**JOHNNY MARR**

**SPIRIT POWER: THE BEST OF JOHNNY MARR**

At the beginning of 2023, Johnny Marr had all sorts of plans, but marking anniversaries hadn’t figured among them. Fresh from a succession of rapturously received shows with The Killers, Johnny had already started to gather songs for his fifth album – a successor to 2022’s acclaimed double LP Fever Dreams Pts 1-4. It was his manager who pointed out that he had now been a solo artist for ten years, a stretch of time comfortably in excess of his tenures in The Smiths, Electronic, The The, The Pretenders, Modest Mouse or The Cribs. And although, Marr’s storied life in music isn’t short of milestones – 2010 Inspiration Award at the Ivor Novellos, an Oscar nomination for his work with Hans Zimmer on Inception; and, lest we forget, an NME Godlike Genius Award in 2013 – he hadn’t stopped to consider that the passing of an entire decade might be significant.

The full measure of this extraordinarily fertile period is captured on Spirit Power: The Best Of Johnny Marr, a major new collection curated by Marr encompassing songs from his four top ten solo albums, a scattering of stand-alone singles and two incendiary new cuts, *Somewhere* and *The Answer*. Spirit Power presents a composite portrait of an artist with no less a complete ideology than the celebrated co-travellers who inspired him along the way. It’s a body of work that mirrors Marr’s unquenchable life force, his love of melody and the urge to resist what he calls the “strummy, age-appropriate transition into mid-tempo middle age.” He elaborates: “It’s a conversation I have from time to time with [Pet Shop Boys’] Chris Lowe, about how much harder it is to write songs that you want to listen to in the daytime. It’s easier to do something that’s perceived as cool if it’s a bit moody. But, for me, the mission with these records was to make songs that you could listen to on the way to school, on the way to the gym, on the way back from work – you know, in the way that you had with, say, Blondie.”

The songs that comprise Spirit Power – sequenced non-chronologically, thus giving a flavour of what you might expect if you were at one of his live shows – are an emphatic fulfilment of that pledge. Among the earliest songs included on this collection is sonorous yet yearning uplift of *European Me*, a song which saw Marr turn the anglepoise on the space that would over time be filled by several more songs, each explaining to their creator something about where he came from and who he had become. *“Left home a mystery, leave school for poetry,”* he sings on *New Town Velocity*, *“I say goodbye to them and me, mission velocity.”*

That liberating sense of simultaneously feeling invisible yet invincible in the big city resonates throughout many of the selections that make up Spirit Power: from

2018’s *Spiral Cities* (*“On the vertical streets / We go up (up up)”*) to 2022’s *Tenement Time* (*“A ghost through space / Slipping through the crossfire / Look what’s coming again / I’m beating that street”* ); and perhaps most dizzyingly on *Dynamo* (2015) *–* where Marr equates stratospheric surge of new love with the mirror-glass skylines of New York and London. For *Spirit Power and Soul* – the opening song from 2022’s Fever Dreams Pts 1-4 – Marr “really put a lot of energy into making what I would consider an electro banger.” Other songs, such as *Easy Money* (2014), came to him when he was out running. “I wondered whether it was either the most annoying song I could possibly conceive of or really quite brilliant, and I genuinely couldn’t work it out until I demoed it on the tour bus. And what swung it was the reaction of [guitarist and co-producer] James Doviak and the crew going, ‘Play the new one, play the new one.’”

One of two new songs featured on here, *Somewhere* sprang into life during Marr’s 2022 shows with The Killers and Blondie. “I’ve played a lot of arenas over the years, and in terms of songwriting, there’s nowhere to hide. For a song to work, it has to be a banger. I know it’s almost uncool to think in those terms, but I grew up in a house where my parents listened to Motown, where you couldn’t get a song released if it wasn’t full of hooks.” The same sense of attack underpins the other new song on Spirit Power. *The Answer* explodes into life from a spoken word intro delivered by Meredith Sheldon. It’s a song, notes Marr, that, would get the approval of his 17 year-old self, mainlining the “narky energy” of Magazine and Buzzcocks: “It’s taken me a long time to write songs that are led by the singing rather than the guitar, and that’s definitely one of them.”

The release of Spirit Power also allows Marr to highlight non-album songs that have gone onto become firm fan favourites. The 2019 single *Armatopia*, whose adhesively catchy synth hooks act as a Trojan horse for a lyric which addresses the cognitive dissonance of life in the convenience-obsessed developed world as we teeter towards ecological peril. The version of Depeche Mode’s *I Feel You*, released for Record Store Day in 2015, reveals the degree to which he has found his *metier* as a vocalist of singular expressive power. *The Priest* is a musical adaptation of Joe Gallagher’s eponymous short story (part of an accompanying film co-directed by Marr) voiced by Maxine Peake. To listen to the nocturnal electronic textures that frame Peake’s portrayal of its homeless protagonist is to be reminded of a version of the industrial north that looms large in the legacy of artists like Clock DVA and Cabaret Voltaire – “musicians who I can easily imagine Maxine having worked with had she been that bit older.”

On Spirit Power, it’s also *The Priest* which represents a point of intersection between Johnny Marr’s solo work and his other projects during the same period – a period which has seen Marr find himself in demand as a soundtrack composer. After receiving an Oscar nomination for his work with Hans Zimmer on Inception, the two reunited alongside Pharrell Williams for the soundtrack to Marc Webb’s The Amazing Spider-Man 2. For Zimmer, the combination of Marr’s musical vision and the big screen made sense before the two had even spoken to each other. On the beginning of their work on Inception, Zimmer recounted a phone call with director Christopher Nolan, in which he exclaimed, “Chris, what do we think of electric guitars and orchestras? Hideous, right? Usually tasteless and pretentious. But… what if, instead of saying ‘Guitar', I said ‘Johnny Marr and orchestra’, you wouldn’t say ‘no’, would you?”

It’s a conversation you can see recounted in the foreword to Marr’s Guitars – a brand new book written by Marr, set for publication in October 2023. Following his 2016 autobiography Set The Boy Free, Johnny describes Marr’s Guitars as “a guitar book for people who wouldn’t usually own a guitar book.” Featuring contributions from Noel Gallagher, Bernard Butler and Ed O’Brien, this “shadow memoir” offers a portal into the symbiotic relationship between Johnny and the guitars that have entered his life, the sounds and songs they teased out of him, and the new directions they opened up: the Epiphone Casino whose tremolo riff helped create *How Soon Is Now*; the black Gibson Les Paul Standard, made famous by Marc Bolan on Top of the Pops, and Marr’s guitar of choice when he rejoined The Pretenders for their triumphant Glastonbury set earlier this year; the Fender Jaguar that yielded *Dashboard* within an hour or two of its deployment – kick-starting an alliance with Modest Mouse that would result in a US number one album (We Were Dead Before The Ship Even Sank).

Also featured in Marr’s Guitars is the Signature Jaguar made by Fender especially for Marr, which he then used to fulfil his childhood dream of playing the James Bond theme with an orchestra when Hans Zimmer invited him to feature on the soundtrack of the James Bond Movie No Time To Die. This is the guitar Marr used when he played with Billie Eilish on the film’s eponymous Oscar-winning title song. Although 38 years separate Eilish and Marr’s birthdays, Marr is swift to emphasise that “Billie might be a pop star but that’s secondary to the fact that she’s a musician – and that’s how we connected. She could have come out of any era and she would have been up there with the very best.”

The same can, of course, be said about Johnny Marr. After forty years as a recording artist, his name beneath a long line of modern standards, it’s a legacy he carries lightly. But on December 7th and 8th this year, when he takes to the stage at Manchester’s Factory International, alongside conductor Fiona Brice and a personally assembled orchestra of 30 musicians from across the North of England, he will do so with an extraordinary canon of songs at his disposal: “I’ve had two experiences of playing with an orchestra – Hans Zimmer, obviously, and also with Pet Shop Boys – but to actually sing in front of an orchestra playing my own work, that’s a first. You can’t help feeling a little bit emotional.”

And his 17 year-old self? The teenage guitar aspirant in Wythenshawe restlessly hopping from one band to another in the hope that he might make songs that instil in other people the feelings that his own record collection instilled in him? What would he make of it all? “Well, you know what teenagers are like,” he smiles. “They’re full of this beautiful, unshakeable self-belief. He might have been like, ‘That sounds about right.’ So when I need to summon inspiration, he’s still the person to be.”

*Spirit Power: The Best Of Johnny Marr is released on New Voodoo Records via BMG on 3rd November 2023*