



Joy Division: Piece by Piece

Paul Morley

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Paul Morley knew Joy Division intimately. He not only wrote extensively and evocatively of the “mood, atmosphere and ephemeral terror” that enveloped the group and their doomed front man, Ian Curtis, but he was present when Curtis suffered his life-changing epileptic seizure following a London concert in April 1980 and was the only journalist permitted to view Curtis’ corpse. *Joy Division: Piece By Piece* encompasses his complete writings on the group, both contemporary and retrospective. In addition to collecting all of Morley’s classic works about the band, the book includes his eloquent Ian Curtis obituary and hindsight pieces on the group’s significance, framed by an extensive retrospective essay, as well as his reviews of the films *24 Hour Party People* and *Control*. Morley, who emerged from Manchester at the same time as Joy Division, effortlessly evokes that city’s zeitgeist and psycho-geography to tell the story of this uniquely intense group.

Joy Division: Piece by Piece Details

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From Reader Review Joy Division: Piece by Piece for online ebook

Ben Winch says

Sometimes it's hardest to write about the things you love best. Joy Division, for me, is one of those things - 'ground zero' in my comprehension of rock music and the most life-changing band ever, comparable to Kubrick's *Clockwork Orange* or Borges' *Labyrinths* as an artistic epiphany. I will never get over this band. 23 years ago I first saw them (via late-night Australian TV) doing 'Transmission' in Manchester's BBC studios and I still remember my mounting shock as the footage unfolded: the rawness, the realness, the focused concentration. Sumner's guitar and the comprehension: 'I could *do* that!' Hook's and Morris's precision and power. The baffling, hypnotic, eyes-wide-opened presence of Curtis turned to howl-in-the-wilderness as the song peaked, and the look of utter relief that flooded his features as they reached the final few refrains without incident and his body wilted and eyes fell shut. My dad, mum and best friend Reed Cathcart in the room around me. Mum to Dad as the tension mounted: 'I can't believe you *like* this.' Dad to Reed (who perhaps was not as hypnotised as I was) re Curtis: 'Look at him. He's really *feeling* it.' Me to Dad: 'It's not just him, it's the *band*.' And that's just it: this was a BAND. A group of equals. Which is why the cult of personality that's grown up around Curtis baffles me. *Touching From A Distance*? I only bought it for the lyrics (back then I didn't have the internet), and read the main body of the text grudgingly, curious despite myself but incensed that the first major book on my favourite band should contain so little information on the *music*. A biography by the one key Curtis intimate who was barred from almost all the gigs?! Worse still, mention Joy Division these days (since *Touching...*, since *Control*) and you're as likely to get the response 'Ian Curtis was a bastard!' as any kind of meaningful comment on the music. I mean Jeez, how many of us would fare well in a tell-all biography by an ex-girlfriend? Besides which, has anyone read a biography of the sainted John Lennon lately? Me, I could give two shits what Curtis did in his spare time, which is why when it comes to recommending a book on his band I'm gonna have to make it this one, despite its faults. Not that Morley - or anyone from the original Factory camp - seems all that interested in uncovering 'the truth'. Light on information and heavy on bluster, every story about Factory Records seems to attest to the enduring influence of founder Tony Wilson's stated philosophy: 'Between truth and legend, print the legend,' and Morley's high concept pontificating is no exception. Approaching his task as if he were one of the 12 apostles, with this approach supposedly legitimised by Wilson's having prophesied it, Morley does nothing to counter the prevailing image of Mancunians as shameless self-promoters, and little to cut through the fog of myth. But the fact remains: Morley was there, and he loved the music. And another fact almost (but only almost) absolves him, and all the key players, of such congenital wankery: in the late 70s Manchester really *was* the site of some sort of minor miracle, which allowed four boys from the provincial grey suburbs to create a sound that not only epitomised urban European sophistication but seemed to have come from Mars. What was their secret? Producer Martin Hannett? Maybe - though again, given the cloud of myth surrounding him (the existing Hannett biography is so facile that I couldn't make it past the first 10 pages), we'll probably never know. I'd say Hannett had something to do with it, though I've also always agreed with the band that he fluffed the production of *Unknown Pleasures*, bleaching it of power even while creating the techniques that enabled *Closer* (the masterpiece) in the process. Curtis, then? To a degree. His commitment, for sure - the same take-no-prisoners approach that would later characterise Kurt Cobain, a powerful force to have in your corner. But add to that the seemingly-selfless sheer unpretentiousness of his bandmates - who would later (as New Order) refuse to pose for photos, mime for videos or move to London - and I think you begin to grasp the Mancunian paradox. Because, at street level, the Manchester of the late-70s surely must have been one of the least forgiving environments for the budding wanker in England. Even today, after the wave of glitzy 'urban renewal', it's a commonsensical kind of place. And if you ask me you can see this in the way the boys from Joy Division conducted themselves: zero flash, shorn of ego, dressed neat with hair cut short, almost military but without the pose that military costume would imply. Yet from this foundation they

were able to lift off to another realm. 30 years later, go into Dry Bar (opened by New Order in Manchester's then-derelict Northern Quarter in the 90s) and the classic black-and-white Kevin Cummins photos seem to have been beamed in from another reality; 'How could this have happened here?' they seem to say. Astonishingly, people keep on drinking in the plush surroundings, apparently oblivious to the paradox - to the figure of Curtis as if hewn from stone, eyes transfixed by the unimaginable, among all this torpid revelry. No exaggeration, the story of Joy Division is – or should be – one of the most moving in rock music. But whether it can be told, I can't say. If you're curious, this book will help a little. The documentary – simply entitled *Joy Division* – which came out soon after *Control* will help a little more. And *Control* itself probably won't hurt. RIP Ian and power to the others for keeping on. Life-changing.

David Manns says

In a sense this is the book about Joy Division that everyone was waiting for. Paul Morley had been their chronicler since the earliest of early days, back up North in wet, miserable mid-70's Manchester when they had almost been called Stiff Kittens but ended up being Warsaw before they became Joy Division. He was there at the Lesser Free Trade Hall in 1976 when the Sex Pistols played there and set in motion the chain of events that would lead various members of that audience to bend the world around them into new shapes. Buzzcocks, Magazine, The Fall and Joy Division all came into being directly because of that concert.

Morley saw something, some spark, some unearthly light in these four young men and the fierce, deeply emotional music they made. As the proto-punk Warsaw morphed into the post-punk Joy Division, as lead singer Ian Curtis found his true voice, as Hooky's bass shook the very foundations of Manchester, Morley was there to write about it. In a way he fell in love with the group or at least with the idea of what the group could become, given the right opportunities.

In the space of two years they created two extraordinary albums and a handful of truly inspired singles. They found a home at Factory records and a svengali father-figure in the mercurial Tony Wilson. And Morley was there to document it all.

He experimented with his journalism, trying to find a way to communicate the greatness of the group and their music with imagery and symbolism instead of the dry track by track analysis of conventional music journalism. This led to accusations of pretentiousness, and yes his work can be obtuse but it can also be diamond sharp and poetic and tragic. It took him almost 30 years to write the definitive book on Joy Division, the book that Tony Wilson always thought he would/could write. Piece by Piece is that book and what it reveals is the complex relationship that Morley had not only with Joy Division but also with death. His own father had committed suicide in the late 70's as Curtis would do in 1980, as Joy Division stood on the cusp of stardom.

Baffled by these events Morley retreated but always there ran through his work, even the wild, chaotic, absurdist world of ZTT, that he helped create in imitation of Factory. The works here are not presented chronologically, but rather each piece tells the story as the story unfolded. Morley took 30 years to work out what he had to say and how he had to say it and why he had to say it and in what way he had to say it. There are live reviews here, record reviews, interviews, essays, not all of them about Joy Division, but all of them linked in some way to that dark, dramatic, passionate group and their dark, dramatic passionate music.

Slowly, over many years, as Joy Division were repackaged and resold and the story was spun by others into Myth, Morley wrote about them again and again and each time more pieces of the puzzle fell into place.

Eventually he would write a book called *Nothing* that dealt with his father's suicide (even if it opens with him being shown, by Wilson, the dead body of Ian Curtis). With that done he then, it seems, had no choice but to write the book he had been waiting 30 years to write.

As Joy Division rose again in the public consciousness, with films and documentaries and the death of Tony Wilson (latterly Anthony H. Wilson) the time seemed perfect for this book. It is the definitive book on one of the greatest rock bands of all time. Because he was there. Because he understood what it meant even if it took him years to work it out. Because death couldn't stop them. Because to so many people Joy Division mattered. And still matter.

This is the way, step inside....

Laurensius Anggha says

What if the pistols came to Jakarta?

a 'not so brief', fictional cum realistic, description of early manchester post punk scene history that is a bit elusive and close, unbelievable but factual, leading to the birth of warsaw, Joy Division, and the end of it, affixed (and linked) with Paul's story of his father's death. i don't want to spoil the party any further because i don't have any capabilities of doing it.

Kristin says

I guess if I wanted to plow through this it might've gotten better, but the beginning is more about the Buzzcocks than Joy Division. Why include that stuff? Also, this guy is pretentious and he writes just like most rock writers, in a style that tries to show more how much he knows and how well he thinks he writes than in a way that actually illuminates anything of substance.

East Bay J says

Whenever I read a bio about a band, I like to listen to the music to set the mood. It serves the function of pulling me more completely into the story I'm reading. However, due to recent events in my life, I found listening to Joy Division incredibly difficult. So many times, since discovering their music sixteen years ago, they have been the soundtrack to my despair. And the reason for this, I think, is summed up rather nicely by Morley. "And so their music is about, finally, isolation. It is about the difficulty of keeping in touch with other human beings as we create for safety's sake a reality around us that works for us as much as it can. A reality we can trust"

It's incredible and a fitting testimony to their originality and power the number of bands on the radio today who were influenced by (i.e. plundered and ripped off) Joy Division's sound, look and atmosphere. Why name names? They're all useless, boring, two or three or four or five generations removed from the band itself but it's amazing the full circle that has been completed by Joy Division's music, their essence, their existence. To the last, I have never liked their descendents, these bland, opportunistic, simple and narrow minded cretins. Once Joy Division did what they did, who would do it better? Who *could* do it better? No

one and there is a lesson in that. Paul Morley's writing is a testament to this fact, his faith in them a testament to originality and risk taking.

Piece By Piece collects all Morley's writing on Joy Division (and Factory and New Order and Peter Saville and Martin Hannett and everything, really, having to do with Joy Division) from 1977 to 2007. Morley has a writing style that mirrors and echoes the seriousness and gravity of Joy Division's music. He has a lovely, playful way of playing with language and what he says with language is poignant and emotional and revealing. Like Joy Division.

I found Morley's writing on the film *24 Hour Party People* to be fascinating. The idea of watching a screenwriter, director and actors trying to recreate something from my life is extremely interesting to contemplate and seems fraught with potential... peril? I feel I *must* see this film. And I believe I'll rent *Control* the same day and geek out on the whole vibe.

I suppose my one complaint about *Piece By Piece* is that, due to the fact that this is a collection, there is much repetition. There are even sort of "before and after" versions of some articles. And Morley is decidedly *not* afraid to go on and on. The chapter on seeing Curtis' body is an exercise in excess.

Any fan of Joy Division will dig *Piece By Piece*. It's a fitting memorial and tribute to a fabulous band and all the people, places and things that made them what they were and still manage to be.

Spiros says

Paul Morley wrote a zine in Manchester in the mid 1970's called "Out There", focusing on the burgeoning punk movement taking place in exotic locales such as New York and London.

A zine is a primitive form of a blog.

Local television celebrity/wanker/visionary Tony Wilson introduced himself to Morley, praising the zine, anointing Morley as the voice of the movement.

Morley would later discover that it was Wilson's friend/partner in disruption Alan Erasmus who had discovered "Out There".

On 4 June 1976, the Sex Pistols played Manchester's Lesser Free Trade Hall. Morley was among the 40 or so members of the audience, as was virtually everyone that had any hand in Manchester's subsequent musical scene. As was John the Postman.

Morley, on the strength of "Out There", was hired as Manchester correspondent for the New Musical Express, the premiere English music magazine.

Morley's father committed suicide at the age of 40. Morley didn't view the body.

A band called Warsaw, that had briefly been called Stiff Kitten, changed their name to Joy Division.

[a paradoxical observation would go about here]

In the course of just over three years, Joy Division would record two brilliant albums, produced by genius recording engineer Martin Hannett, designed by cutting edge graphic designer Peter Saville. They would play many legendary gigs, and record a string of songs (e.g. "Atmosphere", "Transmission", "Love Will Tear Us Apart") which they would deem out of place for inclusion on their albums.

Joy Division's manager, Rob Gretton, called Morley a "cunt". By all accounts, Gretton called everyone a "cunt".

[arty cultural and or political reference would go here]

Morley was forbidden by NME to review any recordings or performances from any of the Manchester bands. Despite this, there is a widespread perception that anything about Joy Division that appeared in NME was authored by him.

The day before they were scheduled to leave for their first American tour, Joy Division came to a sudden stop when their lyricist and lead vocalist, Ian Curtis, committed suicide.

Tony Wilson showed Curtis' body to Morley, so that the book Morley would be destined to write about Joy Division would have a place to start. Or end.

[another paradoxical statement should go in here]

Morley would co-found ZZT records, inspired by Wilson/Erasmus/Hannett/Saville/Gretton's Factory Records. ZZT produced records by Frankie Goes to Hollywood and Art of Noise, amongst others.

Morley viewed acts such as Orchestra Manoeuvres in the Dark, A Certain Ratio, and Cabaret Voltaire through the prism of Joy Division.

Martin Hannett died. A few years later, Rob Gretton died.

Simon Pegg played Paul Morley in the movie "24 Hour Party People".

[a reference to Frederick Engels, Alan Turing, or Jean-Luc Godard should go in here]

Tony Wilson died. Paul Morley wrote his obituaries for the Guardian, the Observer, and NME.

Joy Division became New Order. The final 21 pages of this book tell their story: the book is 384 pages long.

Much of the book reads like what I have just written.

Wm says

It was somewhat startling, but not really surprising that even though as far I can recall I had never previously read anything by Morley, my writing style is kind of similar to his. Not quite so post-modern. But the use of paired adjectives, the overreliance on the conjunction 'and' and sentences that begin with conjunctions, the slightly off verbs, the circling around a subject, the repetition, and perhaps most of all the lapses into the mystical and gnomic followed by undermining those effects.

Of course, it's quite possible that my influences are similar to Morley's influences or that my influences were influenced by Morley.

And there's also the possibility that my vocabulary and his vocabulary were shaped by the same source -- the music and lyrics (not just the lyrics) of Joy Division.

This collection is not likely to be interesting to anyone but the most ardent fan, the completist. There is a lot of repetition of themes and phrases. There's also the injection of Morley in to the mix. But at the same time it's also not just a bunch of reviews and such he wrote for NME along with some Tony Wilson obits. As he collects, he attempts to stitch things together, to expand, to comment upon. It is a literary project. It is an attempt at understanding. And if it gets self-indulgent and repetitive at times, it's because, well, writing about Joy Division, about how the band started, about what it accomplished, about how it all feel apart when Ian committed suicide and how it got put back together and how the myth grew and how to fight against that while also trying to exegete your way in to the fact that for you the music is deserving of the myth.

I have no idea whether that appeals to someone else. There were pages where I got bored. But on the whole, it makes sense to me to read this book and to read it in May, and it brought back for me what this music, once I found it, has meant for me and how it has shaped me and how it's quite a bit more than just some depressing post-punk by some blokes who saw the Sex Pistols in concert and said, hey, we can do that, and then got hijacked by a genius in the studio, and a madcap television presenter, and others and then just as they were about to break big, their lead singer killed himself. Quite a bit and still just about that.

Xisix says

Started strong got bit dry then finished strong. Enjoy as title suggests how fragmented and meaning different things Joy Division as group portray. How their live/death performances had a ferocious intensity that were channeled by Martin Zero into spaced out existential isolation on record. Ian was a confused and troubled and sick bastard that Hookie and Bernard and Stephen wanted to be blokes wit and conquer the world. Being just anutha Warsaw punk group and fade into obscurity was not enuff. From shock Nazi references [even Siouxsie wore a swastika] to vague pulsar and tomb record covers. Here are the young men. Dance Dance Dance to the radio. Ian's thrashing about and twitching was as he explained a type of 'sign language' to explain the songs. A cutting of the air. Up on balls of feet. To be young and want to race headlong into the abyss. Victims fall in battle. Fall in battle with yourself. Go down the line . . . Now we have the echoes . . .

Mr Disco says

The beauty and power of pop music is that it says so much with so little in a way that everyone in the world can understand and relate to. Morley's writing is the opposite: he says so little with so much and deliberately attempts to speak over people's heads in a way that - I have to think - is done in an insecure attempt to prove his own intellectual superiority. And don't get me wrong - Morley is clearly a smart guy - but his writing has virtually no substance to it whatsoever. It's all wordplay and cleverness, smoke and mirrors that - in a manner that feels almost cowardly - entirely obscure the original impulses, thoughts and feelings behind the writing. With nearly every essay in Piece By Piece, I got the feeling that you could substitute literally any band's name for Joy Division's and the audience would be none the wiser - his writing is far more about his own ego

than it is about the music of one of the world's greatest bands. The only thing that would potentially elevate this above a one-star review were some of the later essays on 24 Hour Party People and Control - where he drops some of his pretension and writes a bit more honestly - although even those essays still feel fairly insubstantial.

MJ Nicholls says

Paul Morley, primed for fame by Tony Wilson, present at a private viewing of Ian Curtis's corpse, was the one rock critic fated to write the definitive Joy Division book. As it happened, Morley fled to London, moved into the world of art-pop management, and kept his fascination with the band at the back of his mind for years, until his powerful memoir *Nothing*—an account of his father's suicide refracted through Ian Curtis's. In the end, Morley's Great Book on Joy Division is this patchwork of articles, fragments, explanations, theories, and philosophical waxings, perhaps the perfect form for such a messy, minute period in rock history, that continues to fragment into a million contrasting accounts. A comprehensive overview of the entire scene, written in Morley's searching and grandiose prose style, this book succeeds at having the last word on Joy Division, until the next big book, at least.

Max Renn says

Persistent...audacious...unafraid...

Paul Morley writes about Joy Division... sometimes it seems all he's ever written about is Joy Division...well that and propaganda for Frankie Goes To Hollywood and the Art of Noise. This collection does nothing to dispell that notion. Its an odd project really... a collection of old writings by one man about one band...presumably of interest only to fans who know the story only to well... so why do it?

Because Morley's writings on Joy Division over thirty years become something other than a collection of reviews and recollections when placed one after the other and stitched together with backwards glances, they become a rosary of sorts. The same story repeated again and again, the same names invoked, the same images and symbols brought forth like a mantra, over and over until entrancement sets in... over and over until the tiny variations start to wobble and resonate and suddenly it all makes sense to hear this story again and again and again...

Joy Division is to Morley what wine was to Rumi and out of this fable and repetition, out of his particular and camouflaged poetry, Morley teases out a tale of our coordinated universal time in its becoming...media-saturated, post-industrial, nerved up and alienated. And to his credit he makes it heartfelt and honest and truthful in a way fables are not supposed to be.

In the end this book ends up being something more than an odds and sods compilation for fanatics, it becomes an affectionate unflinching assessment for anyone interested in urban life at the end of the 20th century and all the touching from a distance that that implies.

so dance dance dance to the radio...

Diane says

Interesting perspective on the Manchester scene. A bit too much about the author and lots of repetition, but unusual approach to an outrageous time. If you don't know the names from the English punk and post-punk scene, if you haven't watched the Joy Division documentary or 24 Hour Party People, you're going to miss a lot of reference. Still - Lightning in a bottle.

Laura Collins says

Just re-read this in my current Joy Division/New Order binge. pretty good and at least Morley was there and was at times actively hated by Joy Division.

Rachel says

Paradoxes, paradoxes, paradoxes. Intriguing at first, but an easily exhausted trick when reading 50 pages at a time for a class. I imagine Morley's writing is much more digestible when actually read 'piece by piece' as designated in the title.

Despite that, there were a lot of insightful gems. Although I reveled in the insider knowledge about Joy Division, I mostly enjoyed reading Morley's personal reflections about coming into his own as a writer and how Joy Division inspired and propelled this dream: "The only thing, perhaps, on their side, which I seemed to be detecting, as if through a swirling mist, was their absolute self-belief, and their commitment to the making of themselves into something special."

Mr Disco says

The beauty and power of pop music is that it says so much with so little in a way that everyone in the world can understand and relate to. Morley's writing is the opposite: he says so little with so much and deliberately attempts to speak over people's heads in a way that - I have to think - is done in an insecure attempt to prove his own intellectual superiority. And don't get me wrong - Morley is clearly a smart guy - but his writing has virtually no substance to it whatsoever. It's all wordplay and cleverness, smoke and mirrors that - in a manner that feels almost cowardly - entirely obscure the original impulses, thoughts and feelings behind the writing. With nearly every essay in Piece By Piece, I got the feeling that you could substitute literally any band's name for Joy Division's and the audience would be none the wiser - his writing is far more about his own ego than it is about the music of one of the world's greatest bands. The only thing that elevated this above a one-star review were some of the later essays on 24 Hour Party People and Control, where he drops some of his pretension and writes a bit more honestly - although even those essays still feel fairly insubstantial.
