

music

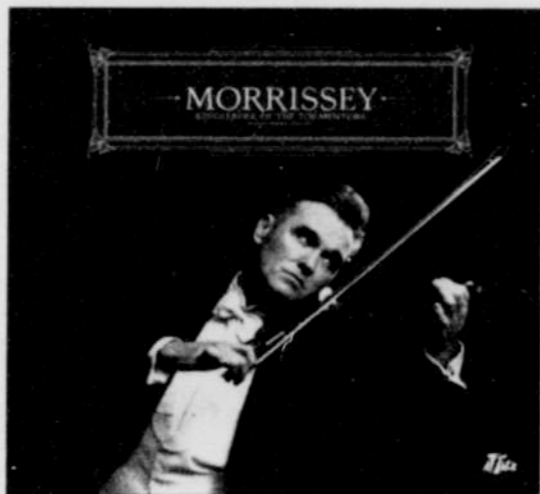
Return to Moz

The misery-monger sounds more confident than ever on his latest album
by Christopher McQuain

In a world that seems to have less and less use for nondisposable, larger-than-life icons, the unusual case of Morrissey becomes ever more intriguing (and encouraging). The former Smiths singer is now in the 24th year of his singular musical journey and has just released his eighth solo album, *Ringleader of the Tormentors* (Sanctuary Records), probably his most musically adventurous and confident record to date.

Morrissey is generally considered "alternative" by the categorizers, but like his rejuvenated 2004 album, *You Are the Quarry*, *Ringleader* is a Big Production with an indelibly embedded conviction that a pop album can be a work of art. This is nowhere more apparent than in his choice of producer: Tony Visconti, who recorded many of Morrissey's beloved 1970s glam-rock masterpieces by the likes of T. Rex and David Bowie, gives *Ringleader* a rich, shimmering, decadent sound. On particularly gorgeous tracks like "Dear God Please Help Me," "Life Is a Pigsty" and "At Last I Am Born," Visconti guides Morrissey and his musicians to previously unscaled heights of lush, inspired and impeccably articulated pop drama-queenery.

Another surprise collaborator is sun-drenched old-world Rome, where the allegedly misery-mongering former inveterate Englishman has been living and where *Ringleader* was composed and recorded. It's a decidedly Rome-besotted album, and the journey south is as metaphorical as it is geographical: The Ennio



Morricone-orchestrated ballad "Dear God Please Help Me," *Ringleader's* loveliest episode, finds Morrissey wandering the Italian capital, his "heart on a string," tremulously cruising and being cruised (all involving a conspicuous "he"—a slightly eyebrow-raising surprise from a lyricist who usually keeps his bisexually responsive options open with gender-neutral pronouns).

Morrissey's chronic suspiciousness toward romance, love and sex is now leavened with shreds of hard-won hope. The album's centerpiece, "Life Is a

Pigsty," makes a convincing case for the squalor of human existence, only to end with a defiantly triumphant litany: "Even now/In the final hour/Of my life/I'm falling in love again, again, again." And the last lines of the album-concluding "At Last I Am Born" are almost boastful about Morrissey's carnal rebirth: "I once was a mess/Of guilt because of the flesh/It's remarkable what you can learn/Once you are born."

It would be an exaggeration to characterize our legendary misanthrope as tanned, rested and happy, but *Ringleader of the Tormentors* is, in the end, an unexpected but brilliant chronicle of a famously tender, hypersensitive and critical persona finding a way to acknowledge life's inevitable pain while finally deigning to embrace some of its pleasures. 10

CHRISTOPHER MCQUAIN is a Seattle freelance writer.

More Morrissey

Is It Really So Strange? (Strand Home Video), a documentary just released on DVD by queer video artist William E. Jones, is—at least on the surface—about Morrissey's intensely passionate Latino fan base in Southern California. The theretofore very English singer himself lived in Los Angeles from 1997 to 2005; several of the interview subjects talk about visiting (stalking?) Morrissey at his home, spotting him on the town, etc. Jones, also an L.A. resident, interjects first-person narration about his own Morrissey fandom, slyly straddling the fence between fan and assayer of fandom.



Jones has earned a name for himself in avant-garde circles with collage-like, quasi-documentary works such as 1997's *Finished* (about the suicide of gay porn star Alain Lebeau) and 1998's *The Fall of Communism as Seen in Gay Pornography*, and his work differs from most conventional documentaries in that he often uses his ostensible topics to get at an infinitely more global theme. Accordingly, *Is It Really So Strange?* is less a document of a particular scene or cult than an investigation into the implications of obsessive, literally fanatical dedication to a celebrity, especially when a significant subset of the fans are oppressed or disenfranchised people. As Jones cuts to each fan in their turn and they say their piece about what Morrissey means to them, the singer becomes a more and more remote figure in the film; it is certainly more about the fans themselves, and even more so about the meaning of fandom.

Is It Really So Strange? has little to say about Morrissey that we didn't already know. But what makes it fascinating, moving and even haunting viewing is its disorienting yet insightful implication that Morrissey—or any celebrity distinctive enough to inspire obsessive devotion—could through no fault of his own somehow be all things to all people. Jones seems to be showing us that perhaps we all respond to our favorite celebs in the same way his subjects do, which means setting aside, in a kind of idol-worshipping myopia, some or all of our critical thinking—our own selves—and seeing in them just what we want: our own idealized reflection.

—CM

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