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## Is It Really So Strange? (Morrissey Fan Documentary)



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What was the last record to change your life? How old were you when it happened? Most likely you were a teenager, possibly pimply and just out of middle school, spending all your time and money at the mall, daydreaming about girls and/or boys too beautiful and too frightfully wonderful for you to ever have courage enough to strike up a conversation with, or, so much less likely, to gather in the fleeting bits of your fast evaporating bravery to ask out on a date. So instead of sock hops and malt shops, or whatever the de rigueur teenage courtship ritual of your day, you spent those long nights in your bedroom with The Record staring at the album artwork, working your fingers over the record grooves as though it were a Braille for the broken hearted, listening, listening, listening to songs that laid your heart bare, shone your dreams, fears, and secret fantasies on a giant screen for all the world to see while you stood to the side pointing and jumping up and down, shouting, "Now do you see? Do you understand? This is my life, my heart! Please will you please just love me?"

*I was probably around 13 when U2's "Boy" went excavating its way through my being; 16 when Bob Dylan's "Bringing It All Back Home" broke my brain with its surrealist Americana; 18 when The Beach Boys' "Pet Sounds" took my heart to school for an advanced course in young love and older heartbreak. There were more I could add here but won't for the sake of something approaching brevity.*

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Or maybe the last record to come smashing into your life and rearrange all of the mental/emotional furniture arrived while you were in your twenties and had been through not only marathons of teenage longing and all that angsty nobody-understands-me stuff but also a real relationship or two that simply, even though you tried your best, did not work out. At the time you were installing the newest edition to your private museum of missed chances and lost loves when a song came on the radio or it came seeping out of your annoying roommate's bedroom who you had no choice but to share an apartment with as all your best friends were living with their significant others, and the song just laid you low. You ran out immediately, bought the record, ran back home, threw the album on, cracked a beer, lit a joint, and disappeared oh so gratefully into the sound.

*I guess I was in my early twenties when Sinatra's "Wee Small Hours of the Morning" seemed to contain everything I would need for the following decade and quite possibly the rest of my natural life; my mid-20s when Van Morrison's "Astral Weeks" re-contextualized my entire world and insisted I rethink past assumptions. Again there were more records, always more records that meant everything to me.*

If you've made it to your thirties and beyond then this singular sort of event probably doesn't happen so much to you anymore if at all. Our capacity for a record, particularly a rock 'n' roll record, to take our heart and turn it inside out, to become our best friend, to be recognized as our own private internal monologue externalized is greatly diminished with each passing year. The world insists we build our own ingenious personal defenses and shields; as long as you are in this living thing then you will build ever-stronger walls to keep the world out. This is not to say it doesn't still happen from time to time, the magic of record snaking through some tiny chink in your armor.

I'm in my thirties and my generation is certainly heir to the prolonged adolescence brought into being by the baby boomers so I'll admit right here that I believe the Shangri-las recording of "Train from Kansas City" to be working its necromantic musical mojo on me right now, doing its invasive open-heart surgery, and recasting a once important relationship in my life in its own terms of 1960s teenage beat-queen operatics.

William E. Jones's documentary **Is It Really So Strange?** while

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purporting to be about the passionate Morrissey fandom that sprung up in southern California during the six year period that Morrissey was between record contracts, and therefore artistically silent and at the same time physically present as he was residing right outside of Los Angeles, is at its core about the very thing I've been rambling on about – The records that change our lives.

Morrissey's records, especially those he made while in The Smiths, arguably are albums designed specifically for the task of burrowing into the confused, adolescent consciousness and bonding with the listener at such a level that the record becomes as necessary for continuing one's day-to-day living as the blood feverishly pumping saltily through said listener's confusedly anxious heart.



I've mentioned this before on FulvueDrive-In but I'll reiterate it here that The Smith's "*Please Please Please Let Me Get What I Want*" did just this sort of thing to me when I first encountered it as a teenager.

Jones films a series of interviews with Moz acolytes and allows the interviewees the space and respect to discuss, sometimes in painfully intimate detail, how they arrived at such a place where this one man's songs, a man from an entirely alien culture in most respects, connected with their souls so totally. Men and women, straight and gay, Anglo and Latino, old and young all speak very intelligently and reflectively about themselves and the music they love. Jones's technique is very simple – point the camera and let the people have their say. Sometimes he'll interject a question or two but he is never ironic about the enterprise, there's nary a smirk anywhere to be found in the film.

**Is It Really So Strange?** is an eloquent statement about the power of pop music and its ability to reach those people in a culture who are often most marginalized and in its way give those people a voice or at the very least tell them "You are not alone." And recognizing that we are not in fact alone in this oft-times harsh uncaring world is truly a life-changing event in everybody's life.

- Kristofer Collins

Kristofer Collins is an editor at The New Yinzer and owner of Desolation Row CDs

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