

# The Smiths' producer shares his hit-making secrets

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**Stephen Street, the man behind classic records by The Smiths, Blur, The Cranberries and more, will be honoured with the outstanding achievement award at this month's Music Producers Guild Awards .**

"I do hope it doesn't mean they're putting me out to pasture!" jokes the Brit and Grammy-winner, who is currently working on a new Chrissie Hynde record.

"It's funny," he continues. "When I started working as an assistant at Island Records in the studio in the basement back in the 80s, if someone had said to me, 'You're going to get to 2020 and you'll get an award' I would've bitten their hand off."

Before he commits such an atrocious act of cannibalism, we asked the 59-year-old to let us in on some of the trade secrets of producing a hit pop record.

## It's as much about managing egos as recording sounds



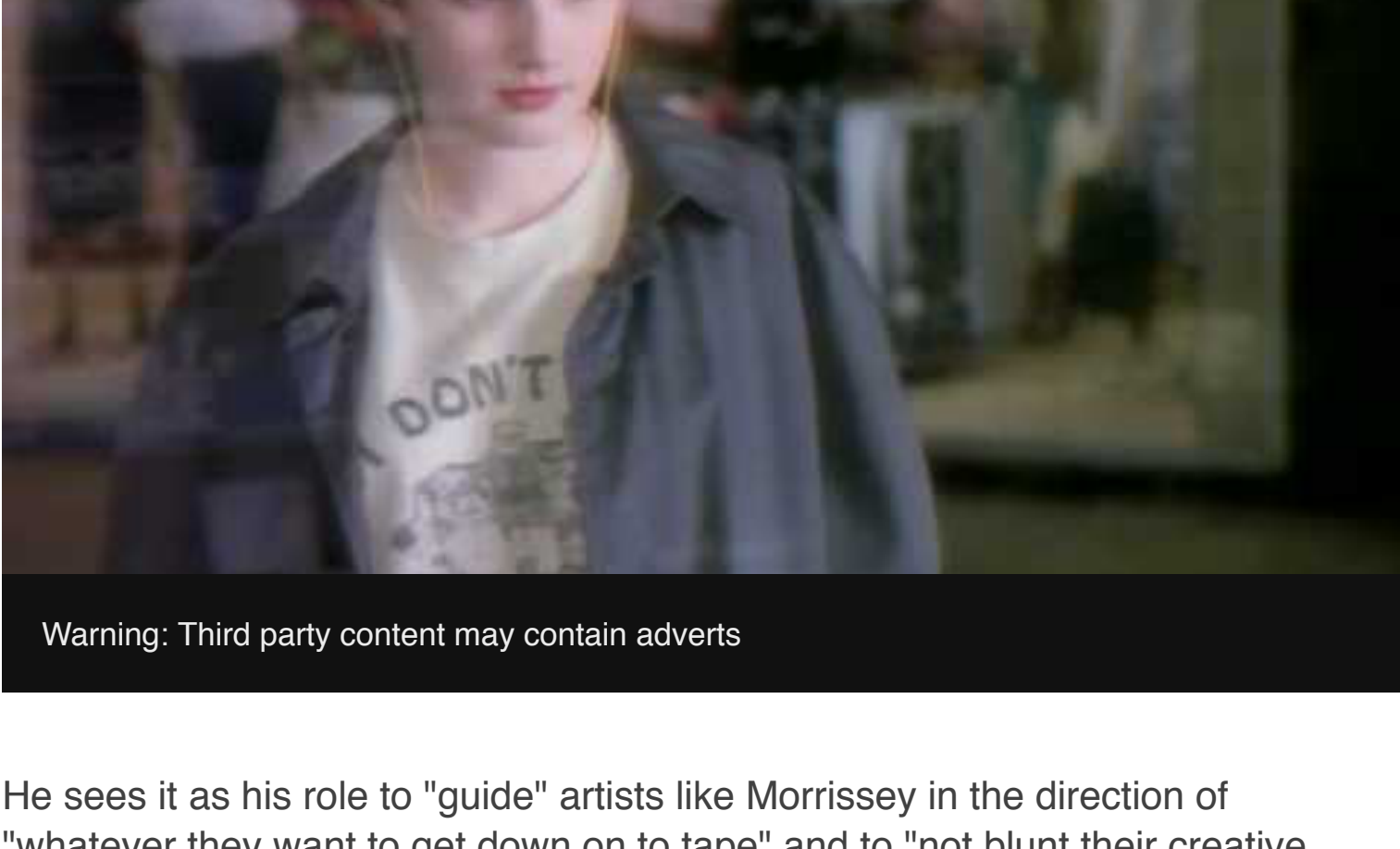
Recording technology has changed radically since Street's early days in that basement, "demystifying" the process along the way - but the emotional needs of musicians have remained largely the same: They are human and they need to be loved.

The producer's job, Street says, is largely "getting the best out of an artist" by "making them feel special".

"I don't know what I've done in a previous life but I have definitely been sent some slightly difficult people to work with," he says. "Then again, I think that's what happens with great artists and I don't mind that."

Pop personalities don't come much bigger or more difficult than Morrissey and, after being promoted from engineer to producer on The Smiths' final album, Strangeways Here We Come, Street went on to work on the singer's debut solo album, Viva Hate.

"At that time The Smiths were so revered [that] if we failed I would have been public enemy number one," he recalls. "So I look back at it with great pride and also great relief".



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He sees it as his role to "guide" artists like Morrissey in the direction of "whatever they want to get down on to tape" and to "not blunt their creative flow".

But, he stresses, it's also important to consider the other talent in the room and "not just keep bending over backwards for the front person".

"Sometimes you do have to put your foot down but hopefully you're doing it in such a way that you're not making enemies.

"And there's other points where you just sit back and let them get on with it, because a good band will always sort out their natural balance."

During the earlier recording of Strangeways, the producer remembers how [nearly all of] The Smiths liked to balance hard work with references to their favourite comedy.

"Johnny [Marr] and Andy [Rourke] were completely obsessed with Spinal Tap," he says, "and there were mini Stonehenges of cigarette packs left all over the studio.... Andy had learned - by note - the bass line to Big Bottom!

"We only did that when Morrissey wasn't in the room, though. Don't worry."

## Sometimes you have to let songs stew



Long after The Smiths had been left at the cemetery gates, Street found himself at the centre of another cultural cornerstone with Britpop and Blur.

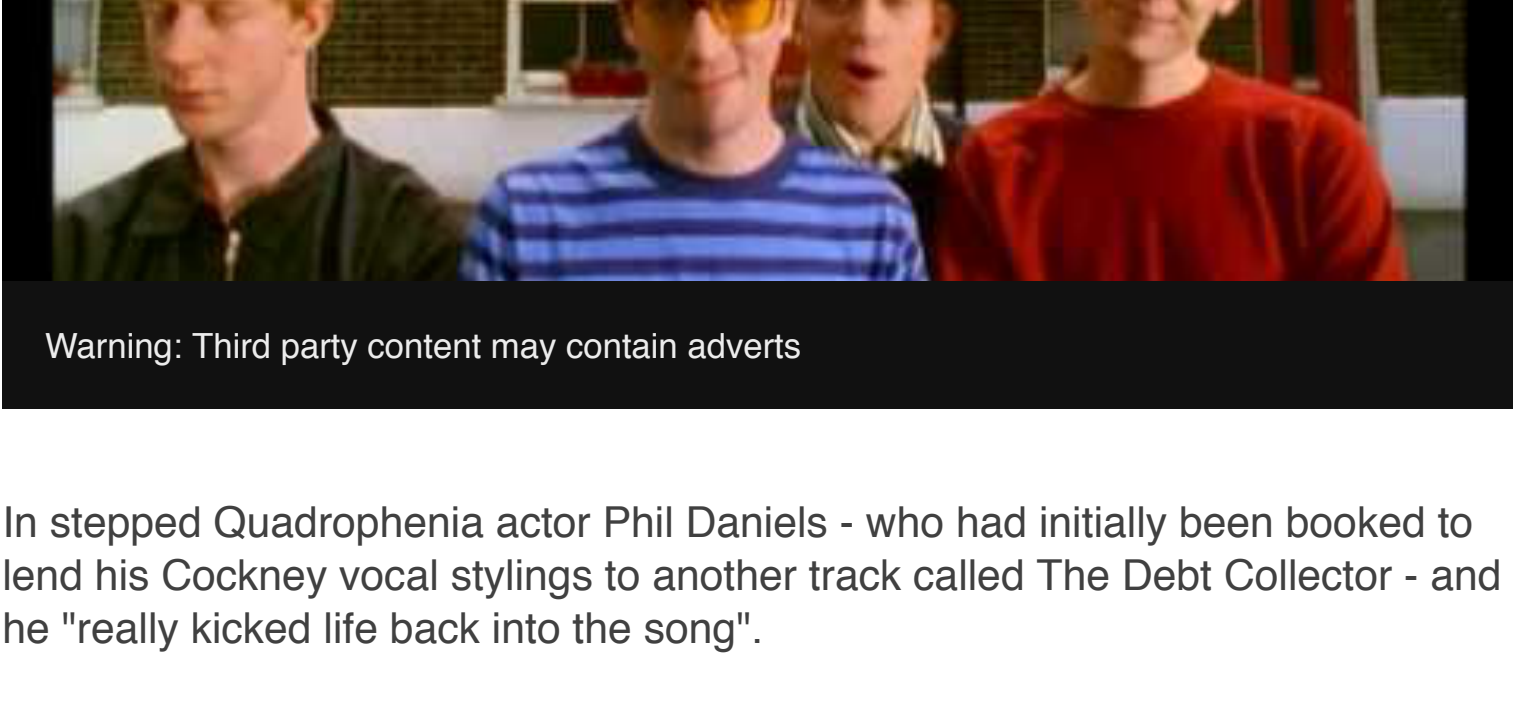
The Londoner was perfectly placed to record the band's "diverse" and ultimately acclaimed third album, Parklife. He describes it as being "here, there and everywhere," sonically-speaking, "yet it all hangs together well as a perfect, perfect album."

It seems unthinkable now, but the title song almost didn't make it out of the studio.

"Parklife, the track, went through a very difficult process," Street explains.

"It was one of the very first tracks [to be recorded] and we just couldn't get it the way we wanted. At this point, Damon [Albarn] was doing the narration on the verses and it just fell flat.

"I think we were being too precious with it because the pressure was on us to make it a single - as it obviously had a great chorus - and we made the drums too tight. So we left it in the can for a while."



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In stepped Quadrophenia actor Phil Daniels - who had initially been booked to lend his Cockney vocal stylings to another track called The Debt Collector - and he "really kicked life back into the song".

"We got Dave [Rowntree] back in to play in a much more bombastic, loose kind of fashion and it all came together," says Street.

"So it was saved, but at one point it nearly didn't make the record - which would've been strange, wouldn't it?

"Sometimes you can be banging your head against a brick wall and you've just got to walk away from it for a while, let it stew and then come back and look at it from a fresh angle."

## Remember: The band are paying you to make the record THEY want to make



When Street first got involved with The Cranberries he thought they could become a decent little indie act, akin to the Cocteau Twins or The Sundays, but he says "no-one could have foreseen" the huge global success that was to follow.

Their debut album, 1993's Everybody Else Is Doing It, So Why Can't We? featured tender tracks like Dreams and Linger but was almost "ignored forever" in the UK, until MTV started to show them some love in the States.

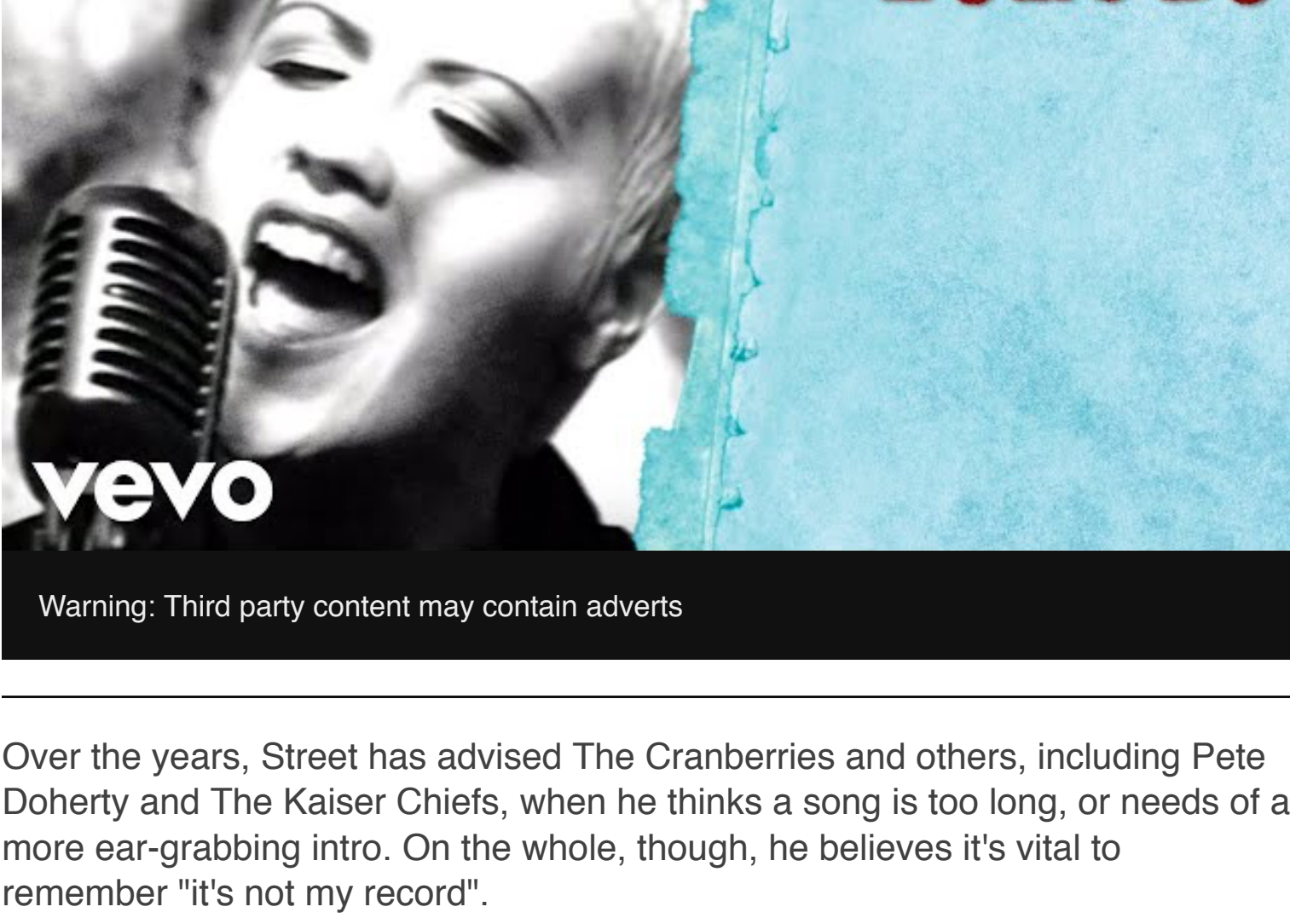
"It was a fairy story," says Street.

By the time their second album came around, the Irish band - who were playing "every gig under the sun" - were ready to cut loose and Street let them to do so spectacularly on the "bona fide classic," Zombie: a protest song about an IRA bomb in Warrington which killed two boys and injured many more.

"That was really the band just flexing their muscles on the second album because they were playing so many live dates at this point and wanted to rock out.

"So much of their material was relatively mellow so [Zombie] was done as a way of letting off steam. We didn't make it with any pressure really because we had no-one looking over us at that point saying 'make a classic rock record!'

"It turned into a huge hit for them."



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Over the years, Street has advised The Cranberries and others, including Pete Doherty and The Kaiser Chiefs, when he thinks a song is too long, or needs of a more ear-grabbing intro. On the whole, though, he believes it's vital to remember "it's not my record".

"I'm not employing them," he says. "They're employing me to do them a service and that's one thing I always try to remember".

The Cranberries' fairy story ended tragically with **the death of singer Dolores O'Riordan** in 2018, aged 46. The band employed Street's services one final time to piece together tracks they had been working on before her death.

"I'm pleased that at least we managed to make one more record," he says, while acknowledging "it's a dangerous thing" for a band's remaining members to release music posthumously.

"You can be accused of some kind of ulterior motives but it was done with a lot of love and affection, so when we were nominated for a Grammy, I was delighted for the band."

*The 12th MPG Awards takes place at London's Grosvenor House on 27 February.*

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