



THE EMBODIMENT OF THE BEAST

Nick Cave has spent 35 years becoming a living myth of his own creation. As a new documentary and photo retrospective honour his 20,000 days on earth, **Ben Hewitt** talks to their creators about why, when it comes to Cave, they stuck to the script and indulged fable over fact

PHOTOS BY BLEDDYN BUTCHER

Nick Cave is not a songwriter. He's a dirty god; a warped titan who's spent nearly four decades fashioning his own torrid creative world. It's populated by an array of terrible characters, from crazed preachers and violent soothsayers to vengeful killers and lust-crazed demons, but they're all played by him because they're all *part* of him. And because he's always morphing, always transforming, he's always beyond autopsy. The Bad Seeds' first album *From Her To Eternity* turned 30 in June of this year, but in the past three decades, few have got close enough to cleave man from myth or fact from fiction.

Those who do know don't want to let anyone else in on the secret, either. Next week, Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard's utterly unique Nick Cave documentary, *20,000 Days On Earth*, is released in UK cinemas. The duo are part of The Bad Seeds' inner circle, having worked with them on various projects since 2008, and were given unprecedented access to recording sessions for 2013's *Push The Sky Away* – but they knew that making a traditional behind-the-scenes documentary would be too worthy, too earnest and too dull for their old friend. What they made instead is a music film unlike any you've seen before: a fictionalised day in the life of Nick Cave that is every bit as strange, surreal and slippery as the man himself.

At Iain and Jane's behest and with their cameras rolling, Cave visited a psychoanalyst. He took a tour of the Nick Cave Archive. He shared secrets over a lunch of oels with his Bad Seeds bandmate Warren Ellis. He drove Kylie Minogue and Ray Winstone around on intimate car journeys. Every conversation he had was ad-libbed and unplanned, but each scenario was an elaborate set-up. A true expose – *At Home With The Real Nasty Nick!* – it most certainly is not.

"It was the only thing Nick would have said yes to," says Jane, sitting in the comfy kitchen of her and Iain's east London home. Their cat,

Bilka – named after ex-Bad Seed Bilka Bargeld, whom Nick also has in his car – snoozes in the corner. "And because he still has that mythology intact, we felt a real urge of 'Fuck, let's protect it! Let's not chisel away at that.' I don't want to watch the *X Factor* sob story of 'Push The Sky Away'. I don't want to know who had a poorly tummy the night before."

"We knew that trying to get behind Nick's mask was going to be very reductive," adds Iain. "Lots of films think that by seeing Bono or whoever doing the washing up, you've



"Working with Nick was tender and gentle. But then he killed me with a rock"

Kylie Minogue

glimpsing the truth; that you find truth in the ordinary and mundane. But Nick's life is *not* ordinary. That doesn't mean that he's drifting around on a big white cloud, but he's created a world that's taken 35 years to build. To dismantle that just seemed wrong."

It's a universe that Cave has fashioned himself, but that doesn't mean he hasn't had help along the way. Former NME photographer Bledwyn Butcher first became a disciple of Cave's when he was still in his pre-Bad Seeds band, the hyper-literate and violent

The Birthday Party. "I come from Perth, and that's a long way from anywhere," Bledwyn says. "I went to London for much the same reasons as Nick did: to make a life in the real world, the outside world."

But he soon latched on to the other world that Nick was making. Unlike *20,000 Days On Earth*'s make-believe 24 hours, his new photo book *A Little History* spans their relationship: an evolution of Cave through photos, from the grotty, rake-thin punk of The Birthday Party and the sleazy, dark-suited creep of his mid-'80s Berlin period to latter-day shots of the hirsute leech he plays in *Grinderman* and the more demure, distinguished statesman of *Push The Sky Away*. You can trace his characters and persona, but not the person – and despite the iconic poses, it's a more simple photo that's most startling: Nick on a trip to Brazil, hair pulled into a ponytail and wearing glasses, looking like an IT tech on holiday. It feels like one real reflection in a hall of smoke and mirrors. "He's still got a scowl on his face though, hasn't he?" says Bledwyn, laughing.

"That scowl is expression one. He doesn't have to reach very far to get that – that's always in the pocket."

For much of Cave's career, Bledwyn has served as a sort of Frankenstein's assistant, trying to aid and abet the mystique. He went to visit his old friend when the latter was writing his first novel, 1989's *And The Ass Saw The Angel*, and realised how much Cave had begun to echo the behaviour of main character Euclid Eurow. An outcast, downtrodden mute blighted by cruel parents, Euclid revolts against his fundamentalist Christian neighbours by murdering the popular Beth, and then retreats to a swamp that becomes his refuge; Cave, while less murderous, was also writing in a small room that had become a similarly strange sanctuary. "He was living with all these fetishes in a very small room: lots of drafts of intensely, spidery handwritten pages of the novel," says Bledwyn. "Locks of hair that he'd bought from three separate women. Pictures of three cute little Victorian

EVOLUTION OF THE CAVEMAN

After The Birthday Party: the many aesthetic ages of Nick Cave

From Her To Eternity

1984

The Bad Seeds' debut and the birth of Cave the mythic, a nightmarish figure who came on like Elvis' wicked younger brother.

Your Funeral, My Trial

1986

A heroin-ravaged Cave became less goth-schlock and more of a dark, dark iconoclast with The Bad Seeds' most harrowing LP.

The Good Son

1990

The Bad Seeds' first startling volte-face: cleansed of their old guts and grime, Cave reinvented himself as a sharp suit-wearing singer with a fondness for romantic anthems like 'The Ship Song'.

Let Love In

1994

A masterful fusion of The Bad Seeds' early apocalyptic hammerings and more grandiose leanings. A torrid but beautiful dissection on the horror of love, with Cave bare-chested on the cover.





Live in London with
The Birthday Party,
October 1981

girls with permed hair representing faith, hope and charity. A model gun. A bottle of vodka. He was very much immersed in that world."

Iain and Jane haven't known Cave for as long as Bleddyn, but he's been just as important to their lives: they met at university when Iain gave Jane a mixtape featuring The Bad Seeds' "The Ship Song". Like Bleddyn, it was important to them to play into Cave's persona, not deconstruct them. "The emotional truth was important, but the biographical truth was of no interest," says Iain. And, just as Nick's relic-filled room merges with Eucharist's sinners' swamp in Bleddyn's photo, so the Cave of *20,000 Days*

On *Earth* mixes myth with reality, too. "Mostly I feel like a cannibal," he narrates at one point. "A cartoon one looking for someone to cook in a pot." Cave's a figure who's been picking flesh from the bones of real life for his work for so long that it's now just one big stew.

Later, he slumps on a sofa with his young teenage twin sons, Arthur and Earl, gorging on pizza and watching a film like a doting dad, only the film they're watching is the extra-violent *Scarface*; in the next scene, he's onstage growling and prowling through The Bad Seeds' nasty take on "Stagger Lee", in which he channels the spirit of a self-styled "bad motherfucker" on a giddy binge of sex

and violence. "I'd crawl over 50 good pussies *ju!* to get to one fat boy's asshole", he barks. As he says himself at one point: "You turn it on, you turn it off - but one day you can't, and you find you've become the thing you wished into existence."

"He's the same bloke!" says Jane. "The same bloke between the kids is the same bloke on the stage. There's very little difference between that. It's a blur."

"There isn't a Nick Cave switch," Iain agrees. "Nick literally embodies this beast, this creation, onstage - and that Nick is the exact same Nick that sits on the sofa watching movies with the boys." →

Murder Ballads

1996

This set of macabre vignettes included 'Where The Wild Roses Grow', a duet with Kylie Minogue, which took Cave 'too close to the mainstream for comfort' - his nomination for MTV's Best Male Artist of 1996 was withdrawn at his own request.

The Boatman's Call

1997

An almost entirely piano-led album, fronted by a Cave with little interest in nightmarish personae; instead, he's a troubled, plain-looking troubadour picking over failed relationships.

Grinderman

2006

The sleazy bunch who got Cave out of a piano-riffant funk; after a string of sombre Bad Seeds albums, he grew a tache, wore garish suits and transformed himself into a cartoonish middle-aged caveman.

Dig, Lazarus, Dig!!!

2008

Inspired by Grinderman's warped sense of humour, The Bad Seeds returned to a rough'n'tumble garage-rock sound.

Push The Sky Away

2013

Cave's latest persona: a moody elder statesman and spokesperson for troubled times, clad all in black and preaching on natural disasters, celebrity culture and societal decay.



That's why there are so many sobbies in *20,000 Days On Earth* that feel so Cave-like in their poetic oddness. "There's a truth and honesty in the film, but it's not a biological truth," says Iain. Take the scene where Nick remembers meeting his wife, Susie, for the first time: he recites a yearning monologue about how he felt the first stomach-turning, world-churning moment he saw her, and how she embodied the spirit of every fantasy pin-up he'd ever lusted after. As he ticks off the names - Marilyn Monroe, Jackie Kennedy, Playboy centrefolds - their faces rush by onscreen, until the montage ends with a giant, fiery explosion.

"We call that the Erotic Data Sequence," says Jane, laughing.

"Nick's talked a lot about how he and Susie met at the Natural History Museum," adds Iain. "But that doesn't really tell you anything apart from the fact they met under a Brontosaurus. That montage actually enlightens everything you feel that Nick feels about Susie."

Some scenes, though, weren't as calculated. Two months before they began filming the rest of the documentary, Iain and Jane started by asking Nick to talk to an old friend of theirs, a psychoanalyst called Darren. "When you sit down in his office, you can't help but notice how many books on masturbation he's got," says Jane, admitting that they knew the two would hit it off. They spoke for 10 hours, conversations that flip between the farcical and the intimate. "I remember having to walk out of the family home wearing high heels and hotpants," deadpans Nick early on, opening up about his teenage penchant for crossdressing.

He also speaks about his relationship with his father, Colin, who was killed in a car crash when he was 19. In particular, he remembers how his dad read him Vladimir Nabokov's

controversial novel *Invitation of a Child*, and how it changed everything. "It became a greater thing," gushes Nick, and it's that awe for metamorphosis-via-performance that crops up time and time again. "I had a desperate need for change," he remarks

later, about what pushed him into music. "I looked in the mirror and I wasn't happy." It became such a driving theme that Iain and Jane had to scrap their original ending - of The Bad Seeds performing 'Push The Sky Away' - and use footage of Nick singing 'Jubilee Street' instead, and its chorus of "I'm transforming, I'm vibrating, I'm glowing".

"As soon as the transformation stuff started to bed in, we realised it couldn't not be 'Jubilee Street'," laughs Jane. "He's onstage yelling, 'I'm transforming! Fuck it! We had no choice.'"

Someone as evasive as Cave, you'd assume, would have hated psychoanalysis, but there was only one scene he sniffed at: the final shot of him taking a solo, nighttime walk on Brighton pier. "That was the only one he kept questioning," says Jane. "Particularly because the bit of Brighton he lives in is next right to this mound that's known as a nudist beach and a good gay pick-up spot. And he kept saying, 'Hang on a minute. Why exactly am I disappearing into the night here?'"

As strange as it is to see Nick Cave fidget under a therapist's glare, it's not the oddest scene in *20,000 Days On Earth*. Instead, it's when he goes for a late-night drive with Kylie Minogue. The pair first collaborated on The Bad Seeds' 1996 single 'Where The Wild Roses Grow', a Top 20 hit for the band and something of a commercial breakthrough (although, typically, it's a twisted melodrama in which Cave's obsessive scoundrel smashes in the head of Kylie's character, Eliza Day, with a rock). Their chat feels like a dream montage. Iain and Jane wanted to replicate another of Nick's novels, 2009's *The Death Of Bunny Moore*, in which Bunny Jr finds tranquility

in the car, just like Eachrid in his bog. "When Bunny's in the car on his own, it gives him an imaginative space," says Iain. "His life wasn't about the everyday dreariness of his mum dying or his dad being insane. He'd go on great mental adventures and think about

ALADDIN'S CAVE

Nick's extracurricular exploits in literature and film

Ghosts... Of The Civil Dead

1988

Nick's first prominent film role has a typically Cave-ian premise: a grim account of a riot in an Australian prison, in which guards and inmates alike are dehumanised by violence. Cave plays the psychotic troublemaker Maynard - a prisoner prone to decorating his cell with his own blood - and co-wrote the film with Bad Seeds bandmate Hugo Race and director John Hillcoat.

And The Ass Saw The Angel

1989

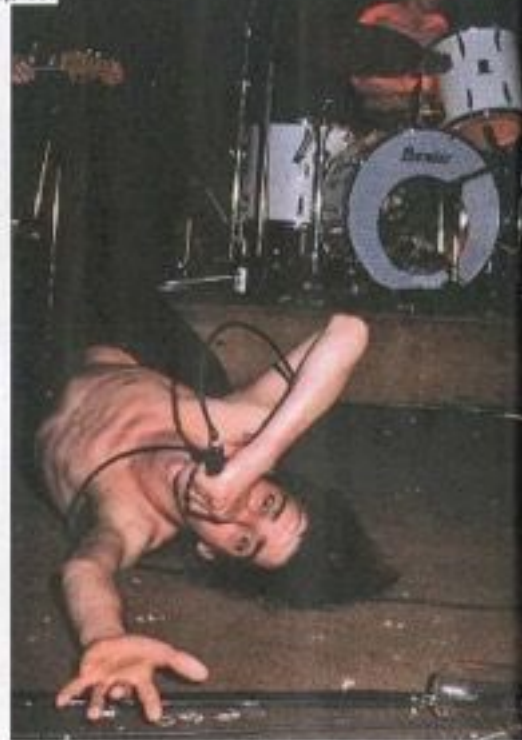
Cave's first novel recounts the story of downtrodden rite Eachrid Eachrow. Abused by his cruel, unloving parents and cast out from his community, he's plagued by warped visits from divine spirits and eventually takes revenge with the grisly murder of one of the local townfolk.

Johnny Suede

1991

Brad Pitt takes top billing in the story of rock'n'roll wannabe Johnny Suede, but it's Cave's peroxide Freak Storm who steals the show: a charismatic safer-do-well who hams it up like an evil David Bowie. "I was born in a goddamn motel room," he boasts. "I don't know too much about my daddy except he shot a man five minutes after I was born."

Onstage with The Birthday Party, 1981



otherworldly things. We felt the car could be similar for us, like seeing inside Nick's head."

Kylie pops up in Nick's back seat, like a ghostly sprite or the flicker of an old memory. As they talk about legacy and longevity, he sounds genuinely in awe - "They made a waxwork of you!" he bleats at one point, enviously - but she found it just as odd. "Brighton could have blown away that night," she says. "Sideways rain and really dramatic. And it ran parallel to my other experiences with him: they take me out of my comfort zone, but also somehow into another comfort zone. I feel safe but challenged, inspired and liberated."

"He could do 10 of these movies and we'd still have a million questions left," she adds. "That's what makes a superstar and an enigma and someone that will constantly have your interest. He's constantly on an exploratory mission of who he is and how he becomes his art, or how his art comes through him. What a mind. If we could just get into his mind! He's in his own realm."

Like everyone else, Kylie says she's always been dumbstruck at how he blends himself with his art. "Nobody's really like the public



Nick in Hove
September 2007,
and (below) in
Berlin, August 1985



**"He never stops.
He always
moves forward"**

Jane Pollard

Slightly soporific 'Nocturama', he roused himself with *Grinderman*: a *Bad Seeds* spin-off in which he came on like a priapic old sleaze. "Grinderman was totally necessary for them," says Bloddyn. "They were stuck in a rut. I remember Warren saying, 'Let's do something, but I don't want you to play piano on it, because that had become what Nick did, and it was getting stodgy.' It's self-mocking: laughing at yourself getting old, still being lecherous and glorying in the hideous hairiness and taking the piss out of middle age."

And so it's always on to the next idea, the next character, the next dimension. "Push The Sky Away" was an evolution that left behind both *The Bad Seeds'* brimstone-or-ballads frodness and *Grinderman's* dirty sleaze for something even more ethereal, touching upon everything from apocalyptic landscapes to down-on-their-luck prostitutes and *Hannah*

Montana to the Higgs boson particle. Their next album will be *The Bad Seeds'* 16th, and it's impossible to predict how it will sound.

"People don't want him to be a character from one of his songs," says Bloddyn. "They don't want him to wring their necks or actually stab them. But I suppose people do want heroes, and he's a very colourful character."

"The world he has created continually builds on itself," says Iain. "It evolves."

"He never stops," agrees Jane. "He always moves forward. He never does the same thing again. I don't think he thinks he's made his best work yet."

All we can do is guess. He's glowing, vibrating, transforming; he always will be. ■

► **A Little History: Nick Cave & The Bad Seeds 1981-2013** is published by Allen & Unwin, £18.99. Images from the book are on display at Somerset House, London until September 28



It's that willingness to sparingly play with those perceptions that's kept his persona from growing thin; just dropping enough hints of being like regular folk to keep everyone guessing. In recent years, he's begun playing up his 'normalness' to add to the strangeness. "He deliberately strews red herrings across everybody's path," says Bloddyn. "Like going to the Natural History Museum or the Chelsea Flower Show. They're just ordinary things that anybody can relate to, but they seem a bit bizarre when he's confessing to them."

Tellingly, Kylie says that the advice he gave her was the most illuminating about working with him: "Sing less and tell the story more," he said, urging her to stop being a pop star and become a murdered, tragic siren instead. "Eliza Doolittle exists!" she says. "She exists! And she was born of his mind."

Cave knows how important it is to find the next character to flesh out: he couldn't be the ghastly, ghoulish Black Crow King of the '80s for ever, else he'd have become a pantomime bogeyman, an old-enough-to-know-better goth trying to relive his salad days. In 2006, after a few years tinkering with softly-softly ballads on the likes of 2003's

perception of them," Bloddyn agrees. "He's amazingly sweet and incredibly polite... although also completely belligerent at times and arrogant and rude and sarcastic." Iain and Jane, meanwhile, say that they purposefully asked Kylie to be part of the film because they knew she'd eke a sweeter side out of Nick. "When I first worked with Nick, it was tender and genuine," confirms Kylie. "And then I saw him perform and speed-read his biography, and I realised that the person I'm watching onstage singing 'From Her To Eternity' is very different to my experience with him. OK, so he did kill me with a rock - but you know what I'm saying."

