

Nick Cave

Rationalising the mystery of his muse has never been among King Ink's favourite duties. It's nearly 15 years since he toyed with Man or Myth? as the title of his first solo project. Over ten subsequent albums, a certain enigma has remained central to his work, from the nature of his various obsessions to the trail of strange and haunting sounds spun by his ever-evolving musical vehicle, the Bad Seeds.

"I would think it's inadvisable to get too far inside someone else's personal obsessions," is the opinion of Mick Harvey, Cave's adaptable right hand since their first recording as the Boys Next Door 20 years ago. "Certainly over the years Nick's lyrics would suggest certain atmospheres or approaches and we'd take that lead. Beyond that, I think we've all tried to keep a distance from his actual inspirations."

There's nothing like a *Best Of* album, however, to spark the kind of retrospective analysis which tends to try the maestro's patience. The new 16-track *Best of Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds* is his record company's baby ("as these things usually are") and he readily admits to a lack of enthusiasm for the concept. Still, that doesn't stop him recognising one of the most extraordinary bands on the planet when he hears it.

"What happened to me was quite incredible with this record," Cave begins stoically. "I was given an advance copy which sat around my CD player for a long time without being played. When I finally put it on it was with a lot of fear, actually, that I just wouldn't like a lot of this stuff — some of which I hadn't heard for maybe ten or 15 years."

"What jumped out of the speakers, for me, was what a remarkable band the Bad Seeds really are. What struck me, song after song, was how versatile, mysterious, strange, funny and brilliant the Bad Seeds are. For that reason I thought it was a great, great record."

It's only fair for the writer to deflect some glory onto his craftsmen. When the Birthday Party exhausted its options in London in 1983, it was purely Cave's selection of personnel which prescribed the direction his music would take in the coming decade. Over six distinct line-ups, the unique strengths of the Bad Seeds' individual players have defined a sound which remains otherwise indefinable. Cave and Harvey's meeting with German guitarist Blixa Bargeld in Amsterdam in June 1982 was the first signpost to a radical departure.

"The fabled meeting. Wish I could remember it," Cave mutters dryly.

"I'd seen him on the TV, playing guitar and singing with Einstürzende Neubauten, and he produced from his guitar one of the most unsettling, extraordinary sounds I've ever heard which, at the same time, was no indication as to whether he could actually play the guitar or not."

"He just looked so good and he turned out to be such a very strange person and these kinds of credentials interested me more, at the time, than his ability. We were trying to create something that was different. That didn't rely on technique, it relied on inventiveness. And Blixa had that in abundance."

If Bargeld was Cave's new wild card, Mick Harvey was the necessary foil as the more reckless pair waged their "war against sleep" across Berlin with instruments not necessarily musical. Invaluable for his inclination to Say No To Drugs as much as his wide-ranging skills in musical arrangement, execution and production, Cave's old school colleague has remained a cohesive force over the numerous personnel shuffles of the past 14 years.

"Mick's actually put in positions he doesn't feel comfortable in a lot of the time: organisational things, a lot of the practical elements of holding the band together through the rough times, all of that stuff," says Cave.

"He's also a very inspired musician. He's full of ideas and in a lot of cases he's able to take up my ideas that seem to be running all over the place and make sense out of them. Particularly in the early days, I could say 'I've got a song and it kind of goes dawdadangadawdadanga', and he'd go 'OK' and create something out of it. And I'd get all the royalties."

"It was very loose, as I remember," Harvey says of the 1983 sessions which would produce the first Bad Seeds

album, *From Her To Eternity*. "There were no real intentions in terms of a group. It was just going ahead with Nick's new material."

"Certainly his writing for that album was unique and it required some kind of unusual approach. I think one of the great things about the Bad Seeds over the years is that they're very attuned to that. They don't strap on their instruments without first listening to what the potential or intention behind the writing is."

In the context of the *Best Of* album, 'Tupelo' and 'The Carny' distil some of main intentions which would dominate Nick Cave's writing for the rest of the decade. To varying degrees these included Elvis, Jesus, rustic blues, the violence and language of the Old Testament and the dark landscapes of southern gothic literature. The unsettling web entangles *The Firstborn Is Dead* (1985) and *Your Funeral My Trial* (1986), and finds its ultimate expression in Cave's novel of 1988, *And The Ass Saw The Angel*. But Nick Cave is bored with this kind of observation.

"It's funny," he says. "When I play this record I have a real detachment from it in a strange way. I thought it would be the opposite but I find I can really stand back and listen to it. That makes me feel really good."

Nick Cave sounds stressed. He waffles a bit, apologises often. He asks the maid in his West London flat to leave the dishes until later. He closes the door, lights another cigarette, then excuses himself to get a glass of water. It's interview time. Nick hates that.

The distance probably hinges on the fact that in 1998, Nick Cave has managed to expunge most of the obsessions which shaped his earlier work. To a large extent, this includes his infamous heroin habit which, by the time of *Tender Prey* in 1988, had practically superseded all of them. The album was released just as Cave was serving the last days of a two-month drug rehabilitation programme in Avon.

"The departure from the chaos of *Tender Prey* probably had a lot of do with what Nick had gone through, and the fact that he was more or less quote clean unquote," Harvey agrees. Nowhere is the link between Cave's life and art more evident than in the leap which produced the melodious focus and order of *The Good Son* (1990). After 'The Ship Song', 'Into My Arms' was only a matter of time.

"There was quite a significant change of lifestyle around that time," Cave acknowledges. "There was a lot more thought and concentration to that record and I think I finally allowed myself to take the music to places where I'd wanted it to go for some time, but just couldn't get it together to take it there. I like songs with melody that are slow and romantic. I think we made a record like that because we could."

The "we" soon changed to accommodate and further the musical direction. The likes of Barry Adamson and Kid

Congo Powers had made important contributions to the group's development, but the tour which followed *The Good Son* drew together the definitive Bad Seeds. Drummer Thomas Wydler had been a constant since 1986. Pianist Conway Savage and ex-Triffids bassist Martyn Casey cemented the line-up which would make the next four albums and edge Nick Cave to the kind of mass appeal which tends to culminate in *Best Of* albums.

Cave and Harvey agree that *Henry's Dream* (1992) was hamstrung by US producer David Briggs, but the Bad Seeds were a well-polished act on 94's *Let Love In*. Two years later, the legendary Kylie connection rocketed *Murder Ballads* into multi-platinum territory. From an artistic standpoint, the no-holds-barred bloodbath marked the exhaustion of some of Cave's longest-running obsessions, essentially clearing the decks for the extraordinary emotional watershed of *The Boatman's Call*.

"The songs that I write these days are ways of keeping the memories of people close to me and not losing them," Cave says. "Now I'm writing directly about experiences that happen to me and situations I'm in, so it serves a real function. Things may be going disastrously wrong but at least I get some songs out of it. It's a kind of compensation," he almost laughs.

It's also a new obsession, and one which has taken the Man into a new dimension of Myth. But while we're looking back, how about some of those old ones. Nick, have you ever been an evil influence over young people?

"I have no idea," he sighs. "Whether I have or not is really very little to do with me and I don't feel I have any responsibility in that area. I feel my responsibility begins and ends at turning up to the piano or turning up to the page. It's my duty to write this stuff down and perform it. The kind of influence it has over people — it's not that it's not my concern, it just has nothing to do with me."

Are you now or have you even been a misogynist?

"Quite probably I have. What I do is sit down and write about the way that I actually feel. And I may well do that when my thought processes are not

necessarily particularly 'correct'. All of that stuff should be put forward. It should be used. And the final outcome is not really my responsibility."

And what's with the journo-phobia, already?

"The reason that I find the whole interview process more and more intolerable is that I don't feel I'm doing them for myself. I don't feel I have any particular desire to make myself understood. I don't particularly want what the interviews are supposed to get me, which is more success."

I'm not particularly interested in more fame and more money.

"What I'm concerned with is having freedom in what I'm doing and I don't like being pinpointed, held down about things. A large part of interviews are people saying 'You are quoted as saying', for example, and I hate this. I find it really disturbing. I find generally I don't actually believe what I'm quoted as saying anyway."

If you can believe what Nick Cave says, the eleventh Bad Seeds album is presently proceeding apace at his piano. Mick Harvey, for one, has no idea what to expect.

"Putting out this *Best Of* means I can't really do another album for a year or so," Cave says. "I'm aware there's a kind of ethos that hangs around *Best Of* records that suggests that a band has nothing left to say or nowhere to go. I don't feel like that at all. I've been writing quite a lot and I feel like there's a lot of work to be done with the Bad Seeds."

Michael Dwyer

AND THE BEST OF THE BAD SEEDS