**THE THE – ENSOULMENT**

The release by any artist of their first studio album in a quarter century would be a significant event, but it’s particularly exciting when it’s THE THE. *Ensoulment* comprises 12 new songs from Matt Johnson, characteristically unafraid to tackle the emotional complexity inherent in the human condition – intimacy in an age of alienation; democracy in the post-truth age; empire and vassalage; and the inexorable rise of AI – yet the album is equally shot through with hope.

The title itself is derived from the word “ensoul”, meaning “to endow with a soul”. “The moment the soul enters the human body,” Johnson says. “I think it’s a pertinent title in this age of nascent AI technology. At what point would some sort of consciousness enter AI? Or will AI even generate consciousness?

“We live in fascinating times,” he adds. “Things are becoming more and more strange, inverted, and hallucinogenic.”

A perfect time, then, for the return of THE THE. The reason for Matt Johnson’s prolonged absence was partly explained in his 2017 multimedia project, *The Inertia Variations*, which took inspiration from British poet John Tottenham’s 2005 book of the same name – particularly the idea of “brooding, abstraction and evasion” getting in the way of the creative process – resulting in a feature-length documentary and the *Radio Cinéola: Trilogy* triple album box set.

At the end of *The Inertia Variations* documentary, 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.”

The experience prompted Johnson to revive THE THE as a live band, leading to *The Comeback Special* tour of 2018 (and the accompanying 2021 live film and album recorded at London’s Royal Albert Hall). Along the way, new THE THE material was released, in the form of a series of seven-inch singles, with ‘We Can’t Stop What’s Coming’ followed by ‘I WANT 2 B U’ (2020) and ‘$1 ONE VOTE!’ (2023). Fans the world over began madly speculating that a new THE THE album was in the making.

And so, here is *Ensoulment*, originally planned to arrive soon after *The Comeback Special*. “This album is now a very different album, having gone through the Covid and lockdown period,” says Johnson. “I think we’d all agree the world has now changed.”

Two of the songs on *Ensoulment* were, however, originated around a dozen years ago – namely the expansively-titled ‘Some Days I Drink My Coffee By The Grave Of William Blake’ and ‘A Rainy Day In May’. The latter explores what Johnson describes as “the fleeting but transformative power of a chance encounter, which suddenly ignites a deep sense of connection and longing”. The former employs an everyday routine of the singer’s as the opening for a lyrical rumination on “the loss of belonging in a changing London” and is in the lineage of London-themed THE THE songs such as ‘Heartland’, ‘The Beat(en) Generation’ and ‘Pillar Box Red’.

For a long time, Matt Johnson has been a regular visitor to Bunhill Fields, the Nonconformist burial ground in central London where Blake was in 1827 laid to rest in a pauper’s grave. “I lived opposite there for a couple of years from the age of 21,” he says. “And in recent years I’ve lived close to it again. I often sit thinking whilst drinking my coffee by the grave of William Blake.”

Among the Blakean references in the song is the updating of his “green and pleasant land” to Johnson’s “greedy, unpleasant land”. “William Blake was a Dissenter,” he points out, “and dissent is now demonised in Britain under increasingly repressive laws. In a way the song is celebrating an inevitable collapse of our corrupt institutions and structures.” Particularly in the singer’s vivid assertion that “when truth breaks through these city walls, perfidious Albion must fall”.

Other personal experiences provide inspiration, not least in ‘Linoleum Smooth To The Stockinged Foot’, built from Johnson’s trippy recollections of being in hospital in 2020 after he was struck down with a dangerous and near fatal pharyngeal abscess in his throat.

“I was pumped full of not only morphine, but also very powerful antibiotics,” he grimly recalls. “Everything had a metallic taste, and I was in this dreamlike state and getting a strong sense – during those draconian Covid lockdowns – that we are heading towards a dystopian bio-security state. I started writing the lyrics to this song in my hospital bed.”

Thankfully, despite reluctantly undergoing throat surgery, Johnson’s singing voice was unaffected, as evidenced by his full-bodied performances on *Ensoulment*. Following the writing and demo process in his Studio Cinéola – which included co-writes with THE THE lead guitarist Barrie Cadogan (‘Cognitive Dissident’, ‘I Hope You Remember (the things I can’t forget)’) and keyboard-player DC Collard (‘Kissing The Ring Of POTUS’, ‘Down By The Frozen River’) – the songs were further worked up in rehearsals, ahead of a six-day tracking session at Real World Studios near Bath. Final overdubs and mixing then took place back at Studio Cinéola.

In addition Collard and Cadogan, the making of *Ensoulment* also involved other longstanding THE THE members James Eller (bass), and Earl Harvin (drums). “This is the band who performed with me on *The Comeback Special* tour and live album. They are all world class, heavyweight players and I’m delighted they’ve joined me on the latest adventure’. The album also features Gillian Glover (backing vocals), Terry Edwards (horns), Sonya Cullingford (fiddle) and Danny Cummings (percussion). Additionally, the album marks the return of co-producer and engineer Warne Livesey, who previously worked on landmark THE THE albums *Infected* (1986) and *Mind Bomb* (1989).

“He’s very supportive, very organised, and technically precise,” Johnson says of Livesey. “I felt particularly as I hadn’t done an album in a quarter of a century, it’d be good to have somebody who knew me well and who I could trust to give me good feedback. Warne provided a certain sort of stability.”

*Ensoulment* contains echoes of THE THE’s multi-faceted musical past, however it is richly representative of the mercurial band’s here and now. ‘Zen & The Art Of Dating’ sees Johnson return to the subject of desire, in the tradition of songs such as ‘Out Of The Blue (into the fire), ‘Dogs Of Lust’ and ‘Bluer Than Midnight’. He says the song concerns “seeking for connection in a landscape of superficial encounters. Yet at the same time it highlights the paradox that genuine love may only appear when one stops actively searching for it.”

Elsewhere, ‘Life After Life’ is one of two songs directly tackling mortality. “It’s really about the cyclical nature of existence,” Johnson says. “Life transcending death, death transcending life, and the experience of slowly remembering forgotten truths, while navigating the absurdities of our reality. Meanwhile, ‘Where Do We Go When We Die?’ was written about my dad,” Johnson says, “but there are also existential questions about life and death, reflections on the passage of time, the inevitability of loss and the enduring cycle of renewal.”

It belongs to the suite of songs he’s written in tribute to the departed members of the Johnson family – ‘Love Is Stronger Than Death’ for younger brother Eugene, ‘Phantom Walls’ for his mother, ‘We Can’t Stop What’s Coming’ for his older brother Andrew.

If it’s partly informed by darkness, *Ensoulment* is also very much about light and love – see the beautiful piano balladry of ‘I Want To Wake Up With You’ – and, ultimately, hope.

“It is vital to be hopeful,” Johnson states. “And I hope people get out of the album what we put into it. It was created under very happy circumstances, with a great atmosphere amongst the band and all the people who worked on it. There was a lot of thought, a lot of work, a lot of love – and a lot of laughter!”

In the end, it may have been a long time coming, but *Ensoulment* is absolutely worth the wait.

*-Tom Doyle, 2024*