

## **Abstract**

*The Smiths were an English band that gained commercial success and critical acclaim in the 1980s. They were closely associated with Manchester and the North of England. They had Northern accents when they spoke and sang; their lyrics contained references to areas of Manchester and to Northern cultural figures such as the playwright Shelagh Delaney, as did some of their videos; and they discussed their geographical origins in interviews with the music press. Yet their vision of Manchester and the North was far from celebratory and was in some ways quite detached. In fact, The Smiths used an adapted version of the genre of Northern Realism to contest the dominant version of Northernness, which was imposed on the North and held together its imagined community. For example, they promoted more inclusive forms of masculinity. However, their attempts to renew Northernness were stymied by the attitude of the music press. The latter gave The Smiths a platform for them to express their ideas but tended to reinforce traditional conceptions of the North in the way they presented the band.*

## **Résumé**

Les Smiths sont un groupe anglais qui a connu un succès commercial et critique dans les années 1980. Ils étaient étroitement associés à Manchester et au Nord de l'Angleterre. Ils avaient l'accent du Nord quand ils parlaient et chantaient ; les paroles de leurs chansons, ainsi que certains de leurs clips, contenaient des références à des quartiers de Manchester et à des personnalités culturelles du Nord comme la dramaturge Shelagh Delaney ; et ils évoquaient leurs origines géographiques dans des interviews avec la presse musicale. Et pourtant l'égard qu'ils portaient sur Manchester et le Nord, loin d'être idyllique, était par certains aspects plutôt distancié. En fait, pour contester la version dominante de la nordicité qui était imposée aux populations du Nord et servait de ciment à leur communauté imaginée, les Smiths utilisaient une version modifiée du genre « Northern Realism ». Par exemple, ils encourageaient des types de masculinité plus inclusifs. Cependant, leurs tentatives de renouvellement de la nordicité étaient atténuées par l'attitude de la presse musicale. Cette dernière donnait aux Smiths une tribune leur permettant d'exprimer leurs idées tout en ayant tendance à renforcer les conceptions traditionnelles du Nord dans sa façon de présenter le groupe.

## **Keywords**

*The Smiths - Northern England - Popular music - Northern realism – Masculinity*

## **Mots-Clés**

The Smiths – Nord de l'Angleterre – musique populaire – réalisme du nord – masculinité

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# Northernness and Popular Music: The Case of The Smiths

Jeremy Tranmer, IDEA, Université de Lorraine

## Introduction

Since the early 1960s, there has been a history of pop groups from Northern England gaining national success. The major example is, of course, The Beatles. The four members of the band were all born in Liverpool, had Liverpool accents and included references to their home city in songs such as “Strawberry Fields Forever” (Parlophone, 1967). In the 1980s, a band called The Smiths were closely associated with the North of England and with Manchester in particular. The Smiths were formed in 1982 and split up in 1987. During this period, they released four studio albums (one of which – *Meat is Murder* [Rough Trade, 1985] - reached number one in the album charts), compilation albums and a live album. They released seventeen singles, seven of which broke into the top twenty, including “What Difference Does It Make?” (Rough Trade, 1984), “Heaven Knows I’m Miserable Now” (Rough Trade, 1984) and “Panic” (Rough Trade, 1986). They were thus commercially successful and also gained critical acclaim in the music press. Their success was due to the combination of the distinctive voice of the charismatic singer Morrissey and the ‘jangling’ guitar sound created by Johnny Marr.<sup>1</sup> The lyrics to the songs were written by Morrissey and contained many literary references, including the work of John Keats, W.B. Yeats and Oscar Wilde in “Cemetery Gates” (*The Queen is Dead*, Rough Trade, 1986), for example. The band courted controversy. Morrissey was a militant vegetarian, and their second album was entitled provocatively *Meat is Murder*. They were opposed to the monarchy, and this hostility was expressed idiosyncratically in the title of their third album *The Queen is Dead*. Morrissey’s sexuality became a subject of discussion. Some of the covers of the band’s singles such as “Hand in Glove” (Rough Trade, 1983) contained homoerotic photos, and the lyrics of songs including “Reel Around The Fountain” (*The Smiths*, Rough Trade, 1984) contained gay slang. Morrissey was very coy about his sexuality in interviews, simply stating that he was celibate.

The members of The Smiths were from Manchester, in the North of England. It is a major city which was at the heart of the industrial revolution and is the third largest city in England. The band’s Northern origins were an important part of their song-writing, identity and image. Although the precise geographical boundaries of the North of England are “ill-defined” and open to debate<sup>2</sup>, it cannot be disputed that Manchester is in the North. This article aims to examine in detail the band’s Northernness. This aspect of The Smiths has already received attention in academic work. Peter Atkinson has examined The Smiths’ Manchester aesthetic and linked it to the agit-prop theatre of Ewan MacColl and Joan Littlewood<sup>3</sup>, Georgina Gregory has looked at how their “Mancunian Melancholia” appeals to Mexican fans in California<sup>4</sup>, and Julian Stringer has studied how the Manchester press reported The Smiths.<sup>5</sup> However, little consideration has been given to how The Smiths’ played with traditional visions of Northernness. This article will begin by positing that the band could be defined as detached Northerners. Despite the numerous Northern references in their work and in interviews with them, they did not give a purely positive image of their city and region. Then, using the analyses of the sociologist Karl Spracklen, it will be argued that The Smiths used the genre of Northern Realism to subvert traditional

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<sup>1</sup> See for example, their first successful single “This Charming Man” (Rough Trade, 1983). The Smiths thus rejected the synth pop which dominated the charts at the time in favour of a more guitar-based sound.

<sup>2</sup> Stuart Rawnsley, “Constructing ‘The North’: space and a sense of place”, in Kirk Neville, *Northern Identities. Historical Interpretations of ‘The North’ and ‘Northernness’*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2016 (2000), p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Atkinson, “‘The Sons and Heirs of Something Particular’ – The Smiths’ Manchester Aesthetics”, *Regional Aesthetics. Mapping UK Media Cultures*, eds. Ieuan Franklin, Hugh Chignell, Kristin Skoog, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Georgina Gregory, “Emotional Places: The Role of Affect in the Relocation of Mancunian Melancholy”, *Relocating Popular Music*, eds. Ewa Mazierska and Georgina Gregory, London, Palgrave, 2015, p. 207-224.

<sup>5</sup> Julian Stringer, “‘So much to answer for’: what do The Smiths mean to Manchester?”, *Why Pamper Life’s Complexities? Essays on The Smiths*, eds. Sean Campbell and Colin Coulter, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2016, p. 205-224.

ideas of Northernness. However, this endeavour was complicated by the ambiguous attitude of the music press.

## 1 The Smiths as detached Northerners

In order to determine how The Smiths expressed their connection with Northern England, it is important to examine briefly their accents, their lyrics, the imagery that they used in photographs and videos and comments they made in interviews.

Morrissey retained his Northern accent when singing the band's songs. The obvious example of this is the use of the short vowel /æ/ in words such as "laugh" in "You've Got Everything Now" (*The Smiths*, Rough Trade, 1984), "ask" in "Handsome Devil" (*Hatful of Hollow*, Rough Trade, 1984) or in the song entitled "Ask" (Rough Trade, 1986), in which the title is repeated numerous times.<sup>6</sup> This was quite surprising as in the early to mid- 1980s many British singers adopted their version of an American accent blended with "higher-status features of British English".<sup>7</sup> It was therefore relatively unusual to hear a distinctly Northern English accent in popular music at this time. Morrissey's accent, as well as that of guitarist Johnny Marr, could be heard in interviews on radio and television.<sup>8</sup> In addition to his systematic use of the short /æ/, Morrissey's pronunciation of the vowel <u> in the word "rub" is clearly Northern.<sup>9</sup> Marr used the same pronunciation of these vowels sounds<sup>10</sup> which are generally considered to be two of the fundamental phonological characteristics of Northern English.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps more than Morrissey, Marr had a definite Mancunian accent. This could be heard, for instance, in his pronunciation of the final syllable of words such as "easily" and "naivety" where the vowel <y> is vocalised as /e/ instead of /i/.<sup>12</sup> This is a standard feature of the Mancunian accent.<sup>13</sup> The Smiths thus made no attempt to hide their geographical origins.

This sense of Northernness was reinforced by the fact that the lyrics of many of The Smiths' songs convey a strong sense of place. There are numerous references to poor working-class areas of Manchester, neighbouring Salford and the surrounding area. The title of the song "Rusholme Ruffians" (*Meat is Murder*) refers to a part of Manchester, while "Miserable Lie" (*The Smiths*) mentions Whalley Range, another area of the city, where Morrissey once lived; their home city is named in both "The Headmaster Ritual" (*Meat is Murder*) and "Suffer Little Children" (*The Smiths*). The latter is particularly interesting as the lyrics refer by name to two of the five children who were killed on Saddleworth Moor near Manchester in the mid-1960s in a case widely known as the "Moors Murders". The title of the album *Strangeways, Here We Come* (Rough Trade, 1987) contains a reference to an area of Manchester which is famous for its high-security men's prison. The Holy Name Church mentioned in "Vicar in a Tutu" (*The Queen is Dead*) actually exists in Manchester. The North in general is referred to in "Is It Really So Strange?" (Rough Trade, 1987) ("I left the north/ I traveled south / I found a tiny house / And I can't help the way I feel").

A sense of place is also present in the imagery used by the band in photographs and videos. One of the most iconic photographs of them adorns the cover of the album *The Queen Is Dead* and was taken in front of the Salford Lads Club, a recreational club opened originally for boys at the beginning of the

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<sup>6</sup> 0:18, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fAHk-M2k5mM>; 1:09, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UZYf3-9LtlQ>; 0:38, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zoo9Vu1a9bU>.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Simpson, "Language, culture and identity: With (another) look at accents in pop and rock singing", *Multilingua – Journal of Cross-Cultural and Interlanguage Communication*, January 1999, p. 356.

<sup>8</sup> This article focuses on Morrissey and Johnny Marr as they were the dominant members of the band – Morrissey wrote the lyrics of all the Smiths' songs, while Marr composed the music. Consequently, the media showed more interest in them and interviewed them much more often than Andy Rourke and Mike Joyce.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Morrissey and Marr for the children's TV programme *Data Run* in 1984, 2:07, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4dBzQOarEQ>.

<sup>10</sup> The word "class", for example, 0:14, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1lj4Ypg\\_AJo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1lj4Ypg_AJo), and "come", 0:23, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qjdDDCTCc\\_E](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qjdDDCTCc_E).

<sup>11</sup> Christoph Schubert, "Dialect and Regional Identity in Northern England", ed. Christoph Ehland, *Thinking Northern. Textures of Identity in the North of England*, Amsterdam, Brill, 2007, p. 77.

<sup>12</sup> "[E]asily" 6:35 and "naivety" 6:49, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ogVc4Mx6Z4I>.

<sup>13</sup> Maciej Baranowski and Danielle Turton, "Manchester English", ed. Raymond Hickey, *Researching Northern Englishes*, Amsterdam and Philadelphia, John Benjamins, 2015, p. 296.

20<sup>th</sup> century. The cover of the album *Strangeways, Here We Come* has a picture of a signpost for Strangeways. The video of the song “I Started Something I couldn’t Finish” (*Strangeways, Here We Come*) was filmed in Manchester and shows signposts for Strangeways, Deansgate (a road which crosses the centre of Manchester), Salford, Cheetham Hill (another working-class area of the city), Old Trafford (where Morrissey had lived), and Whalley Range. On the cover of the single “Shakespeare’s Sister” (Rough Trade, 1985) there is a photograph of the actress Pat Phoenix, who was born in Manchester and starred in the soap opera *Coronation Street*.<sup>14</sup> The cover of the single “Heaven Knows I’m Miserable Now” (Rough Trade, 1984) features a photograph of Viv Nicholson, who was born in Leeds and became a famous figure in the early 1960s for spending all the money she had won on a football lottery. The imagery chosen by the band was therefore replete with visual references to the North which complemented the lyrical references.

In interviews published in the music press, Morrissey and Marr confirmed that they were geographically and culturally part of a Northern universe as they frequently mentioned their geographical origins and their influences. The latter were often Northern figures who had made their names in the 1940s and included actors (Gracie Fields who was born in Rochdale near Manchester), musicians (George Formby, a ukulele player from Wigan, between Manchester and Liverpool), and comedians (Frank Randle, who was born near Wigan).<sup>15</sup> Morrissey often talked about the playwright Shelagh Delaney, who was born in Salford in 1938 and became well-known in the early 1960s for her depictions of Northern working-class life, linking her explicitly to some of his lyrics.<sup>16</sup> A number of songs were influenced directly by the work of Shelagh Delaney. Her plays were all set in Salford and revolved around working-class life there. The Smiths’ songs “This Night Has Opened My Eyes” (*The Smiths*), “Barbarism Begins At Home” (*Meat is Murder*) and “Reel Around The Fountain” (*The Smiths*) all contain lines from her best-known play *A Taste of Honey*.

Despite their numerous references to Manchester, The Smiths were often quite ambivalent about their home city. Some songs suggested that life could be unpleasant and tough in Manchester. “Rusholme Ruffians” recounts a tale of violence at a fair, while “Headmaster Ritual” denounces violence perpetrated by teachers in Manchester’s schools. In the BBC2 music programme *Oxford Road Show* of 22 March 1985, Morrissey was filmed visiting parts of Manchester where he had grown up.<sup>17</sup> The area where he had lived in Old Trafford as a small child had been pulled down in the late 1960s and had been replaced by tower blocks, leading him to say that it was “like having one’s childhood wiped away” and that he felt “great anger [and] great sadness”. He regretted that the strong community ties which had previously existed there had been destroyed and stated that it now seemed foreign to him. He was pleased to talk to his primary school teachers, but admitted that the atmosphere at his secondary school had been very different (“sadistic”, “barbaric”). He concluded that, although he was now financially able to leave the North, he did not wish to do so as he still felt “quite cemented [and] quite attached to all the things that [he had] known”, adding that there was “a mystical bond”. In June 1986, he expressed similar sentiments in an interview with the weekly music paper *Sounds*.<sup>18</sup> He stated that he had a love-hate relationship with his city: “I feel torn between the ties of my roots, which are very binding, and a *hatred*, because I’ve spent so many unhappy years here”.

The Smiths clearly associated themselves with Manchester and the North of England and conveyed a sense of Northernness. It was expressed in the band’s ‘musicking’, in other words in all the endeavours linked to their work.<sup>19</sup> And it was also expressed in the very way they spoke and sang. Yet as Georgina Gregory has noted, neither the music nor the comments made by the band “could hardly be viewed as a celebration of the city” of Manchester or of the North in general.<sup>20</sup> In fact, they provided

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<sup>14</sup> *Coronation Street* is set in the fictional working-class town of Weatherfield, which was based on Salford. See below for more information about the cultural significance of *Coronation Street*.

<sup>15</sup> Gary Leboff, “Goodbye Cruel World”, *Melody Maker*, 26 September 1987, p. 26-28.

<sup>16</sup> Barney Hoskyns, “These Disarming Men”, *New Musical Express*, 4 February 1984, p. 12-13; Ian Pye, “Some Mothers Do ‘Ave ‘Em”, *New Musical Express*, 7 June 1986, p. 26-27, 30, 53.

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q682LIPr4ew>

<sup>18</sup> Glyn Brown, “Laughter in Paradise”, *Sounds*, 14 June 1986, p. 16-18.

<sup>19</sup> The musician and academic Christopher Small coined the expression ‘musicking’ as a way of bringing together all activities related to a musical performance. Christopher Small, *Musicking. The Meanings of Performing and Listening*, Middletown (CT), Wesleyan University Press, 1998, p. 9.

<sup>20</sup> Georgina Gregory, *op. cit.*, p. 229.

the framework within which the detached nature of the Smiths' relationship with the North allowed the band to question the dominant version of Northernness.

## 2. Contesting the hegemonic version of Northernness

In order to bring out the specificities of The Smiths' Northernness, it is necessary to examine the traditional, dominant characteristics of Northernness. According to the British sociologist Karl Spracklen, there is a "common-sense idea of northernness expressed in culture by and about the north".<sup>21</sup> Spracklen states that Northernness is based on a vision of the North composed of tough, dour, hard-working, traditionally masculine, white working-class men, who like rugby league, drink beer in working men's clubs and live in terraced houses. Northerners had a quiet pride "amidst the adversity of being poor, or being a woman in a working-class man's world".<sup>22</sup> Other clichés and stereotypes could be added to this list. The sociologist Katie Milestone states that the North is constructed as "gritty and bleak, populated by 'authentic', hard-working, down to earth, friendly people, who stoically endure hardships".<sup>23</sup> According to Spracklen, these are simply myths and narratives that are imposed on the North by the politically dominant South. Nevertheless, they hold together the imagined community of the North, although they are sometimes contested.<sup>24</sup> The Smiths can be seen as providing examples of this type of contestation in the field of popular culture. To do so, they used the genre of Northern Realism.

Northern Realism is a tradition in British culture which provides a space for the exploration of working-class life in the North. Paul Marris has traced the origins back to the novels of Elizabeth Gaskell, which were published in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, and suggests that it has several basic characteristics: a documentary interest in life in industrial urban districts, a realism in tension with melodramatic effects, incorporation of elements of demotic speech, an association between Northernness and the industrial working class, and a portrayal of the everyday life of a community from a vantage point not wholly within it.<sup>25</sup> Marris refers to books from the inter-war period such as Walter Greenwood's *Love on the Dole* and George Orwell's *Road to Wigan Pier*, the paintings of LS Lowrie, British new wave cinema from the early 1960s (films such as *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* and *A Kind of Loving*), as well as some of the films of Ken Loach. When he comes to the 1980s, Marris mentions challenges to the conventions of the genre with the emergence of women as central characters in films such as *Letter to Brezhnev* and *Rita, Sue and Bob Too*. Television series such as *Coronation Street* are obviously part of this tradition. It could therefore be argued that Northern Realism is a genre which has helped create and perpetuate some stereotypes about the North but has also allowed them to be challenged, particularly during the 1980s.

Marris concentrates mainly on cinema and does not mention music at all. But the points that he raises can be applied to The Smiths – particularly if not simply the lyrics are analysed, but also how they are delivered and how songs were performed in front of audiences. As mentioned above, many passages in the lyrics refer to Northern settings and urban landscapes. But there is a certain tension as a result of the presence of more melodramatic passages in some songs. For instance, the chorus of "There is a Light That Never Goes Out" (*The Queen is Dead*) contain the following lines: "And if a double decker bus / crashes into us / to die by your side / is such a heavenly way to die / And if a ten ton truck / kills the both of us / to die by your side / well, the pleasure, the privilege is mine". There is also tension between the realism of the lyrics and their delivery. Morrissey had a tendency to yelp in early recordings and to sing falsetto. This was the case with "Miserable Lie" (*The Smiths*). His live performance of songs such as "Bigmouth Strikes Again" (*The Queen is Dead*) could be quite idiosyncratic and could involve the

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<sup>21</sup> Karl Spracklen, "Theorising Northernness and Northern culture: the North of England, Northern Englishness, and sympathetic magic", *Journal for Cultural Research* 20/1, March 2016, p. 6.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>23</sup> Katie Milestone, "'Northernness', gender and Manchester's creative industries", *Journal for Cultural Research* 20/1, 2016, p. 47.

<sup>24</sup> Karl Spracklen, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

<sup>25</sup> Paul Marris, "Northern Realism: an Exhausted Tradition?", *Cineaste* XXVI/4, 2001, Contemporary British Cinema Supplement, p. 47-50.

exaggerated rolling of the letter ‘r’, for example. Furthermore, the mundane episodes of everyday life depicted in the lyrics sometimes jarred with the soaring, occasionally celebratory music of songs like “William, It Was Really Nothing” (Rough Trade, 1984). It is a song about the importance of getting married in Northern working-class people’s lives, but Morrissey’s eccentric performance and the very uplifting music give the song greater complexity.<sup>26</sup> The Smiths did not use demotic speech in their songs or Mancunian dialect, but, significantly, Morrissey retained his Northern accent when singing. The Smiths expressed themselves from a vantage point not wholly within the Northern working-class communities they sang about, as their ambivalence about Manchester suggests. The presence of numerous female characters in the songs, either directly or indirectly via the lack of gender-specific personal pronouns, corresponds to developments in Northern Realism in the 1980s. The homo-eroticism of some of The Smiths’ imagery can also be seen as a new development. The cover of the single “Hand in Glove” shows a naked man seen from behind, with his bottom clearly visible. Finally, the most obvious example of The Smiths playing with the conventions of Northern Realism is the video of “I Started Something I Couldn’t Finish”.<sup>27</sup> It was filmed in Manchester and Salford as there are signposts for various areas of Greater Manchester and images of Salford Lads Club. There is also a bleak urban landscape with boarded up houses. However, there is a great deal of humour as Morrissey cycles around with boys and rather masculine girls who all resemble the singer. In other words, the video is characterised by an unusual mixture of stereotypical images of the North as well as more challenging ones and humour.

Consequently, it would seem that The Smiths used the genre of Northern Realism as a general approach, but they adopted a modified version of it to play with and challenge some of the stereotypes and narratives of Northernness. One instance of this pertains to masculinity. Masculinity and heterosexuality were prised apart by the presence of the homo-eroticism mentioned above, while some songs sketch out the possibility of a less harsh and less aggressive form of masculinity. In “I Know It’s Over” (*The Queen is Dead*, Rough Trade, 1986), the narrator states that “It’s so easy to laugh / It’s so easy to hate / It takes strength to be gentle and kind”, and “Ask” is an ode to “shyness” and “coyness”. This corresponds to a more inclusive vision of Northern masculinity, with a place being found for sections of the population who had previously been marginalised. Thus, in their music and in their performances, The Smiths did not correspond to the stereotypes of Northern men and clearly attempted to subvert them. It would therefore be inappropriate to describe Morrissey as an “archetypal Northerner”.<sup>28</sup>

During their career, their Northernness was, to a certain extent, mediated by the music industry. There is nothing to suggest that the band’s image was deliberately encouraged, or even manufactured, by the label with which it had a contract, although it allowed The Smiths to differentiate themselves from their rivals. Rough Trade was an independent label which gave the band complete artistic freedom, even allowing them to choose the layout and photos of their album and single covers.<sup>29</sup> The photographer Stephen Wright has explained that Morrissey had insisted on the band being photographed in front of Salford Lads Club for the inner cover of the album *The Queen is Dead*.<sup>30</sup> The music press also played an important role in the creation and diffusion of The Smiths’ image. At the time, there were four weekly music papers (*New Musical Express*, *Sounds*, *Melody Maker*, *Record Mirror*), which all championed The Smiths, publishing numerous articles about them and photographs of them. Their coverage of the band is significant. The music press frequently referred to their Mancunian origins. The adjectives “Northern” and “Mancunian” were often used by journalists to frame articles about them. This can be seen particularly in some of the early articles about them. “Mancunian” is used twice to describe them in *Sounds* in May 1983, while four months later in *Record Mirror* Morrissey and his fellow band

<sup>26</sup> As can be seen in this performance of the song on the BBC1 TV show *Top of the Pops* broadcast on 30 August 1984: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y6WgdPCaRgs>.

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SckD99B51IA>

<sup>28</sup> Georgina Gregory, *op. cit.*, p. 209.

<sup>29</sup> Jeremy Tranmer, “Independent Labels in the 1980s: Between the Underground and the Mainstream”, *Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique*, XXVI-3, 2021, <https://journals.openedition.org/rfcb/8297>.

<sup>30</sup> Mick Middles, “The Anatomy of a Photograph: Salford Lads Club & the Smiths”, *The Quietus*, 1 April 2015, <https://thequietus.com/articles/17532-salford-lads-club-the-smiths-photo>.

members were presented as the “magnetic Mancunian and his bunch of Northern notables”.<sup>31</sup> The music press also used Northern stereotypes in its presentation of the band. For example, in an article about them published in the *New Musical Express* in April 1985, the journalist mentioned “grey, Greater Manchester”.<sup>32</sup> A review of the album *Meat is Murder*, published in the same newspaper in February 1985, refers to Morrissey’s “natural Northern charm, bred in the back-to-backs and cobblestone alleyways” in a very traditional representation of working-class Manchester.<sup>33</sup> In June of the same year, the author of a review of a Smiths concert recounts a joke made by the singer-songwriter Billy Bragg, according to whom The Smiths were miserable as it always rained in Manchester.<sup>34</sup> The music press sometimes published photographs of bleak industrial, or rather post-industrial landscapes. In 1983, the photographer Paul Slattery took pictures of the band at Manchester Central Station, which was no longer used and had been abandoned for several years. Some of them were published in *Sounds* to illustrate an article about the band. One of them was even on the front cover of the issue.<sup>35</sup>

The music press thus imposed on the band a traditional image of the North and by extension of Northerners. It is important to note that, although the music press had regional correspondents, it was based in London. Its attitude towards The Smiths seems to confirm Spracklen’s analysis of the characteristics of Northernness being imposed on the North. On the other hand, in interviews, the music press also allowed The Smiths to express themselves and talk about their Northern influences (which was important as many fans probably did not have the cultural capital necessary to understand all of the Northern references in their songs. Many would not have heard of Shelagh Delaney, for example). It also allowed Morrissey to bring out the humour in some songs that fans might have missed.<sup>36</sup> The music press thus had a complex impact on the reception of The Smiths and their music, emphasising traditional Northernness in the way they framed articles but mentioning novelty in the articles themselves.

The Smiths were not the only Northern band to enjoy commercial success and critical acclaim in the 1980s. Others included Echo and the Bunnymen (Liverpool) and the Housemartins (Hull). Nor were they the only band from Manchester to receive sustained coverage in the music press and attract large followings. The members of Joy Division / New Order<sup>37</sup>, The Stone Roses and Happy Mondays were from Manchester or the surrounding area and were closely associated with the city. The latter two bands, for example, were at the heart of the “Madchester” music scene which appeared at the end of the decade. Nevertheless, The Smiths were the only group to put forward a distinctive regional identity, engage with Northernness and embody an attempt to renew aspects of it. Consequently, the historical and cultural significance of the band goes well beyond the field of music and it left a distinctive legacy.

## Select discography

### BEATLES

“Strawberry Fields Forever” (Parlophone, 1967)

### MORRISSEY

“Margaret on the Guillotine” (*Viva Hate*, HMV, 1988)

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<sup>31</sup> Dave McCullough, “Out to Crunch”, *Sounds*, 14 May 1983, p. 33; Graham K. Smith, “Strictly Shrub-Wise”, *Record Mirror*, 12 November 1983, p. 33.

<sup>32</sup> Danny Kelly, “Golden Wonders”, *New Musical Express*, 20 April 1985, <https://illnessasart.com/category/nme/page/4/>.

<sup>33</sup> Paul Du Noyer, “Top of the Chops”, *New Musical Express*, 16 February 1985, <https://illnessasart.com/2020/03/02/nme-16-february-1985/>.

<sup>34</sup> Dave Thomas, “The Smiths/Billy Bragg”, *New Musical Express*, 14 June 1985, <https://illnessasart.com/2020/03/02/nme-14-june-1985/>.

<sup>35</sup> *Sounds*, 19 November 1983, p. 1.

<sup>36</sup> Biba Kopf, “A Suitable Case for Treatment”, *New Musical Express*, 22 December 1984, <https://illnessasart.com/2020/01/05/nme-22-29-december-1984/>.

<sup>37</sup> The band changed its name from Joy Division to New Order in 1980 following the death of its singer Ian Curtis.

## SMITHS

- “I Started Something I Couldn’t Finish” (Rough Trade, 1987)
- “Is It Really So Strange?” (Rough Trade, 1987)
- “Sheila Take A Bow” (Rough Trade, 1987)
- “Ask” (Rough Trade, 1986)
- “Cemetery Gates” (*The Queen is Dead*, Rough Trade, 1986)
- “Panic” (Rough Trade, 1986)
- “There is a Light That Never Goes Out” (*The Queen is Dead*, Rough Trade, 1986)
- “Vicar in a Tutu” (*The Queen is Dead*, Rough Trade, 1986)
- “I Know It’s Over” (*The Queen is Dead*, Rough Trade, 1986)
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