

Marquee, London

IN his first public appearance in who cares how long, Matt Johnson, with a little help from his friends, proved that styles may come and songs may go, but live performance is a conservative art.

Possessed with all the charisma of your average brickie, he exposed his eerily intimate songs to a coarse exhibitionism which did him, them and us very few favours, testing the bounds of patience and monotony with a uniform treatment that, frankly, should have been long surpassed in rehearsal.

Matt, of course, has an image problem; his rumpled tee-shirt and high street chic denims indistinguishable from the anonymity of Level 42. But Matt's maverick songs don't deserve to be dull — there are twists and turns on his records capable of suggestion beyond the obvious that were reduced tonight to the lowest rock denominator.

A sort of manic depressive Gilbert O'Sullivan, Matt should wring tears out of words and blood out of tunes, but his chances were hampered here in the inappropriately dingy dive of the dying Marquee by a mix that would have maddened Motorhead.

People like Matt really should leave live gigs well alone — his guest slots with the loose-knit Mambas may have added bite to back up charisma but, as a frontman, Matt is nowhere. The The, in case you're confused, is the pointless pseudonym on which he palms off all (ir)responsibility. He crafts careful songs that The The then haphazardly spoil, looking for a sock-it-to-'em live focus that he should know doesn't exist within works structured like kaleidoscopes.

Presumably, The The seeks to impose a mad spontaneity on eggshell frail compositions engendered in cotton-wool, but the mauling is unwelcome, inappropriately ragged over the regimental backing tapes and the only stimulation springs, not from any freedom of redefinition, but from the struggle to stop them cracking up.

Indeed the few moments of emotion wrenched from songs splayed and sucked dry by drab rifferama, the few precious glimpses of the *art* of falling apart, were provided by the much-publicised "Guests".

Jim from the gratuitously out-to-lunch Foetus salvaged his timid contributions with the night's most wasted look, photographer Peter Ashworth was a matter of interest on drums; Zeke from Orange Juice was a bonus draw fresh from his involvement in Weller's Style Council; but guess who stole the show?

Marc Almond, knackered and just back from Israel, took the mike for the Mambas' "Angels", writhed like a reptile in velvet and pulled the show to a premature climax. His presence, professionalism and obsessive but doomed bid for expressive perfection, dwarfed those around him, and his voice, unlike Matt's homely but limited drawl, took charge from the challenge and magnificently hammed it up where Johnson was happy just to hum along.

It is early days — Matt has a four week residency here — but despite tonight's low-key back-slapping party, doubts were aroused whether he's really got a strong enough sense of his destiny for his private ponderings ever to be suited to public display. They suffer in numbers from an obvious rhythmic similarity which renders the luscious potency of "Perfect" or "Icing Up" almost as emotionally arid (though not as egotistically obnoxious) as the Thompson Twins.

Matt Johnson's songs speak of an inner decay best communicated through a perverse outward composure. They're like marshmallows with razor blades inside. Tonight, in attempting to force them down our throats, he gave the game away long before he cut deep.