

THE SECOND COMING OF DANIEL JOHNS

**Australia's most beloved son
learns to love the hard way,
writes Jonathan Seidler.**

**Photography Jordan Graham | Styling Jolyon Mason
Grooming Sophie Roberts**

There is an entire generation of Australians, if not two, that have already made up their mind about Daniel Johns. His is an image perennially fixed in the collective consciousness; a flannel-clad Peter Pan who chugs power chords on his guitar and howls into the abyss of his bored adolescence. It's a public expectation that teenagers grow out of their angst, mature even, but that rule does not apply here: with the exception of those who wholeheartedly embraced his Silverchair's latter records, Mr Johns has never really been allowed to grow up. Imagine a 36-year-old being chastised for not acting like someone he was two decades ago, and you have a pretty good grasp of what it's like to be the present day Daniel Johns.

That being said, you have no idea. You couldn't possibly. To have been the frontman of the biggest rock band in Australia - and at one point, the world - for a solid decade comes with significant baggage, which becomes heavier still when you consider that Mr Johns started lifting these sort of weights young. One would wager, and it's unlikely Mr Johns would entirely disagree on this point, that he's already done more than his fair share of

service to the country's culture. Advancing across five albums from garage grunge to exquisitely orchestrated baroque rock, and bringing the radio-listening public along for the ride, Mr Johns did the opposite of what we expect our bright young things to do. No overdoses. No early death. Instead of becoming a supernova, he kept on innovating until he reached the creative cliff face himself.

"I guess *Talk* was about me saying things that I didn't have the balls to say to anyone else otherwise. "The only way I could express it was through writing it. There was stuff that came out of my head on this record that I didn't even know I felt until it was out there."

Somewhat unwittingly, we project ourselves onto Mr Johns. He is a very public, ever-shifting magnet for our fears, our desires and our preconceptions about what a male music star can and can't do. "Everything had to feel like it was something I hadn't done before in order for me to feel satisfied," he says. The media fascination with Mr Johns remains stubbornly unchanged even after his five years out of the limelight. And so, Mr Johns has changed instead. Without anyone's permission. In a big way.

**Mr Johns wears Prada
shirt and coat.**





Mr Johns as painted by Julian Meagher for the 2015 Archibald Prize.

Daniel Johns' album *Talk* is out now via EMI Music.

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In person Mr Johns, who spent his formative years tormenting many interviewers, is exceedingly polite and unflinchingly honest. He's the sort of character who looks dressed up even when he's dressed down, carrying an air of mystique that can't be pinpointed to any particular part of him. But if you had to guess, it would probably be his eyes; deep, blue-green pools which light up when he laughs and fade into grey when he's thinking. They're somewhere in between when he's shooting straight from the hip, like discussing the sonic palette of his new work. "I wanted to write music on instruments I didn't know how to play and see what happened," he says. "Sometimes there's a lot of fucking around that comes with that, but when it works, it's amazing."

Talk is a record that many people may hate, which is a deliberate move by Mr Johns. It's dark, sensuous and lithe. There is not one guitar to be found. "I just dramatically fell out of love with the sound of my guitar playing," he shrugs. "I felt myself getting over it and I was repeating ideas a lot." Instead, the album is littered with co-writes from some of the best electronic producers in the country, heavy on synths, light on its feet. Perhaps in anticipation of the way his words have been picked apart over the years, Mr Johns' lyrics are upfront and palpable. When he says he's never been this honest, he's not joking; he originally never intended for *Talk* to see the light of day. "When I was doing this record I was trying to go into my *Sgt. Pepper's* era and not do anything but be a recording artist, he explains. "So any time I sent a track to management, if they asked how I'd do it live, I said 'Well I'm not going to do it live! That's not my problem.'"

To bring himself to the point where he would be happy to have himself publicly dissected again, Mr Johns would need some time away. The writing was on the wall many years before he yanked the rug out from under the band that had defined over half his life. You could hear it most clearly on *Diorama*, undeniably Silverchair's magnum opus, where he sang on the coda to "Across The Night": *I don't want to be lonely, I just want to be alone.*

Being alone is an activity Mr Johns has become exceedingly good at since Silverchair's disbanding in 2010. He vanished from public view almost as quickly as he had appeared, retreating to his Merewether home on the coast of NSW to spend some quality time not being famous and noodling about, writing out there, experimental electronic music that, conveniently, didn't involve using his voice. "There had to be a dead spot," he says, "a black hole, a moment in time where nothing happened." The schism between Daniel Johns the pin-up guitar god and whatever we will call him from here on was a definitive one. The change, which manifests itself through his image, his instrumentation and particularly his voice, is all part of Mr Johns divorcing himself from his prior reputation. "I found that quite restricting, to be a rockstar," he says. "There are not many places you can take that. Pop music is anything, that's what's beautiful about it."

It is this shift in voice, both as a physical entity and a story-telling device that will challenge most of his long-time fans. "I knew it had to be a statement," he says of this new approach, "and I guess the strongest statement would be to reinvent the way sound comes out of your head." On *Talk*, Mr Johns spends most of his airtime floating in the octave above his regular range, delivering melodies almost exclusively in a falsetto that alternates between soothing and piercing. It's a big deal for the musician, who has always been able to blast out high notes, but never quite like this. "I was fucking around with a microphone and compression ratios and I found this voice," he explains. "And it was a really good palette to make a record with. It's a lot smoother and more sexual. Less aggressive."

He's right; it isn't hard to imagine using *Talk* to set the mood for an encounter between the sheets, which is certainly a change of pace from any Silverchair record. "It's not necessarily that I wanted to sound sexy, but I wanted the music to be pulsating, warm and quite sexual," Mr Johns admits. "It was only after [Lorde producer] Joel Little heard "Aerial Love" for the first time that he said 'Dude, you're making that baby-making music...'"

In the tradition of solo stars like Prince and D'Angelo, Mr Johns has repositioned himself from an object of desire to someone who channels his own sensuality into his art. "It does feel a little like the two sides of your personality fighting over how to express the same thing," he says, especially when referencing the doubling of his voice with "that gruff, more masculine voice underneath to support it." Falling in love is hard to do, he confirms, when you've been an object of national affection for years. So is showing it: "I find it very difficult to express anything, because I've had such a wide range of emotions forced on me since I was a kid," he says. "It's really hard for me to determine what's real and what's disingenuous."

It is this edit of Mr Johns' personal narrative that may throw his old adorers the most. "I've never really thought about that, but I think that's going to be the biggest stumbling block," he muses. "Especially people who grew up with my career and have *Frogstomp* in their collection. They'll put this on, hear one or two songs and be like, 'What the fuck?'"

As Mr Johns glides onstage for his debut solo gig at the Sydney Opera House two weeks later, whatever anxiety he has regarding the reception of his work will have seemingly faded away. Kitted out entirely in white, with a band that includes three backing vocalists, two keyboardists and a whole lot of electronic gizmos, it takes Johns less than one song to settle into his new skin. "I always felt like the guitar was a security blanket," he says, but it seems like he's better off without it.

Liberated from his prior self, Mr Johns soars; dancing, prancing, voguing and leaping across the stage. It's fascinating, entertaining, but perhaps most importantly, thrilling. One gets the impression that perhaps he has always been this sort of fabulous weird – messing about with theremins, wrapping a scarf around his head like a head injury victim – but never really had the outlet.

It looks like Peter Pan might finally be able to shed that tatty old flannel.