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Sundance 2014: '20,000 Days On Earth' for Nick Cave as man & myth



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The film “20,000 Days On Earth” is that rare thing, a movie that is hard to classify. Even describing it is difficult to do.

Screening as part of the World Cinema Documentary Competition at [Sundance](#), it is a document of the recording of Nick Cave’s most recent album “Push the Sky Away,” an intimate look at his life, creative process and where his mind is at now, as well as a burnishment of his carefully crafted persona as lover man, wild man and man in touch with the darkest parts of human nature.

Directed by Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard, artists who have collaborated with Cave on his more recent music videos, the film finds Cave awakening in what appears to be the same room seen on the cover of “Push the Sky Away.” We see him visiting a psychoanalyst, driving a Jaguar to pick up actor [Ray Winstone](#), former collaborator Blixa Bargeld and pop superstar Kylie Minogue, stopping by an archive of his own career, having some lunch with current collaborator Warren Ellis, doing some recording and performing a show.

PHOTOS: Sundance Film Festival 2014 | Photo booth

Cave, Pollard and Forsyth stopped by the Los Angeles Times photo and video studio in Park City this week to talk about the film, following its world premiere on Monday night. “20,000 Days On Earth” feels honest, strangely, even though much of what it depicts are scenarios constructed for the film itself.

“It felt more real to me than other things I see, things that I’ve read about me,” said Cave. “When I read journalistic pieces about my life and those magazines that have parts of an interview and a larger story, I don’t recognize myself in those at all.

“What is true about celebrity or whatever I’m supposed to be, a rock star or whatever, is the idea of transforming into something,” he added, “something which I guess on some level becomes a truth, becomes a real thing. So that seems to be what the film’s about on some level.”

The conversations Cave has in the film, with the analyst, Ellis and the passengers in his car, were unscripted, so that when Cave and Bargeld discuss why Bargeld left Cave’s band it’s a real conversation. But the places and scenarios in which they occur are fictitious – Cave isn’t even driving his own car, he is quick to point out. And though a trove of Cave’s materials are kept in an official archive in Australia, those scenes in the film were shot on a set.

PHOTOS: Sundance Film Festival 2014 | The Scene

Forsyth and Pollard have referred to such films as Led Zeppelin's "The Song Remains the Same" and Jean-Luc Godard's Rolling Stones film "One Plus One" (also known as "Sympathy for the Devil"), both of which mix scenes of musicians at work with fictional sequences. And the way in which "20,000 Days" manages to both explain and expand on the self-created mythology of Cave is also reminiscent of Todd Haynes' "I'm Not There," a fictional feature drawn from the guises and personas of [Bob Dylan](#).

"We never really thought of it in any way, if that makes sense," said Forsyth of whether the film is a documentary or not. "When you're making something you're concerned with making it, and the kind of labels and boxes and the categories and the pigeonholes come after. It's kind of a documentary I guess by some definition because it tells a story that is on some level true."

"I guess it's about a real person, and in that sense it's a documentary," said Pollard. "But I think for Iain and I, truth, and in particular reality, just feel like a reductive way of looking at stuff. It's so much more interesting and expressive to let the imagination take over. And it's actually Nick's words in the film, to churn through the mill of the imagination."

For someone with such a carefully cultivated personality and image – Cave arrived for an interview in a pinstripe suit with his shirt partially unbuttoned, with only a pair of royal blue leather gloves for winter wear – it is surprising that Cave has allowed Pollard and Forsyth the level of access to his materials and process that he did.

"I think what the film puts over is this idea of what a person actually is, you may start off with a persona, although I never felt I did that anyway, and in the end you are just this thing you've created. That's the truth about you," Cave said.

LIST OF SUNDANCE SELECTIONS: U.S. and World Cinema dramatic competition

"There's a lovely scene in the film of me eating pizza with my kids, which should be a basic thing that a father does with his kids," he added. "But there is also an element of the monstrous about that scene, there's something about myself within that scene. There's something that's been created, an awkwardness about that scene, about the idea that you become something, as a celebrity, you become something you can never really go back to, whether you want to or not, to the natural, normal things that most people can experience."

The film serves as both a fascinating journey through Cave's current creative mind for fans and also as something of an introduction to his worldview for those not familiar with his work. There are also a few musical performances, including a dynamic in-studio reading of his song "Higgs Boson Blues" that differs from the final released version, as well as a performance of "Jubilee Street" from Australia's Sydney Opera House that Forsyth and Pollard intercut with on-stage footage of Cave throughout his career.

So does Cave feel he has revealed his true, naked self in the film more than he has done before? Or does it simply open a door to another level of myth-making?

"I think that's what the film is looking at, the idea that there is a real you, what is the real you?" asked Cave.

"But do you care?" interjected Pollard. "I want my rock stars to be mysterious and something else. I don't want to know everything about them, I don't want to kind of unwrap them just to find out that they're the same as me."