

Mr SMITH

He bristled when I called him the Godfather of Goth, but Robert Smith's name is still a by-word for po-faced young people with lopsided haircuts hiding from the sun under layers of black clothing. Robert Smith may not personally have ever sat on a gravestone at midnight sucking on a bottle of red wine whilst straining to read Rimbaud by the light of a match, but that's the kind of behaviour his music encourages.

So it was with some trepidation that I put the call through to a stately English countryside recording studio one absurdly early Friday morning (8am our time) for a chat with this influential youth cult figurehead and Cure leader. But before I got to speak to him I had to pretend to be interested in interviewing several of his band members, none of whom were actually in the group when it first convened way back in Crawley in 1976. They were nice enough boys, ready with platitudes about how Robert isn't difficult to work with really but, you know, they just weren't Robert. So we'll skip their mumbly and get right to the nitty-gritty.

I can't report what Robert looked like because we were on the phone, but you can imagine he looks exactly the same as he has for the past 10 years: badly made up, slightly overweight with a goddawful haircut. As he says, even he gets a shock sometimes when he sees himself on the telly.

He began by disavowing all responsibility for the Goth Thing, saying Bauhaus were more responsible than the Cure for getting young people to dress up in mourning. Robert would rather call the Cure "introspective" and, besides, at the time they were dubbed A Long Raincoat Band rather than goth and everyone knows there's a world of difference between the two.

Having cleared that up, at least temporarily, I went on to ask Robert about the protracted adolescence of his emotions. He and his band members seem like ordinary, grown-up folk, yet he's still making soundtracks for adolescent angst trips.

"Again, I don't think that's true," says Robert. "I think around a certain period of your life, which is usually between the age of 13 and your early 20s, everyone goes through a

similar kind of depression, leaving school you become aware of the outside world, facing it. When you're 13 you don't really have to consider those things, only in a secondary way to what you see and read. "I think once you start to experience things you inevitably go through a period of introspection which results in what you call angst. I mean if you take the term angst in its truest sense some of the best writers of what would be considered angst literature didn't stop writing when they hit a certain age. I think you can obviously come to terms with it, but I think in the notion of growing up and becoming adults you lose an awful lot, you allow a certain amount of yourself to wither away and die. Angst is always painted as a very negative kind of emotion, but I think if anyone genuinely feels it at whatever age you don't grow out of it. I think people who grow out of it never really felt it in the first place. I think you can smooth those cracks, focus your attention on other things, but I know that within the group we still worry about the same sort of things that we worried about 10 years ago."

Except, perhaps, how to sell records. The Cure have now sold some 18 million records worldwide, an incredible figure for a band that is generally perceived as being "out there" (although you can't get any further out there than Michael Jackson and look how many records he's sold). Maybe it's because Robert Smith manages to tie that lump in his throat to a catchy tune — he's writing "Dear Diary" with a sob in his voice, he's user-friendly for junior league depressives and, as he outlines above, there's never going to be any shortage of those. He reckons the Cure's new album *Wish* has an upbeat atmosphere, "even if they're not the most uplifting songs", although there are one or two "outrageous" pop songs. Can Robert



summon a mood of alienation at will in order to write, while otherwise leading the life of a happily married man?

"The fact that I'm married hasn't really taken away the fact that you can't ever really get to know anyone," he replies dolefully. "The whole thing's very complex, but I don't think I've ever sat down consciously to write a song, the words just sort of happen from time to time. I suppose I'm more aware now that if I'm writing something down, whether it's in the middle of the day or the middle of the night, that ultimately if it's good I may use it for a song, but 15 years ago I never had that in mind. But it's certainly not like conjuring it up."

"When we go on stage and we play songs like 'Disintegration' I get immersed within minutes, but I don't walk out in a state of heightened reality all the time, I probably would have disappeared a long time ago if that was the case. But the comfort gained by having people around me that I can feel comfortable with and that I'm friendly with and don't feel shy in front of or awkward with certainly helps and in that sense the group as it is now with this new album has got a much more up feel to it overall."

This is hopeful news from a man famous for depicting himself running away from giant spiders and falling

off cliffs into wardrobes full of water in a series of deeply symbolic videos that enchanted the fans and added fuel to Robert's mystique as something of an archivist of madness. He says he used to read a lot of books on the subject in order to familiarise himself with the way society has approached mental aberration as a political and social form of repression. He talks of the recent closure in Britain of Victorian institutions which has resulted in the release into the community of people ill-equipped to look after themselves; this is the sort of issue the Cure won't address in a song, but will play a benefit for.

"I think the group has to retain a certain conscious escapism for it to work and it's not really a cop-out," he explains. "A lot of the time people are doing really laudable things, but unfortunately if you don't like that person you go off the thing they represent. An obvious example is Morrissey and his campaign to not eat meat. I personally loathe Morrissey and I despise everything he does without exception, so he almost makes me want to go out and eat burgers."

But why do you loathe Morrissey? "Because I think he's a professional moaner — he's written the same song ever since he started."

But has Robert Smith changed

much over the years? He has obviously managed to harness his anxieties and use his fears to fuel his music, but he admits outlandish hair and makeup is a psychological support when acting out songs in front of strangers ("It's a theatrical prop rather than me trying to look glamorous"). Is it a struggle to maintain your equilibrium?

"I think I am a much more balanced kind of person now than I probably was 10 years ago, but I still have the same basic attitudes. I think if I met myself now when I was 17 I could still hold a conversation because I've retained a lot of the ideals I had when I was 17."

"I don't know, it's very difficult really. We live in the real world, we aren't surrounded by people who look after us and do things for us, we all do our own shopping and things. We are kind of divorced from reality, but at the same time we are lucky in that we're able to be in a group like the Cure and express certain things through music. At the same time we're genuine fans of other people's music. I can just as easily get something out of listening to an old Nick Drake album as I can from listening to the new Ride album."

Fashions come and go, but the Cure remain true to themselves, steering clear of new-fangled musical tangents — with the exception of 1990's *Mixed Up* album of remixed tracks and deleted 12" remixes.

"That shocked and upset people," admits Robert. "On this new record there are certain elements which, had we had the same bunch of songs during the *Disintegration* period three or four years ago, would have sounded very different. Because we are influenced by what goes on around us if we like it."

"Obviously we don't try and get on a bandwagon, but we like a lot of the guitar-orientated dance music that's around, particularly ambient house music, but going back to that basic pop idea of doing a three or four minute song and it's danceable, but it's got a really good tune, it's got good atmosphere, good people playing it and it's full of life. In that way we've been influenced by what's going on, but I don't feel defensive about it, I think it's really good that we can still enjoy music being made by people 10 years younger than us and when we actually meet those bands they all cite the Cure as an influence. We've become a role model for people in

that we've attained quite a bit of success through doing exactly what we want, when we want and we've proved to a lot of people that you can do it that way."

"The thing about the Cure is that it works on two distinct levels. The reason why we've kept going so long is because they both work in tandem. One is our attitude towards things, a lot of people would like to be in the Cure because of our attitude. That has to go hand-in-hand with music. If you can't write songs and if you can't play the songs live it doesn't work because you can't sit and listen to someone theorise about how it should be. If you're making contemporary music there has to be a certain amount of enjoyable listening for it to work."

What about your hobbies, Robert? You once said they consisted of sleeping and reading. Is that still true?

"They're not really hobbies, they're needs. I don't sleep as much as I used to. I wish I slept more, but I sort of feel like I'm running out of time so I get up a lot quicker now. It's the same with reading. The problem with both those things is that at times in the past I've used them as a way to divorce myself from what's going on around me because I haven't necessarily enjoyed the people around me. Whereas now I much prefer to have conversations with people than to read a book. A lot of it is dictated by how much you're enjoying your life."

And finally Robert, as I understand your minions are waving frantically at you from the other end of the room over there, is the Granddaddy of Goth actually interested in such things as gothic architecture and gothic novels?

"I refute any idea that I'm the grandfather of goth. The archetypal goth bands like Fields of Nephilim are really as divorced from us as Wham!. They concentrate on one particular area and never allow themselves to move anywhere else. I think this is where we can't really be held responsible... in *Faith* and *Pornography* and *Boys Don't Cry* there's too much history even in the first three years for us to be labelled just as a goth band."

"I like some gothic literature like Shelley and Byron and Edgar Allen Poe, but generally I prefer stuff like Kafka and Camus and Satre. I don't go and sit in graveyards in the middle of the night. I never have and I never will."

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