



Johnny Marr knew from an early age that he wanted to be a musician. But the former Smiths guitarist says the pressure on kids today to achieve academic results means it's harder than ever for new U.K. bands to emerge.

Writing in the key of life

BY SASKIA MURPHY
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

When Johnny Marr sat down to write his autobiography, "Set the Boy Free," it was a chance for him to set the record straight on a career spanning more than three decades. Starting with his humble beginnings in Manchester, England's Ardwick district, Marr writes of his first encounter with a guitar, the first time he met his wife, his fated meeting with Morrissey and everything that happened after and in between.

Although Marr is best known for his part in the undying legacy of The Smiths, his story as a musician encompasses a plethora of names and collaborators, from Kirsty MacColl to Modest Mouse, Pet Shop Boys to Nile Rogers, Hans Zimmer to The Cibs. It is these collaborations, he said, that continue to shape him as a guitarist. His autobiography, first published in November, is now available in a new paperback edition with extra material.

"For years it seemed like I was put in the position of defending why I hadn't followed the same path as, say, Peter Dinklage or the Edge or the Stones and all these musicians who stayed playing with the same bands for years," he said. "They happen to be people I respect so I don't have a blanket criticism of that, other than it wasn't for me and I can't imagine not making records with people like Beck, Pet Shop Boys or making solo records. To have not had that opportunity is not something I would have ever wanted."

"Let's put it this way," he said. "I always followed what I thought was best for my growth and inspiration as a musician. I wouldn't swap playing concerts with Hans Zimmer and a 70-piece choir and orchestra for anything – regardless of how much security or fame or status or wealth it may have brought. The bottom line is that I'm a better guitar player because of all the things I've done."

Marr's passion for the guitar is a theme that is threaded throughout his book. He writes about his fascination with music from an early age and recalls standing in front of the radio at the age of 4, listening out for

guitar hooks and memorizing the lyrics to songs by 1960s pop bands such as Love Affair and The Four Tops.

By the age of 5, Marr had a guitar of his own, and his journey from a child with a guitar to one of the country's most revered musicians followed an almost biblical path. He knew his purpose from a young age, and Marr writes about how his talent was recognized by a primary school teacher who opened his eyes to the possibility that he could one day be an artist.

"She contacted me to let me know that she'd seen it (the book), and that was amazing," Marr said, "because she was the first person who told me I was an artist, and that was a real turning point in my life."

Marr credits Miss Cocaine with helping him realize his dreams as a musician. But in the current school curriculum, where children face unprecedented pressure to achieve academic results, he said, creativity is being stifled.

"From what I have seen, the overwhelming message kids are given now is one of career panic and insecurity and competition. Aside from it stifling creativity and artistry, which I think is crucial on a spiritual level, it also takes away their youth to an extent. I'm not saying that people don't need to understand responsibility, but for kids to be putting themselves under immense stress and to have insecurity about career possibilities at the age of 15 is a real shame."

"Most of the people I know had no idea what they wanted to do until they got to their mid-20s," he said. "That's the natural way, as I see it. OK, some people know what path they want to go down when they're young, as I did, and that's very handy, but it's normal to not really know exactly what your destiny holds for you. But this culture of intense competition is really very convenient for the authorities, and it's convenient that they overlook the arts and culture almost to the point where it is seen as irresponsible or a bit of a cop-out to actually want a life in the arts."

"It was bad enough when I was growing up in the 1970s for working-class people to even think about themselves as an artist, let

alone describe themselves as such. If we're not careful, there will be no culture coming out of the U.K.," Marr said. "We need a new David Hockney, and we need new Tracy Emin and Maxine Peake. Those people do it against the odds, and it is seemingly more difficult now than it ever was."

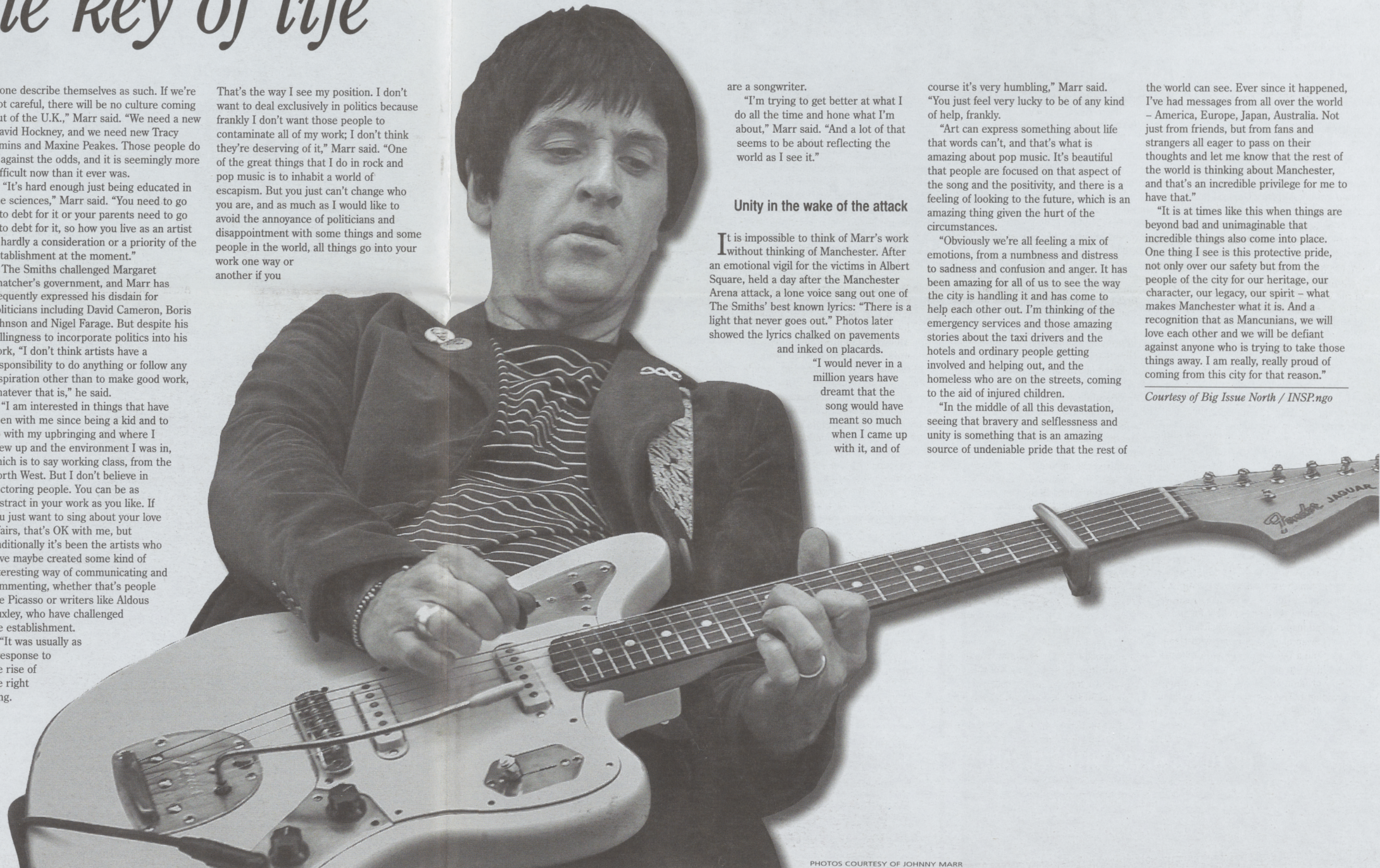
"It's hard enough just being educated in the sciences," Marr said. "You need to go into debt for it or your parents need to go into debt for it, so how you live as an artist is hardly a consideration or a priority of the establishment at the moment."

The Smiths challenged Margaret Thatcher's government, and Marr has frequently expressed his disdain for politicians including David Cameron, Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage. But despite his willingness to incorporate politics into his work, "I don't think artists have a responsibility to do anything or follow any inspiration other than to make good work, whatever that is," he said.

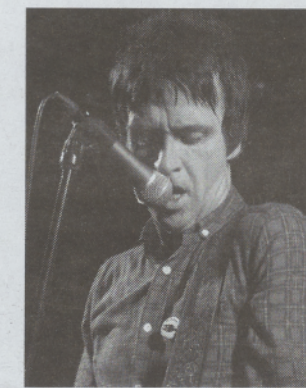
"I am interested in things that have been with me since being a kid and to do with my upbringing and where I grew up and the environment I was in, which is to say working class, from the North West. But I don't believe in hectoring people. You can be as abstract in your work as you like. If you just want to sing about your love affairs, that's OK with me, but traditionally it's been the artists who have maybe created some kind of interesting way of communicating and commenting, whether that's people like Picasso or writers like Aldous Huxley, who have challenged the establishment."

"It was usually as a response to the rise of the right wing.

That's the way I see my position. I don't want to deal exclusively in politics because frankly I don't want those people to contaminate all of my work; I don't think they're deserving of it," Marr said. "One of the great things that I do in rock and pop music is to inhabit a world of escapism. But you just can't change who you are, and as much as I would like to avoid the annoyance of politicians and disappointment with some things and some people in the world, all things go into your work one way or another if you



PHOTOS COURTESY OF JOHNNY MARR



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JOHNNY MARR,
ON THE MANCHESTER TERRORIST ATTACK

are a songwriter.

"I'm trying to get better at what I do all the time and hone what I'm about," Marr said. "And a lot of that seems to be about reflecting the world as I see it."

Unity in the wake of the attack

It is impossible to think of Marr's work without thinking of Manchester. After an emotional vigil for the victims in Albert Square, held a day after the Manchester Arena attack, a lone voice sang out one of The Smiths' best known lyrics: "There is a light that never goes out." Photos later showed the lyrics chalked on pavements and inked on placards.

"I would never in a million years have dreamt that the song would have meant so much when I came up with it, and of

course it's very humbling," Marr said. "You just feel very lucky to be of any kind of help, frankly."

"Art can express something about life that words can't, and that's what is amazing about pop music. It's beautiful that people are focused on that aspect of the song and the positivity, and there is a feeling of looking to the future, which is an amazing thing given the hurt of the circumstances."

"Obviously we're all feeling a mix of emotions, from a numbness and distress to sadness and confusion and anger. It has been amazing for all of us to see the way the city is handling it and has come to help each other out. I'm thinking of the emergency services and those amazing stories about the taxi drivers and the hotels and ordinary people getting involved and helping out, and the homeless who are on the streets, coming to the aid of injured children."

"In the middle of all this devastation, seeing that bravery and selflessness and unity is something that is an amazing source of undeniable pride that the rest of

the world can see. Ever since it happened, I've had messages from all over the world – America, Europe, Japan, Australia. Not just from friends, but from fans and strangers all eager to pass on their thoughts and let me know that the rest of the world is thinking about Manchester, and that's an incredible privilege for me to have that."

"It is at times like this when things are beyond bad and unimaginable that incredible things also come into place. One thing I see is this protective pride, not only over our safety but from the people of the city for our heritage, our character, our legacy, our spirit – what makes Manchester what it is. And a recognition that as Mancunians, we will love each other and we will be defiant against anyone who is trying to take those things away. I am really, really proud of coming from this city for that reason."

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