



# Just the Two of Us

The biggest surprise in interviewing Anglo-duo Electronic is how unrockstar-like they are. Bernard Sumner and Johnny Marr were towering figures in 80s pop music, given their membership in Joy Division and New Order (Bernard), and the Smiths (Johnny), three of the most popular and influential British bands of that decade. Given that history, you'd expect the pair to be either arrogant, jaded, cynical, pretentious, or even all four. In fact, they're refreshingly down-to-earth, self-deprecating and funny — just a couple of Manchester lads you'd happily down a few pints with at their local.

They were making the promotional rounds on behalf of *Raise the Pressure*, the second and long-awaited Electronic album, when I caught up with them in Toronto, a city that has always given Sumner and Marr a warm musical welcome. Considering the long gap since Electronic's 1990 self-titled debut, they must have been a mite anxious as to whether anyone would remember or care about them. Five-hundred vocal fans showed at a Toronto radio station appearance, and Johnny Marr admitted, "We weren't expecting that at all."

"This [self-promotion] is something we have to work at because we are a new group and have to work our audience. We're not going to rest on our laurels," adds Sumner.

While Electronic may be young in terms of output, the friendship between Marr and Sumner dates way back to 1983. Bernard was then producing an album by Manchester group Quando Quango, and he hired young guitarist Marr to guest on the record. The two stayed in touch, forming Electronic in 1988.

Their 1990 debut single, 'Getting Away With It', featured Pet Shop Boy Neil Tennant on backing

vocals (he co-wrote the song), and became a huge hit in both Britain and North America, where it sold over 350,000 copies! The subsequent album sold well, but aside from 1992 single 'Disappointed', Electronic haven't been heard from again until now. Apparently Sumner's commitments with New Order were the primary cause.

"After working together for just a couple of months on the first album, we knew Electronic was going to work," he recalls. "But I'd already committed to doing the *Republic* album with New Order. Then, when [New Order label] Factory went down and was bailed out by London Records, part of that process was that New Order were contracted to two more records, that new album and a greatest hits collection."

Bernard is obviously not keen on talking about New Order at length, and his explanation of that group's current status is rather confusing.

"New Order haven't split up, but we have no plans to work together."

The other reason for the slow arrival of Electronic album Number 2 is simply that they had too much fun making it.

"We just love being in the studio together,"

says Johnny. "That's one of the reasons this took so long. We couldn't stand to finish!"

To make *Raise the Pressure*, Sumner and Marr cut themselves off from the musical world.

"We've been in a very closed environment, like this little shell underground, for two years, as well as trying to have a semblance of normal personal life, if that's possible," explains Marr. "You can get this sense of cabin fever, where you don't really have a sense of what is going on in the outside world. Now, with this promotional tour, we've let go of it, and it's interesting to get a sense of how people are responding."

The response has been mixed. Initially, *Raise the Pressure* has been doing moderately well commercially, but has been generally slaughtered by the English music press. Not that this raised the duo's blood pressure.

"We don't read reviews or interviews of us," claims Bernard.

"You don't want to take the baggage of something you've read with you," agrees Johnny. "It makes you very self-conscious."

"We know what we think of the album, and that's the main thing," Bernard concludes.

Over the course of its 13 numbers, *Raise the Pressure* does get a bit monochromatic, but songs like 'Forbidden City' and 'Dark Angel' have real appeal. Sumner's languid, world-weary vocals are well framed by Marr's melodic guitar and the pair's slightly retro keyboard sounds. Fans of Marr, the guitar hero, may be disappointed there's not enough of his axework here though. Credited with co-writes on six songs is Kraftwerk keyboardist Karl Bartos, who also plays on the album. Marr describes Karl's contributions as, "more in a production sense".

"He brought in a few demos that we kicked around to make more like us. He'd go back to Dusseldorf, we'd keep writing, and then he'd come back and say, 'Ja, this is happening,' or, 'This isn't happening.'"

"One of the great things about Electronic is we get to work with people we admire, which is fantastic. I do think we enjoy working with just the two of us more than anything. That's the least problematic thing."

Both Marr and Sumner now find writing and recording songs the most pleasurable aspect of the rock 'n' roll circus.

"That's the creative part, the only really productive part," explains Bernard. "I like playing live, but I don't like the lifestyle that goes with touring. I toured for a long time; New Order toured for longer than the Beatles or the Doors, and even they got sick of it. It's just such an enclosed lifestyle that crazy shit can start happening. There are drugs available, lots of chicks around [mocking laughter]. You can have a wild time, yeah, but these days it's just a bit dangerous. There's AIDS flying around, and hard drugs. Look at the Smashing Pumpkins. At one stage I ended up in a hospital in Chicago from drinking too much, and I don't want to do that any more."

Johnny Marr adds, "It has occurred to me about touring in the past, you've got a whole mini-industry of people counting and relying on you. Touring may actually suit them, but we're more into the creative than the reproductive process. You can feel obligated to tour for the rest of the band and the entourage. When I play live, it is almost as a gesture for people who have stuck by us. Both Bernard and I have had fairly interesting careers [an understatement], and continue to have people who are very passionate about our music. When you come out of the studio and get that sort of feedback from the audience — 'Oh, please play live' — it breaks your heart to say no. We certainly don't tour to make money, or make ourselves more famous. We do it to promote the records, because we believe in them."

Electronic are still unsure whether they'll tour soon.

"We're just getting more and more confused," admits Johnny. "I've realised, if you play in Manchester or London, you're pissing off people in Toronto or Auckland. If we were to play, it'd have to be in a lot of different countries. It is interesting, though, because our future is clear. I'm not committed to any sessions, and Bernard is not particularly committed to New Order. The temptation is to go back in again and do another record, speed up the process. We want to prove to people Electronic is our main concern."

The duo is quite aware of how some observers perceive Electronic. As Johnny Marr asserts, "We want to reiterate the point we can write songs together in a structured way that isn't an indulgence of two disenfranchised pop stars coming together as a hobby."

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