

Nick Cave Explains the Truth Behind His Staged Documentary '20,000 Days on Earth'



Amelia Troubridge

Nick Cave in "20,000 Days on Earth."

Depending on your appetite for the impossible, psychoanalyzing [Nick Cave](#) is either a nightmare or the Holy Grail. And although that's hardly the aim behind Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard's [20,000 Days on Earth](#) -- a partly staged documentary about Cave that's named after one of his discarded lyrics -- it is how the film begins.

Cave sits down with real-life psychoanalyst Darian Leader to discuss familiar Freudian turf: His fears, his father and yes, even faith (for Cave, God mostly exists as "someone keeping score" within the warped worlds of his songs).

After that, the film dives into Cave's world, present and past, with the directors rejecting any *cinema verite* equivocation in order to get at more lasting impressions of the enigmatic rocker's life. While conversations emerge organically, each scene -- whether Cave is driving, working with the Bad Seeds on their latest album *Push the Sky Away* or thumbing through memorabilia in Melbourne's Nick Cave archives -- was meticulously constructed.

So when Cave gets behind the wheel to drive former duet partner [Kylie Minogue](#) around, the conversation is unscripted even though the action is staged. As you can see in that scene -- which Billboard is exclusively premiering below -- the sets make *20,00 Days on Earth* more lush and cinematic than the typical rock doc.

In addition to premiering that scene, we also sat down with Cave and *20,000 Days on Earth* directors Forsyth and Pollard to discuss the film. We found out why Cave watched *Scarface* with his twin sons for "Inappropriate Movie Night," what screenwriting taught him about songwriting and his nostalgic relationship with Minogue.

This is hardly your first film: You've scored films before and you've written scripts, but what made you think it was time to do a documentary?

Cave: I didn't think, at any time, it was time to do a documentary. I still don't think it's time. [Forsyth and Pollard] approached me with an idea that seemed exciting and about something beyond myself. So slowly I got involved.

Forsyth: Nick remains reluctant and disinterested in the biography side of documentary making, and he was keen to not make a film like that. As soon as he understood it wasn't just about cameras following him and quizzing him, he was interested.

Cave: The only fly-on-the-wall stuff in the movie is the recording studio. The idea was that everything in *20,000 Days on Earth* was filmic. We used

sets. Nothing is real. We felt I would be able to be more free and myself in a constructed scenario than I would be if they came bursting into my house with a camera, which never would have happened. I would have no interest in doing that. I just don't see the point. I don't see how it benefits anybody -- certainly not the person watching the film, because all they're seeing is a deconstruction of the people they think are special. They're being made ordinary. And why would they want that to happen?

[Nick Cave Shares 'Give Us a Kiss' From His Film '20,000 Days on Earth'](#)

Pollard: For each set, we thought about what things *should* look like. We use Nick's actual office, but it's completely dressed to create a space that the camera tunnels in to. Warren [Ellis, Cave's primary Bad Seeds collaborator] has a functional place in Brighton, but it wasn't telling you enough about him. Warren *should* live on the edge of a cliff in the middle of nowhere. He looks like he should live there, his music sounds like that -- so that's why we did that.

Forsyth: We were envious of the tools usually available to scripted films. Why should documentary be limited?

Cave: It was quite an interesting way to tease out some 'truths,' to get to something more authentic even though we were using contrivances. The conversation with Warren as we're eating eel is entirely authentic. I've been in that situation with Warren telling me some long-winded story about something more times than I can count, and I've heard that [Nina Simone] story many, many times, because that's what Warren is like. The relationship you see in there is quite real. Warren is on transmit and I'm on receive. That's the nature of our relationship.

Aside from Warren, most of the other Nick Cave collaborators in the film appear in a moving car. Why are the conversations framed like that?

Cave: We wanted to bring other people in the film without doing it in a

conventional way.

Pollard: The car thing came from *The Death of Bunny Munro* [Cave's second novel, which the directors created the audiobook for]. We loved the way the car was a psychological bubble and it became a world of the imagination. We decided to make the car operate in the same way in this film. With Kylie, we had just looked through loads of Kylie ephemera in the Nick Cave archives with him. So we thought, that's obvious -- he'd been thinking about her, and she'd manifest [in the car].

[Nick Cave Scores Highest-Charting Album](#)

Forsyth: Nick and Kylie's relationship is quite nostalgic -- we'd seen them together before filming. They tend to talk about the past: Growing up in Melbourne, coming from Australia and both having a need to leave home in order to achieve the success they've enjoyed. So in the film, he's looking back at her through the mirror in the car [while she sits in the back seat].

There's a scene in the film where Nick is sitting with his twin sons, eating pizza and watching *Scarface*. Why that film?

Cave: It was just a film that they'd been on at me to watch. "We want to watch *Scarface*!" Maybe I'd talked about it or something. And I said, "Well it's got some scenes in it that are pretty heavy, do you think you're all right to watch it?" They said, "Oh, we've already watched the chainsaw scene on YouTube." We wanted to find a film that they hadn't seen, and they have seen a lot of that super violent stuff with me anyway. [My twin sons and I] had a thing we'd do that we'd sit down and watch a film that we shouldn't be watching together. It was a bonding experience.

What other movies do you watch with them?

Cave: Just...violent films. So we all wanted something that could hold them, and *Scarface* is such an opera -- an exaggerated cartoon of the world. That scene is probably my favorite -- not because it's got kids in it, but it sets up an idea. It's the one moment of Nick Cave supposedly at home, doing an ordinary thing with his kids. But it's not. I'm sitting there,

the camera is here, we're looking into the camera -- we're not looking at the TV at all. So there's this sense of being removed from the ordinary, or that the ordinary has been taken away from us and it's something we're not able to reclaim. And that's true.

It's also one of the few scenes where we see you laughing.

Cave: That's just how it ended up. I laugh a lot actually, but you don't laugh a lot when the camera is on. There's a lovely outtake of Kylie and I that says a lot. We're in the car; they haven't started shooting but they're filming. We're talking about something, it's very light, and then they say 'action' and both of us [pantomimes stone face]. It's not that we're trying to portray anything, it's just the effect that it has over you. The claustrophobic, unfunny aspect of being filmed.

Much of the film is concerned with memory and memory loss. While talking to the psychoanalyst in the film, you say memory loss is your greatest fear. Why?

Cave: I'm only worried in the same way as anybody else would be or should be. I feel that our memories define us. And my way of keeping my past life in place is to write about it. That seems to be increasingly a function to aid memory for me.

In the film you mention that '87 seems more of a blur for you. Are there spaces of time you remember better than others?

Cave: Oh, I don't know, I was just talking loose in the film. I don't know if I have more or less memories than other people. I'm not nostalgic by nature. Even though there are moments of nostalgia -- looking back fondly and romantically on past things -- it's not really what I'm interested in. I'm very much interested in the present and what goes on my life. I don't feel that need to rake over the coals of my life to find something to write about. It seems catastrophic in a writer's life to do that. There are musicians, poets, writers in general, who feel they no longer have anything left to write about in their personal life because of a kind of artists shrinkage that happens -- a shrinkage of existence where you cease to do more and more things you can write about.

But you haven't experienced that.

Cave: I don't write about [life] in such a way that I'm documenting it. I write about the imaginative springboard that life, at any point, can be. And I don't see why that should need to be different now than 10 or 20 years ago.

You share a story about how your father sat you down and read the first chapter of *Lolita* to you as a kid. Have you done that with your sons and any books?

Cave: Well, I've sent both my older kids *Lolita* and advised them to read the first chapter. They're older than when I had it read to me -- I was about 12. I didn't read the whole thing [at the time]. The point was the first chapter is very short, half a page. It's undeniably beautiful even to a young child, to someone who doesn't really understand. Even to a child who isn't concerned with understanding, but who's happy to be in the company of my father and singled out among his brothers and sister to be the one whom he imparted this particular piece of knowledge to. So there was a double thing going on: I think he saw I had an interest in those things, similar to him, and in that sense it was no different than a father showing a son how to play football because he loves football. There was also the excitement I could see in him when he started to read this piece of writing. Like, this is a key that unlocks all sorts of things.

Did he encourage you in that realm more than your siblings?

Cave: I don't really know, to be honest. At school I didn't do very well, but I did have talent for writing. And you're often defined by what you're good at. I was good at art history, mostly, because I was interested in it, and I could write an essay or an imaginative story. Apart from that, I was an underachieving student.

In the film we see you sitting down to write each morning. How much of that daily writing ends up being useful?

Cave: The way I'm writing in the film -- sitting down and pounding away at a typewriter -- is not the way I write in real life. I write by hand, or I

work quite closely on things in a computer because I can swap and edit. Once it gets to a place where I think, 'This is as close to a song as it's going to get before I start fucking it up by overworking it,' I type it out on the yellowing back pages of an old book. This gives it an instant feel of having some authority, even being a kind of classic. [laughs] Something written by hand doesn't have the same authority. It's good when you feel something is worthwhile.

[Nick Cave, Tyler the Creator & Katy Perry Team for 'Gay Nineties' Album](#)

You also say you've recently learned the value of editing songs more harshly. Looking back, are there any songs or albums you wished you'd edited more?

Cave: I wouldn't like to say what songs, but I guess my problem, as a songwriter, is that I write narrative songs and very often the narrative is expansive. And the song form is not sufficient to contain these ramblings stories, so you get this freak song that's really long. I learned through writing scripts that brutal editing actually can do wonders for a song. People don't need all the information.

You also talk about watching TV once you've finished writing. What kind of TV do you watch?

Cave: You mean like Apple TV or Netflix? [laughs] I guess I watch more movies. I don't really sit and watch TV-TV too much. It's really just the most effective way for me to turn off. It's a narrative thing -- you sit down and you're pulled into the story, and I'm a sucker for that. Stories have a big effect on me. I get quite excited about a book if I'm in the grip of the narrative of a book. If I'm reading something that I'm interested in, it's always there as a place you can disappear into. Movies are hugely effective in that way.

What about this movie -- would you ever consider doing another documentary?

Cave: I really enjoyed it. The thing is, I didn't feel I did much. It wasn't my thing -- I was called in to do particular things, it didn't take up a lot of brain space for me. They made the shooting relatively painless. I pretty much followed instructions. For the voiceovers they would email and say, 'Write something about the weather' as they were constructing it. So they made it painless. Would I do another one? I don't know.

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9/25/2019 by [Associated Press / Billboard Staff](#)