

SONGS OF EXPERIENCE

One of the music world's most debonair artists and gifted wordsmiths, Neil Hannon rode the Britpop wave and survived. We meet him as he prepares to release The Divine Comedy's melancholic latest long-player...

STEVE O'BRIEN

Breaking big at the peak of Britpop, Neil Hannon has been one of our smartest and most playful lyricists for over 30 years. Winsome songs about pollen counts, fading socialites, eccentric aristocrats and public transport invited comparisons to Noël Coward and Alan Bennett. Irony, whimsicality and theatrical flair were common adjectives flung his way, as were references to his heroes Burt Bacharach, Charles Aznavour and Walker Brothers-era Scott Walker.

"If the Neil Hannon from 30 years ago heard what I was doing now," the singer-songwriter theorises from his farm in Ireland, "he would like it, but he'd think, gosh, it's so serious. It'd be like, 'Oh, you really are going all Scott Walker and dark.'"

If all you know of The Divine Comedy (which initially started out as a group, but is now simply Hannon's *nom de plume*) are those Britpop favourites *National Express*, *Becoming More Like Alfie* and *Something For The Weekend*, then Hannon's 13th long-player, *Rainy Sunday Afternoon*, might surprise you. Once known for his arch humour and character-driven narratives, there's a more personal flavour to many of the tracks on the new record, that wasn't there on 1996's *Casanova* or 1998's *Fin De Siècle*.

"There are songs on this album I couldn't have written back then because I didn't have that experience," the now-54-year-old Hannon reflects. "That's the reason I wrote so many songs about other people's books when I was younger, because I didn't have much to write about my own life. And now I've got lots, though not particularly positive stuff."

DIFFICULT TERRAIN

It was three years ago that the singer lost his father, the former Bishop of Clogher Brian Hannon, who passed away from Alzheimer's at the age of 85, a death referenced in one of the new album's defining songs. It's difficult to reconcile the words to the heartrending *The Last Time I Saw The Old Man* ("His hands seemed so fragile and grey/ I was worried I might break them/ Showed him pictures but he didn't understand") with the artist that once sang, "It's hard to get by when your arse is the size of a small country".

"The lyrics are a brutal observation of what was going on in the last year or two of his life," Neil says, adding that "the music does a lot of heavy lifting with that one." There are similar ruminations on death in the Patrick Shaw-Stewart-inspired *Achilles*, when Hannon sings of a man "turning 53/ And his pampered mind was turning/ To thoughts of mortality," telling the story, as he explains, "of the growing dread of the young classics scholar as he waits to board a troop ship for Gallipoli."

Though Hannon has found more to mine from his own life (the title track details a lockdown argument he had with his wife, while the lush *All The Pretty Lights* was written for his

The Divine Comedy's latest album *Rainy Sunday Afternoon* was recorded at Abbey Road Studios back in the autumn of 2024

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STANDING APART

Office Politics won The Divine Comedy its most rapturous reviews in years and highest ever placing in the UK Albums Chart (No.5). Its success spawned a second Best Of collection (the first, *A Secret History*, came out in 1999), *A Charmed Life*, which again peaked at No.5, proving there's an appetite for literate, uplifting pop, even if Hannon's fanbase are, it seems, pretty much the same ones who fell in love with his music decades ago.

"On Spotify it gives you all your demographics, and that's fascinating and also quite disheartening," Hannon says. "The vast majority, I mean 80 per cent, of listeners are between 35 and 55, basically my age or a bit younger. We also have a lovely 10 per cent of over-65s and then I love the plucky little three per cent of under 18s. Well, good on you. I mean, you must get ridiculed at school!"

As ahead of the cultural curve as those Gen Alpha kids are, they're not the ones who sent *Office Politics* and *A Secret History* into the Top 5, it's those OG fans in their forties and fifties that are the most likely to go out

and buy physical media. But though Hannon admits he was happy with those albums' placings, it wasn't as if he popped open the Bollinger, like he might have done in the 1990s. Those chart-chasing days, he insists, are over.

"I wouldn't even know where to begin to try to have a hit anymore," he shrugs. "It mattered hugely in my twenties, I mean I was a pop whore in the 90s. I always tried to do it on my own terms, though. I wanted to emulate my heroes from when I was growing up, who had all been very strong and interesting, not at all mainstream personalities, like Adam Ant, Boy George and Philip Oakey."

It was always his unironic love of the 80s' biggest and most flamboyant pop stars that made Hannon stick out from the Britpop throng. Though The Divine Comedy certainly

now-adult daughter, as she left home for the first time), there are other, more archetypically wry Divine Comedy numbers, from the Trump-mocking *Mar-a-Lago By The Sea*, which imagines a future in which The Divine Comedy has become the house band for the infirm ex-President after he's left prison, to *Down The Rabbit Hole*, which narrates a descent into a conspiracy theory echo chamber.

If early Divine Comedy albums were escapist fantasies, more likely to be inspired by F. Scott Fitzgerald or E.M. Forster than Tony Blair or George Bush, recent songs have reflected our more turbulent times, reaching its apotheosis with 2019's *Office Politics*, a grand concept album about the encroaching dominance of technology in the workplace.

"I'm a big news person," Hannon explains. "I always have been, but it does get harder and harder.

"I wonder what's actually being achieved by me being so up-to-date on everything. But I feel worried that the world will find out if I'm not paying attention."



“I remember when Robert Palmer was on *Top Of The Pops* and thinking, ‘Wow, he’s just wearing a black suit, and it looks so cool.’”

— surferd the wave of Cool Britannia (*Something For The Weekend*, the band’s breakout single, was famously championed by Chris Evans on his Radio 1 show), Hannon always seemed like an odd fit.

While sartorially sharper than most of his peers, there was also a distinct lack of studied cool. Look at any interview with the singer from the time and, unlike your Liam Gallaghers, Brett Andersons or Damon Albarns, he just looks happy to be there.

“I’m glad that came across, because I was!” he laughs (Hannon laughs a lot, and still looks happy to be here).

“I feel like there was a bit more pressure on my English or Welsh or Scottish contemporaries. I felt like a complete outsider, being from Northern Ireland, but I was just living my dreams. I guess I did look odd compared to them, because I didn’t know how to dress. I didn’t know where the shops were that you bought all of this gear in.”

YOU WEAR IT WELL

Well, he says that, but Hannon’s tailored suits and ever-present tie became a vital part of his brand, and he has another 80s pop hero to thank for inspiring it.

“I remember when Robert Palmer was on *Top Of The Pops*,” he says, “and thinking, ‘Wow, he’s just wearing a black suit, and it looks so cool.’”

Hannon still performs suited and booted (though today, talking to *Classic Pop*, he’s rocking a casual open-necked shirt) and indeed is smartly attired (sans tie) on the cover of *Rainy Sunday Afternoon*.

That modish aesthetic seems to be irrevocably tied with the baroque milieu of The Divine Comedy. In fact, the only time he ditched the suit was for 2001’s *Regeneration*, a frills-free, guitar-oriented record that Hannon dismisses as “a classic



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The Divine Comedy’s last two studio albums – *Foreverland* and *Office Politics* – both charted inside the UK Top 10

mid-life crisis album” (in the video for lead single *Love What You Do* he’s decked out in a t-shirt and denim jacket). It all seemed a billion miles from the high camp and wry romanticism of his Britpop years.

“It was like, the 1990s are over, nobody wants me anymore,” he remembers of The Divine Comedy’s most outlier album. “One journalist from the *NME* asked me bluntly, ‘What are you still doing here?’ and I was like, ‘I’m not going away that easily.’ It was very much like, I’m going to be in a massive rock band now, with a Radiohead-ish tinge. Luckily, I couldn’t do it properly, like most of these things, and it didn’t make me as happy as I thought it would, so I went back to Scott Walker basically.”

Rediscovering his love for Walker, Hannon returned to the rich orchestration for 2004’s *Absent Friends* and has since released another five

studio albums. In the years since, he’s also moved into theatre with a stage adaptation of *Swallows And Amazons*, penned two operas in *Sevastopol* and *In May* and, in 2023, was invited by filmmaker Paul King to pen the songs for the big-screen musical *Wonka* (see boxout on page 64). But for all these extracurricular activities, it’s the day job, as The Divine Comedy, that Hannon finds the most fulfilling.

“With my albums, it’s about making one person happy, and that’s me,” he says.

“With films, there are hundreds of people above you in the pecking order. Normally, I don’t have to try to inject my personality into songs, it’s just there when I write them, but with *Wonka*

there were lots of plot boxes to tick. I enjoyed that, though. It was a bit like a very interesting logic puzzle.”



Neil Hannon cut a sartorially elegant dash as the gentleman of Britpop back in the 90s



Those *Wonka* setpieces, from *A Hatful Of Dreams* to *You've Never Had Chocolate Like This* and *A World Of Your Own*, have all the breezy, sun-kissed *joie de vivre* of classic Divine Comedy and in an era of profound political and social upset, Hannon's songs are a welcome tonic. He once said of his music that it felt like he was "whistling a happy tune as the ship goes down." Does he still feel like that?

"I could put that on my grave!" he smiles, "but yeah that pretty much sums it up."

"I've always been pretty positive about things, but I'm finding it harder and harder. I'm constantly waiting for the upturn but I think it's a bit of a lost cause."

KEEPING BUSY

What keeps Hannon's spirit up, it appears, is work. Not only is there a fresh album in the offing, but a tour is planned for later in the year.

"It does get a little harder as you get older, just from a physical perspective," he reveals about the crazy workload that comes with a new album. "We're creating schedules for the release, and it's like an in-store in the morning and then a radio show in the evening... It's not too different from 20, 30 years ago, except that, well, I was never particularly physically fit, but I had some youthful virility back then."

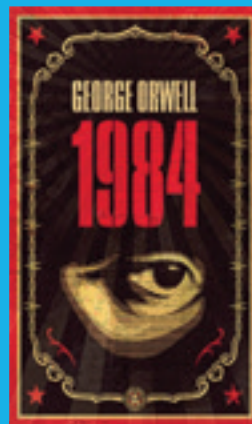
So what does Neil Hannon do when he's not beaver away on a new album? It's hard to shake the image of him in a smoking jacket, relaxing on a chaise longue with his head in a Penguin classic and a Jean-Luc Godard film buzzing away

NEIL HANNON'S CULTURAL LIFE

The singer often references movies and books in his songs. But what are his current recommendations?

What was the last book you read?

Well, when Trump got back into power I was very gloomy, so I thought I'm going to double down and read, for the first time, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. I've always been more of an E.M. Forster, Graham Greene kinda guy, and didn't think it was my kind of thing, but it was a revelation... Of course it was – a book doesn't get that famous if it's not good. So it was fantastic, but it did not cheer me up, that's for sure.



What was the last TV series you saw?

Because things are a bit gloomy at the moment, we went back to *30 Rock*. It's definitely in the Top 5 funniest shows ever made. It ended just as Trump came down the golden elevator, so I think that was good – it still existed to satirise a reasonably, moderately logical political world in the States that you couldn't satirise these days.

What was the last movie you watched?

When Harry Met Sally is perfection. I watched it again recently, and I knew it was one of my favourite films. It's brilliantly written, brilliantly observed and really well acted.





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The Divine Comedy tour the UK
this October before heading to
Europe in February 2026

“All my albums are an honest representation of my personality... they are all different sides of this very strange looking coin!”

— on the television. “I don’t think I read enough,” he laughs. “I’ve been trying to get through *The Old Curiosity Shop* for about five months, but Dickens’ sentences are so long! Thing is, albums are a killer when it comes to being awake enough to read. By the time you get to it, you fall asleep halfway through a page.”

What about any unfulfilled ambitions? Would he like to try his hand at novel writing? After all, Stuart Murdoch, Morrissey and Nick Cave, have released books, to varying degrees of success.

“I’ve tried several times,” he says. “I’ve written the first three pages of many, many books, and always read them back and gone, ‘Oh, my God, you’re terrible!’ Unfortunately, I have this awful personality trait that means, if I’m not the best at something, I won’t do it. I don’t want to be the 173rd best writer, I want to be the best songwriter.”

Thirteen albums in, Neil Hannon’s songsmithery still shines brightly on *Rainy Sunday Afternoon*, and even if the subject matter is now darker and more personal than before, it’s all shot through with his usual lyrical brilliance.

“All my albums are very much an honest representation of my personality,” he says of what bonds those early records with his newest work.

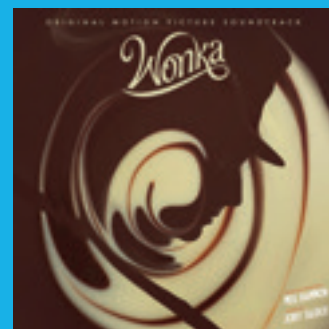
“That’s why *National Express* is just as important as *The Heart Is A Lonely Hunter*.”

And so he can see a clear lineage between that very first LP in 1990 and this latest one?

“Oh yes,” he smiles. “All of these albums that I make are just different sides of this very strange looking coin!” ■



● *Rainy Sunday Afternoon* is released on 19 September via Divine Comedy Records and reviewed on page 82



A WORLD OF PURE IMAGINATION

A couple of years ago, Hannon found himself composing his first ever movie soundtrack when *Paddington* director Paul King approached him about writing the songs for his planned Willy Wonka prequel.

“He got in touch, saying, ‘I’ve always been a massive Divine Comedy fan, and would love you to write songs for my new film.’ It was like, I knew one day you’d come, it’s like the masterplan had worked. It was great to know that I’d influenced someone in their early stages, and they’ve now gone on to have this high position in the media.”

It must have been very odd, we suggest, to see one of the world’s biggest stars – that’d be Timothée Chalamet – singing your words on the big screen?

“It was very surreal, but enjoyable,” Hannon grins. “I think Timothée did a fantastic job on the songs. I knew from the videos I’d seen of him singing that he could hold a tune, but I was surprised how much I warmed to his voice as the film went on. There’s a quality to it that’s very him.”

I think the best singers, with their voices it’s not this extra bit, it’s like their personality coming through in tuneful form. So, yeah, I was delighted. And, you know, I still can’t quite believe it, I’m basically this sort of alternative oddball. So to end up writing the songs for basically the biggest film of 2023 was very strange!”

Wonka lead actor
Timothée Chalamet
sang the songs of
Neil Hannon for
the movie

