

# 20,000 Days on Earth

## Documentary Directors Talk About Nick Cave and the Creative Process

Kyle Harris October 7, 2014

Even with hundreds of rock documentaries covering everything from concerts to artists on tour, few have managed to crystallize the creative process as well as *20,000 Days on Earth*. Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard's fantastical depiction of Nick Cave's 20,000 days explodes the rules of traditional documentary filmmaking. They have created a visually opulent and sonically rigorous portrait of a musician who brings an ecstatic, sensual and violent energy to his performances and writing. *Westword* recently connected with Pollard and Forsyth to learn more about the production of the film, which opens tonight at the [SIE FilmCenter](#).

**See also:**[\*Nick Cave is the Master of American Mythology\*](#)

**Westword:** What was your relationship with Nick Cave at the start of the film and how has that evolved?

**Iain Forsyth:** Sure, yeah, well, we met Nick, I guess, probably, eight years ago, something like that. Our background is as visual artists. We work together, Jane and I, working largely with video and film and sometimes with sound installation, on projects for the last twenty years, or so. Nick asked us to make a music promo for The Bad Seeds. That was the first time that we'd been asked to do something like that. It was an exciting opportunity, so we just did it.

The process was really enjoyable. We found we had quite similar tastes and similar ways of working and just got on very well. Since that point, we've found various excuses to work together over the years on different projects. It's just evolved over that time. By the time we made this film, we were

pretty well-acquainted and over that time, we've built up a strong trust with each other, and I think that trust was the building block that allowed us to make the film that we've made.

*It's a film that's about the creative process. You're very much present in the film. Talk about the creative process and your relationship to it.*

**Jane Pollard:** I guess when we came around to the idea of realizing what we wanted to do was make a full-length film, the footage that we started to record with Nick was, in a way, too good to end up in a ten-minute making-of-the-album on Youtube and then forever be forgotten. We needed to construct something bigger, something ambitious. I think that what we realized was in order for it to be interesting to us and to Nick, I think, as a project, it had to be about something more, something bigger, something more universal than that kind of attempt to observe or to pinpoint one person's process or one person's approach and to maybe be more open in that and be about that thing that we all share, that fire that lights us all up and makes us want to do things and try and make our time on earth meaningful.

*Talk about the construction of the film itself. How did you set up all of those shots? How was it scripted?*

**Iain Forsyth:** We had a script, just like you might have for a traditional feature film. But the way it differed was that there was no dialogue scripted in it. We had a script in which each scene we knew where we'd be, what action would be taking place, who would be in the scene. What we just didn't know is what they were going to say.

**Jane Pollard:** It was very much like working on a fiction film, but then with the unpredictability of a doc. We have this idea that inside a completely artificial circumstance, you're most likely to get to a truth. It might not be a factual, biographical truth, but it will definitely be an emotional one. All the dialogue you hear in the film was improvised. Everything was done in one take. We never asked Nick to repeat anything. Nothing was ever too scripted or planned rigidly in advance.

**Read on for more from Jane Pollard and Iain Forsyth.**

*You were clearly setting up these shots incredibly carefully and just doing one take? That's amazing.*

**Iain Forsyth:** Yeah. In many ways, I guess, we felt kind of envious of the tool kit that is available to you as a dramatic filmmaker, perhaps, rather than a documentary filmmaker. Even in our culture now, where our concept of what a documentary is or can be is really evolving, I think we still genuinely assume that documentary will in some way follow a journalistic idea of the truth: it will contain biographical, historically factual information.

I guess, for us, we felt very envious of the fact that presenting information in that way gives you the option of telling the audience where it's going, whereas in the world of feature films and fiction storytelling, you can tell things, but you can also show things. We just felt that the entire screen should be available to us, as storytellers, to be able to reinforce the story that we wanted to tell.

Let's take, for example, the scene in Nick's office. That is the room he works in. The stuff that you see in that room is almost entirely things that belong to Nick and were already in that room, but the room was heavily prepped. There was lots of art direction involved, and Nick was involved a little in that process.

It's about creating a kind of heightened environment that we felt tells you more about perhaps Nick the character and some of the influences on the work that he does and it gives more depth and more richness to that story.

*He had to have a huge amount of patience to go through this process.*

**Jane Pollard:** We're still amazed at how much he trusted us. A lot of the ideas we put to him, he would look at it and say, "Uh, I'm not sure this is going to work and I'm really unsure about doing it, but I'll give it a try." To have somebody do that, I think, speaks volumes about the unusual nature of the results, when you watch the film, that it really grows out of that

friendship. And he was willing to give us the time, be patient enough to see the ideas through that we didn't know if they were cast in stone and going to work. We just had to try them. We had to experiment.

I guess part of that trust comes from coming from a different kind of background, as visual artists. I guess our process and our approach is less journalistic. We're kind of more of a co-conspirator with him, trying to come and say something interesting or make something that feels like it's as much of the imagination as it is of a truth or of a document. *Can you talk about your background as visual artists?*

**Jane Pollard:** Oh, we've worked together for 21 years now. We graduated from Goldsmiths Art College together. I guess we became known, initially, for doing fairly large-scale, live projects. Most notably, we reenacted the last David Bowie concert, as Ziggy Stardust, back in 1998. Since then, we've made video work, installation work, sound work. We recently did a big project at the Sydney Opera House with Scott Walker.

We've always had this connection to music. It's not really that our work is about music. It's more that we saw, when we were deciding what kind of artists we wanted to be, when we looked at how art was working and how it operates and its audience, it just didn't seem to have a connection. It didn't seem to be trying hard to emotionally communicate directly with its audience. I guess that we wanted to make art that did that. So we aligned ourselves, in a way, more with the strategies of music, certainly, independent music. At the time, a lot of our friends were making fan zines and putting out records on their own labels, and that very much felt like a world that we wanted to be part of, that we could understand and appreciate how that worked.

*You've been talking about the expansion of documentary form? Is documentary a relevant major genre anymore?*

**Iain Forsyth:** I think in documentary and most things, really, what we find interesting is the space where it feels like there is the most kind of opportunity and where we can find a creative space is in those sort of

slippery spaces in between, into the cracks. It's the gray spaces, between black and white, that I think give you a place to play, a place to experiment.

For us, it's extremely interesting to see a number of films, in recent years, that have taken, perhaps, elements of documentary, perhaps elements of some of the other forms of filmmaking. I guess it's something that's not intrinsically new. I think it's something that makers have been experimenting with for many years. But it certainly does feel that right now there is an appetite amongst cinema audiences for films like *The Act of Killing*, films like *The Imposter*, these films that are kind of living in the slightly more slippery spaces. I think audiences are really getting those films. That's exciting, as a maker, to see that.

When you start a project like this, you don't know whether it's going to be understood correctly, whether it's going to be received well, or whether audiences are going to reject what you're trying to do. It's been extremely rewarding, with this project, to feel that the audiences do seem to understand our intentions behind the project.

***Read on for more from Jane Pollard and Iain Forsyth.***

*Talk about working with Cave and his children. The scene where they're watching Scarface was intriguing.*

**Jane Pollard:** That kind of came out of necessity. We wanted to get Nick back into the house at the end of the day to give it that arching structure. We knew, at that point, we were introducing more and more music. The balance between music and other things was tipping. In the beginning of the film, it was weighted toward more nonassociative insights and then near the end weighing toward more music.

We wanted to include a moment of that thing that truly makes Nick and the Bad Seeds unique, that bonus, that on-stage ability to be wound up so tight and tell stories that are laced with violence but also told with an explosiveness. That's hard to get into. You can't just see one minute chatting in the car and then the next minute spitting and posing. You can't

really do that. We needed something. We needed a trick that would slip us into a more violent moment.

That's when we started to think about using the sound of other things. So, is it something on the radio in the car? How do we do that? We wanted him back in the house, so we said, "Okay, it has to be something on the TV, then." We hear that there is a violence to it, and it allows us to sort of slipstream into a moment of violent performance.

And when we started talking about the idea of watching something, Nick was like, "Me and the boys have this thing called inappropriate film night." [Laughs.] I don't know if they still do it, but they used to when the boys were a bit younger, when he'd show them a film that was just a little bit too old for them, like some classic film. The idea came out of that. The boys are really amazing, those two. They've started making films and shorts themselves. They have remarkable talent. They are definitely going to be ones to watch. And they were really into it and happy to help out.

*What do you want audiences to know going into the film?*

**Iain Forsyth:** It's been really satisfying how many people have been willing to go into the film not really knowing about Nick's backstory and Nick's career. In a way, that's a very generous thing for an audience to do, to be willing to embrace a film that's so clearly about a very particular subject.

We've been lucky that we've been able to see the film a lot with audiences around the world, through festivals and so on. It has been so satisfying that we've met so many people that have said, "I'm not the world's biggest Nick Cave fan." It's something that kind of piqued their interest, but they weren't dyed-in-the-wool, hardcore fans. I think that was really the audience we had in mind when we were making the film. We were very aware that you make a film about a subject like Nick and the fans are going to want to see it. The fans are going to come see it, and they're going to have their own opinion on how it reflects on the things that they're a fan of. But for us, we really wanted to reach that wider, slightly more general

audience, people interested in creativity and culture and music and film, and not make a fan film. That was the ghetto that we were really keen to avoid when we were first in the studio and looking back at the footage we were getting. It was kind of a real fear for us that the film could become something that disappears into that fan world that lives on Youtube and only those in the know get to see it. I'm really excited when I hear that people who go to see the film don't know a great deal before they go in. *You're almost translating his musical language for a wider audience, in some ways, in a way that really succeeds for people who might not be fans.*

**Jane Pollard:** That's great. *There are these moments where he's in an ecstatic space as a performer, either channeling something or so deeply immersed in it, or performative. I can't tell quite what's going on. I'm curious what it was like to shoot those moments and what your relationship to that was.*

**Jane Pollard:** In the studio or on stage? *In the studio, actually, and when he was writing.*

**Jane Pollard:** Overwhelming, utterly overwhelming. I cried more than once when we were filming in the studio and kind of had to have the stomach to hide it so as to not disturb or influence them.

They are the most intense, hardworking, instinctive group of performers that I've certainly ever been near. It's a real privilege to have been in the room at that point. I mean, "Higgs Boson Blues," when you see that in the film, that's the first time they played that, the first time. You know, they'd demoed it a little bit and tried ideas out on it, but that was the first full run-through of the song and it was so thrilling, just unfathomably thrilling to train the camera on that.

**Iain Forsyth:** As a maker of things, not music, but understanding something of the creative process, I found it quite shocking, in a way, to see the editing process that Nick talks about in the film. It does feel really, really brutal. It feels like things are being slashed and ideas are being

tossed out the window before they're even fully formed. It's really quite alien to our way of working, which is a slower, perhaps more considered pace. Nick, Warren and the rest of the band work so much on instinct. They really know, very, very quickly, whether something is worth pursuing or not. I was incredibly envious of that. It was a daunting thing to watch, but very exciting.

20,000 Years on Earth plays *Tuesday, October 7 through Thursday, October 16, at the SIE FilmCenter, 2510 East Colfax Avenue*. Tickets are \$10 for non-members and \$7 for members. For showtimes and tickets, go to [denverfilm.org](http://denverfilm.org).

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