**THE THE – BIOGRAPHY**

The word “soul” has been a recurring one in the story of THE THE: from Matt Johnson’s 1981 neo-psychedelic debut album, *Burning Blue Soul*, through the shapeshifting musicality of its 1983 successor, *Soul Mining*, and now with the name of his mercurial band’s 2024 Ensouled World Tour.

The dictionary definition of “ensoul” is “to endow with a soul”. “It’s a fascinating idea,” says Johnson. “At what point does the soul inhabit the body? But more pertinently perhaps – in an era of nascent AI technology – what is the meaning of even being human.”

From the beginnings of THE THE in the late 1970s, Matt Johnson has always been a diviner of truth, whether it be of a personal or political nature. Over four-and-a-half decades he has earned an enduring reputation as abrave and uncompromising artist dealing with dark matters of the heart and delivering prescient socio-political commentary.

Originally conceived less as a traditional band, more a multimedia art collective (inspired by the Plastic Ono Band), THE THE were born out of the teenage Matt Johnson’s experiments with reel-to-reel tape – initially conducted in the basement of his parents’ pub, the Crown, in Loughton, Essex, and at De Wolfe Studios in London’s Soho, where Johnson worked as an apprentice sound engineer and used the downtime to make his own music.

THE THE emerged from the post-punk landscape, in an era of self-taught musicians and DIY experimentation. Combining his passions for film soundtracks and musique concrète with his love of traditional songwriters such as John Lennon, Hank Williams and Robert Johnson, Matt Johnson began to develop a unique sound. His first, low-key release, in 1979, was the limited edition cassette, *See Without Being Seen* (remastered and reissued in 2020 on his Cinéola label). This in turn led to his signing with 4AD Records for the headspinning *Burning Blue Soul*, made during intensive recording sessions in ‘81.

“It was done on a shoestring budget,” Johnson remembers. “You went days without sleep and then you would be completely spaced out at the end of it, and you’d get home and put the cassette on and be thrilled with what you’d done. It was a very exciting time.”

More thrilling still was Johnson’s first trip to New York in 1982 to record ‘Uncertain Smile’ with producer Mike Thorne (Wire, Soft Cell): an eventful jaunt involving nocturnal adventures in the Mudd Club and on the edgy streets of Alphabet City. Back in London, the track ignited a bidding war between the major labels, resulting in Stevo Pearce, founder of Some Bizzare Records (whose 1981 compilation, *Some Bizzare Album*, featured THE THE’s track ‘Untitled’) negotiating a deal with CBS.

“In those days, CBS was known for its support of serious singer-songwriters,” Johnson recalls. “The likes of Leonard Cohen, Bob Dylan, Johnny Cash and Bruce Springsteen. So, that really appealed to me. And I went with them.”

THE THE’s great leap forward, *Soul Mining*, followed in 1983. Brilliantly showcasing Matt Johnson’s multifaceted sonic approach – one that encompassed synthesisers and fiddles, drum machines and accordions – it was an astonishing album, particularly as one made by a mere 21-year-old, boldly charting his emotional weather.

“It has a very simple sound in some ways,” Johnson notes, “but it’s very rich and complex in other ways. Some of the lyrics… I obviously wouldn’t write that way now. But the important thing for me is it was sincere. It’s how I felt when I was 21.”

Johnson’s next album was an even more ambitious one. *Infected* (1986) tackled desire – ‘Out Of The Blue (into the fire)’, ‘Slow Train To Dawn’ – and offered the stirring account of a US fighter pilot losing altitude over the Persian Gulf in ‘Sweet Bird Of Truth’. In ‘Heartland’, he painted a grimly vivid portrait of the UK decaying in the dark days of Thatcherism.

But *Infected* was a globally-minded album, as made explicit by the accompanying 47-minute, multi-location film made for the album, with a budget of £350,000 (the equivalent of £1.1 million today). Shot in Bolivia, Peru, New York and London, its Herzog-like journey into the heart of darkness involved dangerous encounters with South American communist rebel fighters and Spanish Harlem street gangs. The result was a wholly intoxicating audio-visual experience, in which the sheer authenticity of these mad adventures gripped the viewer to the screen.

“That’s what you do at that age,” Johnson points out, laughing. “You’re fearless.”

The origins of 1989’s *Mind Bomb* meanwhile involved an inner journey, one that found Matt Johnson intensively practising meditation, imbibing magic mushrooms and studying religious texts. THE THE subsequently expanded into a four-piece band, involving guitarist Johnny Marr (who had very nearly joined forces with Johnson in the early ‘80s, before forming The Smiths), drummer David Palmer and bassist James Eller.

Johnson took flak at the time for the lyric of the single ‘Armageddon Days Are Here (again)’, with its prediction of an impending holy war between Christians and Muslims. “It was very misunderstood when it came out,” he says now. “People thought…Islam…clash of cultures? He’s gone mad. But, of course, fast forward a few years and that’s exactly what was about to happen.”

Equally far-sighted was ‘The Beat(en) Generation’, a clear-eyed depiction of the downtrodden and closed-minded “reared on a diet of prejudice and misinformation”. In a similar vein to ‘Heartland’, these were pulse-of-the-nation narratives that are perhaps even more relevant today.

“I would rather the songs I wrote in the ‘80s be completely out of date,” says Johnson. “For people to look back and say, ‘Oh, do you remember when the world was like that?’ Unfortunately, it’s got even *more* like that. We’re living through very strange times indeed.”

The release of *Mind Bomb* was accompanied by a global tour, THE THE Versus The World, which spanned 1989-1990, but was brought to an enforced pause partway through due to the sudden death of Johnson’s brother, Eugene, aged 24, from an aneurysm. “That was a hammer blow to my family,” he offers. “It was absolutely awful.”

Eugene Johnson’s passing threw Matt Johnson off his axis, prompting a period involving what he describes as “a bit of a downward spiral” for him emotionally. It did, however, inspire one of his greatest songs – the moving, metaphysical ’Love Is Stronger Than Death’, a standout of THE THE’s *Dusk* album, released in 1993.

“It’s a very honest album,” he says. “It’s very emotional… more emotional than, say, political. That became a favourite of mine. It was very, very cathartic.”

Another hugely successful world tour, Lonely Planet, followed, along with another album-length film, *From Dusk ‘Til Dawn*, shot in New Orleans and New York. Soon after, Johnson relocated permanently to the latter city and, inspired by the cover versions he’d recorded on 1990’s *Shades Of Blue* EP (Fred Neil’s ‘Dolphins’, Duke Ellington’s ‘Solitude’), embarked upon the making of an album of his favourite Hank Williams songs, *Hanky Panky* (1995). The striking video for his rousing rendition of ‘I Saw The Light’ found the singer perilously perched on one of the steel eagle heads on the 61st floor of the Chrysler Building in Manhattan.

When both the unreleased long-player, *Gun Sluts*, and the subsequent *NakedSelf* were rejected by Sony (who had swallowed up CBS/Epic in 1988), THE THE parted ways with the label, releasing the latter through Nothing/Interscope in 2000. The band – now comprising guitarist Eric Schermerhorn, bassist Spencer Campbell and drummer Earl Harvin – hit the road once again for a lengthy international tour funded by the singer himself.

At the end of this phase, exhausted, Johnson quit the stage, returning only at the invitation of THE THE fan David Bowie. Johnson, along with JG Thirlwell, performed an experimental set during Bowie’s curation of the Meltdown festival at London’s Royal Festival Hall in 2002. “I never met Bowie,” Johnson laments. “But he’d sent messages. I know he’d mentioned that *Infected* was one of his favourite albums. It was a real honour to be invited by him.”

From here, following a move to Sweden, Matt Johnson refocused his creative efforts on film soundtracks – for Nichola Bruce’s *Moonbug* (2010) and his director brother Gerard Johnson’s *Tony* (2009) and *Hyena* (2014) as well as numerous documentaries by Johanna St Michaels, including *Penthouse North* (2014).

“It was quite natural to me,” he says. “I could just play around in the studio with no pressure of writing lyrics or being judged and critiqued. I’m interpreting what the director’s vision is, and it’s a different process, but it’s one that I also enjoy.”

Naturally enough, then, the next Matt Johnson project was an 84-minute documentary, *The Inertia Variations*, directed by St Michaels and inspired by a John Tottenham poem of the same name, originally brought to his attention by Thirlwell. A rumination on expectation / procrastination, it provided the spark of inspiration for the 2017 film, in which Johnson examined his sometimes-troubled relationship with fame and the creative process and – through the tragic deaths of his mother and two of his brothers (Andrew Johnson AKA artist Andy Dog having passed in 2016) – how bereavement has informed his work and outlook.

“It was a fruition of those early ideas of THE THE, to be genuinely mixed media,” he says now, referring to the triple album box set and art exhibitions that were part of the project. “To go off in various tangents and do something that’s very, very unusual.” At the end of *The Inertia Variations*, Johnson was filmed performing a new song live in his studio; ‘We Can’t Stop What’s Coming’ is an elegy to his elder brother Andrew (AKA artist Andy Dog), who passed away in 2016. “It was not an easy song to write,” he says. “That was the first time I’d sung in many years. I enjoyed it but found it very emotional.”

In a surprise development, in 2018, THE THE returned to the stage, after an absence of 16 years, kicking off the widely-lauded The Comeback Special tour at the Royal Albert Hall in London (a performance captured and released as a live album in 2021). “Actually,” says Johnson, “it was the most enjoyable world tour that I’ve ever done. The warmth and the love from the audience was overwhelming.”

All of which brings us to the much-anticipated – and COVID-delayed – release of the first studio album in a quarter century, *Ensoulment*, and the Ensouled World Tour 2024, set to visit Europe, America and Australia. “This one would have happened sooner,” he stresses, “but of course, we’ve been on a bit of a dystopian amusement arcade ride the last few years. So, life got in the way.”

As to what audiences can expect from the shows, Matt Johnson promises “there will be sons from the new album, plus the songs we love to play each time… ‘This Is The Day’, ‘Uncertain Smile’, ‘Heartland’. But there were certain songs that people asked for that weren’t performed on the last tour that *will* be included this time.”

*-Tom Doyle, 2024*

**THE THE: A Chronology**

1979: Matt Johnson self-releases the cassette album *See Without Being Seen* (remastered and reissued in 2020 on Cinéola) and makes still-unreleased LP, *Spirits*. THE THE make their debut live performance at the Africa Centre in Covent Garden, London.

1980: First THE THE single, ‘Controversial Subject’ (produced by Wire’s Bruce Gilbert and Graham Lewis) released on 4AD.

1981: *Burning Blue Soul* issued under Matt Johnson’s own name (re-released as a THE THE album in 1993).

1982: Johnson travels to New York to record ‘Uncertain Smile’ with producer Mike Thorne. Issued as a single (distinct from the later *Soul Mining* version).

1983: *Soul Mining* released to wide acclaim, with *Sounds* hailing it as “ready for the radio, the dance floor and those thoughtful interludes late at night”.

1986: The Andy Dog-drawn cover of the ‘Infected’ single (depicting a masturbating devil) causes controversy, is withdrawn from sale and reissued with an edited version of the image. *Infected*, the album, reaches UK Number 14 and stays on the chart for 30 weeks.

1986-7: Johnson tours the world screening Infected: The Movie, following its television premieres on Channel 4 in the UK and MTV in the US. It will be seen by an estimated 50 million people globally.

1989: *Mind Bomb* – featuring THE THE as a quartet comprising Johnny Marr, bassist James Eller and drummer David Palmer – hits UK Number 4. The band enjoy their biggest British hit with ‘The Beat(en) Generation’ (Number 18) and embark upon the THE THE Versus The World tour.

1990: *Shades Of Blue* EP released, featuring covers of Fred Neil’s ‘Dolphins’ and Duke Ellington’s ‘Solitude’.

1993: *Dusk* released. Praised by *Time Out* as “a minor masterpiece of major proportions”. *i-D* magazine likens Matt Johnson to “a post-Thatcher John Lennon”. Lonely Planet tour commences and includes a Saturday night headline slot at the Reading Festival.

1995: ‘I Saw The Light’ video, shot high on Manhattan’s Chrysler Building, accompanies the release of *Hanky Panky*, THE THE’s album of Hank Williams songs.

1999: *Gun Sluts* album rejected by Sony and shelved by Johnson.

2000: *NakedSelf* released by Nothing/Interscope. *Pitchfork* declare that the record “finds Matt Johnson in his element, tackling issues of alienation, global corruption, and urban squalor and decay, with potent, succinct lyrics and some of his most affecting melodies”.

2002: THE THE, comprising Johnson and JG Thirlwell, perform at the Meltdown festival in London at the request of David Bowie. Compilation album *45 RPM: The Singles Of THE THE* released, featuring two new songs, ‘Deep Down Truth’ and ‘Pillar Box Red’.

2010: *Tony* soundtrack released.

2012: *Moonbug* soundtrack released.

2014: Original soundtrack for *Penthouse North* documentary. *Hyena* soundtrack released. Sony released *Soul Mining 30th Anniversary Deluxe Edition* box set, overseen by Johnson.

2015: Radio Cinéola, a 12-hour live shortwave broadcast on UK election day, features previously unreleased music and interviews with geopolitical commentators from around the world.

2017: *The Inertia Variations* documentary premiered at the Edinburgh Film Festival. ‘We Can’t Stop What’s Coming’ seven-inch single and *Radio Cinéola: Trilogy* box set released.

2018: Matt Johnson and THE THE return to touring, after 16 years, with The Comeback Special. Biography *Long Shadows, High Hopes: The Life And Times Of Matt Johnson And THE THE*, by Neil Fraser, published by Omnibus.

2020: ‘I WANT 2 B U’ seven-inch single released.

2021: *Muscle* soundtrack released. *The Comeback Special: Live At The Royal Albert Hall* live album and Tim Pope-directed concert film released.

2023: “$1 ONE VOTE!” seven-inch single released. “This Is The Day” featured on the soundtrack of Guardians Of The Galaxy Vol. 3.

2024: First studio album in a quarter century *Ensoulment* released. Ensouled World Tour commences…