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*This innovative study of Nick Cave playfully disguises itself as fiction while more than fulfilling the requirements of a biographical documentary.*

An aptly intense and innovative study of pioneering rock poet [Nick Cave](#), "20,000 Days on Earth" playfully disguises itself as fiction while more than fulfilling the requirements of a biographical documentary. As if that weren't ambitious enough, co-directors [Iain Forsyth](#) and [Jane Pollard](#), who wrote the movie with Cave, add ornately detailed production design and gorgeous widescreen images to the mix, defying the rough-edged, caught-on-the-fly feel of most rock docus. Cave fans will flip for the music-filled pic, which won two jury awards at Sundance, while inevitably strong reviews and word of mouth will lure a larger crowd.

At times, "20,000 Days on Earth" comes on like a modern film noir, with the black-clad Cave as a brooding antihero spouting hardboiled narration. "Songwriting is about counterpoint," he says in an early voiceover, "like letting a child into the same room as a Mongolian psychopath or something." Scenes of Cave driving his car through cold and rainy Brighton on the south coast of the U.K. suggest interior fantasies, with people from his past — actor Ray Winstone, singer Kylie Minogue, former bandmate Blixa Bargeld — suddenly materializing for dramatic conversations about life and art.

In place of the standard interviewer, the film has a therapist (Darian Leader), an idea so perfect it seems obvious in hindsight. The shrink's questions — about Cave's late father, his former status as a junkie and his earliest memory of the female body — enable the documentary to attain a psychological dimension in the purest possible manner. So, too, Cave's visit to his archive, stuffed with old photos and notebooks, allows for the Australian artist's 40-year history to emerge in a way that feels fresh rather than formulaic.

Among the archive's artifacts is Cave's comic last will and testament, in which he requests that all his money be given to the "Nick Cave Memorial Museum." Surely some viewers will be put off by the alt-rock legend's seemingly endless self-regard, although the film's climactic concert footage of Cave and the Bad Seeds performing explosive renditions of "Higgs Boson Blues," "Jubilee Street" and "Stagger Lee" at the Sydney Opera House is well timed to allow for catharsis after so much formal control and highbrow talk.

The pic's tech package is simply astounding, with Erik Wilson's cinematography and Jonathan Amos' editing both razor-sharp. Joakim Sundstrom's sound mix is as dynamic as Cave's fiery music deserves.