



# Matt Berninger

**The National frontman on the classic indie rock records that shaped him**

**I**F YOU SUDDENLY HEAR A high-pitched scream, it's probably my daughter coming in," forewarns Matt Berninger with a laugh. With grandparents on kid duty in the backyard of Berninger's L.A. home, the vocalist - touring Australia with his band February 2014 - casts his mind back to the LPs that hit him hardest during his formative years...

## Violent Femmes

*Violent Femmes (1983)*



The first album that woke me up and made me see music differently. My sister, who's a year-and-a-half older than me, brought it home - somebody had copied it for her on cassette tape. She had just gotten her license and we would drive around and that would be in her tape player. It was so catchy, but also de-

mented in this brilliant way. My image of a rock band at the time was like Led Zeppelin or Rush, and these guys just turned everything on its head.

## The Smiths

*Louder Than Bombs (1987)*



My sister had this on big double vinyl - this orange album I just thought was such a beautiful artefact. The music of the Smiths and Morrissey and his ability to be so incredibly funny and so incredibly exposed and sad and silly all in the same breath, that blew my mind, and I listened to this obsessively.

## R.E.M.

*Lifes Rich Pageant (1986)*



This had a level of strangeness and beauty and there was a connection that I'd never had with any other form of art. That one touched my

brain and soul in a way that very few other things had, and from that point on I was a die-hard fan. We toured with them not that long ago, so to talk with Michael Stipe about songwriting was incredible. One thing he told us was to not be afraid to write a pop song. We never were afraid; we just weren't that good at it!

## Leonard Cohen

*New Skin for the Old Ceremony (1974)*



This was an incredible enlightenment to how amazing lyrics can be. I saw him in Spain at a festival. Walking through the rain and muddy puddles between tents, I saw him coming from about 12 feet away. We passed each other which was the most surreal thing - like fiction when someone walks straight off the page. He was like a myth to me. We were both wearing hats, so he tipped his at me and said, "How do you do, nice hat." I think I just tipped my hat back and said, "Thank you, sir." I couldn't think of anything else to say! I still can't believe it happened.

## Pavement

*Slanted & Enchanted (1992)*



This is an album that made me think that I could possibly be in a rock band - they looked like me. The stuff they were doing was so creative and crazy and fearless, so them and Guided By Voices were the first two bands that had me entertain the delusional dream that maybe I could be in a band too. We did some shows with Pavement, which was a surreal, amazing dream.

## Guided By Voices

*Bee Thousand (1994)*



Guided By Voices were from not far from where I grew up, and Robert Pollard was a school teacher and he just switched it all around and became a rock star. He didn't look like a rock star, which was great. I've seen them play about 20 times - it's either a train wreck or brilliant. That's what was so great about seeing them - you never knew if you were gonna get high art or just low debauchery.

## Pixies

*Surfer Rosa / Come On Pilgrim (1988)*



Those two records, which came in one package, were so significant to me in terms of how crazy and vicious music could be, then turn on a dime and be tender. The melodies could be so poppy but the lyrics so twisted and violent - it was this primal, effortless catchiness. I would listen to the Pixies late at night in the basement when my parents were asleep. It's the first record where I would put headphones on in the dark and dance around and freak out. It opened the door to how you could let your guard down and go absolutely apeshit. I met Black Francis once - he gave me tips on how to scream without ruining your vocal cords.

JAMES JENNINGS