

These charming men

What possesses people to dress up as the most elusive of pop icons? Fiona Sturges goes in search of the men who would be Morrissey.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ELISABETH BLANCHET

Being a Morrissey fan takes dedication. I should know because I am one. Hours of my life have been squandered trying to explain his genius to unbelievers who insist on asking such inane questions as "Why does he have to be so miserable?" or "Where's the tune?" Age has tempered my obsession very slightly. These days I don't feel the need to preach to the unconverted, I just quietly think them fools. There was a time when I would listen to The Smiths all day every day; now I own records by other bands as well.

Talk to any Smiths fan and chances are they'll remember the moment they first heard Morrissey's plaintive croon. My epiphany came aged 13 via a classmate at school who played me *Hatful of Hollow* on an old cassette recorder. When The Smiths split a year later I thought my life had come to an end. The French photographer Elisabeth Blanchet was in a second-hand record shop in Normandy →

Stop me if you think you've seen this man before (clockwise from top left): Graham, Lee, Gejo, Paul, Steve and Fernando dress as Morrissey



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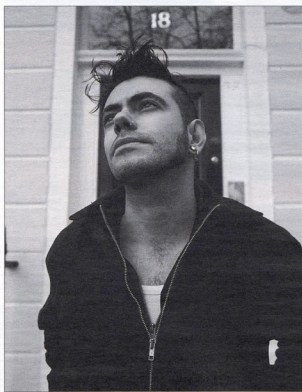


looking for old Clash singles when she first heard them. She was heavily into ska at the time. "As a teenager my mind was the other side of the Channel," she recalls. "As soon as I heard The Smiths, that was it, there was no going back." It was the start of a lifelong passion that has culminated in her current project photographing Morrissey look-alikes.

"When I was younger I had all these pictures of Morrissey on my bedroom walls and so I had a clear idea of how they should look and the poses they should have," she says. "It's as much about the way they stand, the angle at which they look at the camera, as the way they do their hair that makes them authentic. Is it weird that people want to look like him? I don't think so. I became friends with some of the guys I photographed. When you meet someone who loves The Smiths as you do, you find you have a lot of things in common. You've read the same books and are into the same films. You're on the same wavelength."

Few musicians have attracted the kind of idolatry that Morrissey has. In the early days one fan in Denver held a radio station up at gunpoint, demanding that they play only Smiths songs. He said he just wanted to hear Morrissey's voice. Acolytes would regularly turn up at the singer's house in Manchester clutching books of poetry (on moving to London Morrissey would do the same with Alan Bennett). Today Morrissey fans, many of them grown ups with jobs and children, still hurl themselves at him with hopeless abandon during concerts, desperate to make contact with the man who articulated their teenage angst.

Since his glory days with The Smiths, Morrissey has drifted in and out of fashion. →



Graham Sampson (above), lead singer of the tribute band **The Smyths**. 'At a time when Thatcherism was disassembling working-class culture, the Smiths were the cultural reference point for the British, northern, working-class man. From nowhere, they arrived with this sense of

urgency, and I knew the moment I heard "This Charming Man", that this band truly meant something.' **Fernando Amador** (left) shop assistant. **Lara Brady** (below), lead singer of **These Charming Men**, of whom Morrissey said: 'I'm very impressed and flattered by what they do.'



After the initial promise of his first two solo albums, the quality of his music went into sharp decline. His exaltation of all things English and his flirtation with gangster imagery sat uncomfortably with the prevailing culture of political correctness. In 1992 he was vilified by the press for performing at a Madness reunion show draped in the Union flag. By the end of the decade he was without a record deal and living in self-enforced exile in Los Angeles. But now, after a spectacular comeback in 2004, he's at the top of his game, so much so that when he had another spat with the music paper *NME* about his views on immigration recently, few seemed to care.

Gejo Canovas's devotion has never wavered. At 40, he's as passionate about Morrissey as he was when he first discovered The Smiths as a teenager. Like his idol, he is a vegetarian, a staunch republican and is the proud owner of a scrupulously sculpted, oversized quiff.

"I'm from Spain and there are two reasons why I came to this country," he says. "One was to be with my partner and the other was Morrissey. He has pretty much shaped my whole life." His feelings are echoed by another fan, Paul. "Morrissey was the friend I never had, a kindred spirit who understood me completely," he says. "He wrote the words, I lived the life."

Most pop stars have to be dead before they reach the iconic status that Morrissey has achieved in his lifetime. Once the maverick outsider, the boy with the thorn in his side, Morrissey is now the established face of disaffection. Twenty-five years after he first rose to fame the legend has been sealed, not just by his music but by those who choose to look like him.

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Gejo Canovas (above) 'I wouldn't call myself a lookalike as that would be stealing someone else's image. But Morrissey has been a big inspiration for me and I'm proud to be recognised as a fan.'

Steve Tanner-Tremains (left) 'I first heard the Smiths when I was going through adolescence; I was a bit miserable and felt somewhat disassociated, and something in the sound just got to me, where other music couldn't.'

Paul (declined to give his surname, below) 'My infatuation with Morrissey began when I saw The Smiths on *The Tube* in 1983. Each new song I heard articulated my thoughts, which hitherto I hadn't been able to express - I'd thought I was the only one who felt that way. I feel so fortunate to have had Morrissey as a constant companion, through good times and bad. The world is infinitely more bearable for having him in.'

