Back To The Old House

THE SMITHS

KIT MORGAN travels back through time to transcribe this popular acoustic Smiths tune. And HARRY WYLIE looks at the history behind one of Johnny Marr's best guitar lines.

The Smiths were one of those bands that managed to write B-sides that were as good, if not better, than the A-side of the single. The excellent How Soon Is Now? was the B-side of William It Was Really Nothing (along with Please, Please, Please Let Me Get What I Want) and Back To The Old House was B-side to their third single, What Difference Does It Make?

When a particularly idle-minded journalist put the idea to Thom Yorke of Radiohead that his band were the best pop band since The Smiths, Thom reacted vitriolically – the Smiths weren't a rock band, they were a folk band, he claimed. And if you stop and think about it, Thom is probably correct. The guitar lines played by Johnny Marr often involved complex fingerpicked patterns, and Marr himself cites folk players like Bert Jansch as the defining influences on his technique.

Some of the Smiths best tunes were played on acoustic guitar, and Marr is still a seriously underestimated player on this instrument. Well I Wonder and That Joke Isn't Funny... from Meat Is Murder both featured great acoustic parts. But perhaps the best example of his finger-picking skills is Back To The Old House, originally recorded early in 1983, re-recorded for a John Peel session the next year.

TECHNIQUE

You'll need to use some form of fingerstyle technique to play the part accurately – thumb and two fingers will suffice, although occasionally Marr brings in the third (ring) finger to bring out the top notes of some of the chords. Hybrid picking (plectrum and two fingers) could also be used if you prefer, although it's harder to reproduce his soft tone on the bass notes.

The main theme is based around C shape chords and their relatives (Am, F, G etc), but on the F shape there's no need to struggle with a first finger barre across the neck – the first fret of the 6th string isn't played at all, so why make life difficult for yourself? The middle section gets very curious – at the end of bars 4 and 5 there's an idea often used by folkes – a basic C major chord, which slides up two frets creating a pleasing semitone clash between the open third and fourth fret of the fourth string.

At bar 6 you'll come across that old Cmaj7 (Bm7 in capo speak) which rarely gets used outside a jazz club, and at bar 8 there's a distinctly jazzy sounding maj7 shape. After the middle section, we're into verse two, which is extended by going back to the intro and playing through the whole lot again, adding four extra bars to the verse.

After the second time through the middle section, simply play the first two bars of the theme eight times, and end on a D maj7 (Cmaj7 with a capo) chord – ie a normal C shape with one finger taken off. Full lyrics are printed on the left.