

[Sign in](#) · [Register](#)Go to: [Read today's paper](#) · [Jobs](#)Search: Guardian Unlimited Web**Guardian**Unlimited

[Home](#) [UK](#) [Business](#) [Audio](#) [Guardian Weekly](#) [The Wrap](#) [News blog](#) [Talk](#) [Search](#)
[The Guardian](#) [World](#) [America](#) [Arts](#) [Special reports](#) [Podcasts](#) [News guide](#) [Help](#) [Quiz](#)



Comment

Bigmouth was better

The saddest thing about the Morrissey-NME spat is the singer resorting to writs to stifle his critics

Search this site

 Billy Bragg**Wednesday December 12, 2007****[The Guardian](#)**

It all started so well. Morrissey offered the NME a live version of Drive-In Saturday as a giveaway seven-inch vinyl single, and they sent a journalist to New York to conduct an interview. He could expect a hefty plug for his six nights at the Roundhouse while the NME enjoyed the massive boost in sales that always accompanies a free cover-mounted single.

All went swimmingly until Tim Jonze asked Morrissey if, having lived abroad for the past decade or so, he might ever consider moving back to Britain. This is not a loaded question. Morrissey could simply have brushed it aside with some effortless quip about how it would be simply impossible for him to pop to the shops for some cream soda and a copy of the Daily Sketch. Instead, he began talking about the negative effects of immigration on the British identity.

Article continues ▾



INTERNATIONAL

PART OF THE SANTANDER GROUP

The Capital Guaranteed Dual Option Account – Issue 1

[Click here to find out more
about this limited offer.](#)

Unfortunately for him, this wasn't an interview for Prospect magazine.

Morrissey and the NME have past form on this issue, falling out spectacularly in 1992 over the singer's use of nationalist imagery. He must have been aware that this would be a contentious subject. Coming just weeks after the paper had endorsed Love Music, Hate Racism, giving away a free album in support of the anti-racist cause, there was no way such a comment could go unchallenged.

Probed further on the issue, Steven Patrick Morrissey, son of Irish immigrants, expat extraordinaire, was quoted spending the rest of the interview bemoaning the fact that England, his England, had been flooded by people who didn't really belong here.

This posed a dilemma for the paper. The NME says that, forced to choose between its principles and a huge boost in sales, it stuck to its principles, forgoing the free single in order to hold Morrissey to account for his views.

It is worth recalling at this point that Morrissey is the most articulate pop star of the past 25 years, always the arch-contrarian, using his wit to provoke and amuse. You'd think that it would be simple for him to respond to the NME's criticism with a stirring defence of his right to freedom of speech, a reasoned argument in favour of an open and honest debate about the pros and cons of immigration, and a staunch refusal to give in to "political correctness".

Instead, he released a letter in which he apologised profusely, not for his comments, but for giving an interview to the NME, rambling on about how the paper wasn't as good as it used to be. "This wouldn't have happened in my day" seemed to be the nub of his argument.

He has also said his comments were "butchered, redesigned, chopped, snipped and split in order to make me seem racist and unreasonable". He declared that he was not a "racist" - NME had never used the word - but failed to clarify his position on immigration. This sin was compounded by the fact that he issued a writ against the paper and its editor. But Morrissey must know that the NME says it has recorded his comments. Can he say it has misrepresented his words when there is a tape of the interview?

From a man whose whole career has been based on the articulation of sensitivity and victimhood, this is more than just heavy-handedness. Any court case will only result in his questionable assertions on immigration being aired anew - something you'd imagine he'd want to avoid. He may hope, in going to law, to shut the NME up, wait until the fuss dies down and quietly withdraw the writ. But that has been the tactic down the ages of those wealthy folk who are self-centred enough to believe that they are above criticism.

Unless he has been misrepresented, in attempting to intimidate the NME in this manner Morrissey undermines the unspoken contract of trust between interviewer and interviewee: the journalist must undertake not to fabricate quotes while you have to assume that whatever you say will appear in print. If he has been accurately quoted, then what is ultimately at stake here is not Morrissey's reputation, but whether the press is free to report factually what has been said without fear of censure.

Had Morrissey claimed freedom of speech in his own defence, I would have supported his stance. Instead, we have the unedifying possibility that a man who once skilfully wielded his dazzling wit to confound his detractors and delight his audience has been reduced to relying on a writ in order to stifle his critics.

- Billy Bragg is a musician and author of *The Progressive Patriot - A Search for Belonging* billybragg.co.uk