the Smiths' recorded output. On the vocal front, Morrissey sang aching melodies in an unabashed croon that hit rich baritone, swooning falsetto and all points in between. His untrained but technically capable singing fit the mood perfectly; Morrissey understood the part of the song when the singer's voice breaks with emotion is always the point of purest pop tenderness.

When the Smiths broke up in 1987, the UK press reacted as if Keith Richards and Mick Jagger had said goodbye forever, and the band's sizable cult following mourned the loss of

Willfully enigmatic and prone to saying provocative things to the press—like "I can't recognize gender" and "I don't know anybody who is absolutely, exclusively heterosexual"—Morrissey deflects questions about his own sexuality with Wildean quips and proclamations of celibacy. Regardless of his refusal to categorize himself, he's always had a large and loyal queer following, perhaps due to his androgynous persona and derisive view of gender conventions. Many of Morrissey's own heroes were gay, and Smiths record covers feature photographic portraits of Morrissey idols like Truman Capote, or stills from the films of Jean Cocteau and Andy Warhol.

Morrissey's unwillingness to identify his sexuality has, of course, angered some members of the queer community. In his book *Seduced and Abandoned: Essays on Gay Men and Popular Music*, British music critic Richard Smith demanded that Morrissey come out, and if he wouldn't, that he "get his hands off our history...and write about breeder culture."

It can, however, be argued that Morrissey's stubborn artistic independence, embrace of homoeroticism, questioning of gender roles and his personal, insightful lyrics about "otherness" of every sort, including sexual, make him more genuinely valuable to queer audiences than many "authentically" gay rock stars. It's difficult to imagine the latest George Michael or Elton John album being called "homoerotic and darkly celebratory of things homosexual" by the *Sunday Independent*, as was Morrissey's 1994 masterpiece, *Vauxhall & I*.

One of the most intriguing amalgams of emotional, political, artistic and sexual contradictions to appear in 20th century popular culture, Morrissey is the end of a family line that includes Oscar Wilde, Elvis Presley and David Bowie. Don't miss your opportunity on Feb. 2 to witness this unique, beloved living legend.

■ CHRISTOPHER MCQUAIN writes frequently for Just Out. He also screams and faints at Morrissey concerts.