



Entertainment WEEKLY

NICK CAVE CAN'T GET COMFORTABLE.

The oblong couches in the private back room of a midtown Manhattan hotel lobby are not to his liking. He keeps rearranging cushions like an indecisive interior decorator, finally settling his long frame at a mildly awkward-looking angle and cradling a peach-colored throw pillow.

His struggle with furniture feng shui makes for a pretty good metaphor. Ease, after all, is not a default mode for one of rock's most notoriously cantankerous characters—a punk icon largely unmellowed by age (he turns 57 on Sept. 22) and success (his 2013 release with the Bad Seeds, *Push the Sky Away*, was one of the most critically and commercially acclaimed of his career). At an event the previous night that found him presenting his new quasi-documentary, *20,000 Days on Earth*, and performing a few songs to a rapt New York audience, Cave was polite and generous but palpably itching to stop answering the crowd's questions and retreat behind the familiar wall of his songs.

Which is what makes *20,000 Days* (out Sept. 17) such a fascinating and unlikely project. The film is ostensibly a day-in-the-life portrait of Cave: It shows him going to therapy, lunching with fellow Bad Seed and spiritual life partner Warren Ellis, working on an archive project, and watching *Scarface* with his 14-year-old twin sons. All the voice-over thoughts are Cave's, everyone plays themselves, and many

of the conversations are unscripted. But the scenes are staged, giving the movie a sense of hyperreality that blurs the line between genuine and fake—not unlike the schism that exists between Cave's actual personality and the one he has carefully constructed over the course of three decades of writing and performing.

"He's turned down the idea of a documentary hundreds of times," says Jane Pollard, who codirected *20,000 Days* alongside her longtime collaborator Iain Forsyth. Initially, they were invited only to film the band during the *Push the Sky Away* recording sessions, but, she says, "the footage that we got was just remarkable, and we thought it would be the saddest thing if this lived like a lot of music films these days—which is a 10-minute thing on YouTube. We needed to take it into another form."

Pollard and Forsyth approached Cave with the idea of fleshing out the in-studio footage. "They said, 'Let's do a Nick Cave documentary,' and I said, 'I have no interest in doing that,'" Cave recalls. "Music documentaries often do more damage than good, I think. Because they attempt to make the subject human, and that's not really what we want to see."

Indeed, Cave—who told the audience at the New York screening "Growing up, all I ever wanted to be was Elvis Presley. There was some element [of him] that was beautiful and brutal"—has always played



Scenes from *20,000 Days on Earth*, including Cave with Kylie Minogue (top left) and at home with his twin sons (top right)



the role of a godlike rock star excellently on stage, his elegant suits and preacher-man presence belying the violence and doom that reign supreme in his lyrics.

But the Cave *20,000 Days* reveals is a sensitive, quiet, thoughtful soul. There's a dialogue between him and a psychoanalyst named Darian Leader that runs throughout the film; their conversation isn't scripted, though the entire session—10 hours spread over two days—took place on a set. From that artificial environment come some of the movie's greatest revelations. "Darian uncovered things about Nick and his work that I think Nick himself had not really thought about before," says Forsyth. "He was able to draw these lines between all sorts of moments in his life and his career."

It's a career that has grown significantly more diversified in recent years. After decades of dabbling in novelistic writing and soundtracking for films, Cave gained notice for penning two screenplays for Australian director John Hillcoat (2006's outback Western *The Proposition* and 2012's Prohibition drama *Lawless*, starring Tom Hardy and Jessica Chastain). "I have a love of cinema, but I really had no interest in getting into the film world," Cave says. "But John had been trying to get an Australian Western together, so I found myself in that world for a while."

To this day, his primary working relationship remains the one he has with musician and composer

Ellis, who has collaborated with Cave on almost every project since joining the Bad Seeds in 1995.

"Nick and Warren are like two teenage boys," says Pollard. "There's a youthful enthusiasm they bring out in one another." During one of the movie's more surreal sequences, Ellis makes Cave a lunch of boiled eels while regaling him with tales of working with Nina Simone. "The hardest part of the entire film was pretending I hadn't heard that story a thousand times before," Cave jokes. "But as Warren said once, 'You've made a career out of feigning interest.'"

Revelations of Cave's relationship to women provide some of the film's most personal moments—including a pivotal scene with pop star and onetime duet partner Kylie Minogue, and an inspired monologue about meeting his current wife, former model Susie Bick. "When I look back on it, my life seems to be divided up into particular women who kind of lord over particular periods of my life," Cave says. "The songs themselves act as a way of keeping the memory of that woman that's trapped in the aspic of your memory alive."

And despite his misgivings about the film—he only signed on once he was promised final cut—its once unwilling subject sounds surprisingly pleased with the outcome. "I quite enjoyed being put in a situation where I had to think about certain things like the creative process, which I've always pretty much taken for granted," he admits. "It forced me to take a stand on particular things, and I have a take on it that's been helpful to myself and others. I'm not going to write a self-help book, though."

He pauses, looks in the distance, and offers a wide grin. "Actually, it's not a bad idea."

That tiny gesture distills Cave: a man both hard-boiled and disarmingly irreverent. "I don't really care about the truth," he says. "I'm more interested in obfuscation and lies and darkness."

So who, then, is the real Nick Cave? Is he the guy who obsessively watches television and keeps a journal about the weather? The flinty-eyed sheriff maintaining order in the outlaw universe he's created? The Elvis-channeling beast who stalks stages with the Bad Seeds night after night? "At the end of the 20th century, I ceased to be a human being," he announces at the top of *20,000 Days*. Whatever Cave is becoming, he's content with the transformation. "I think you get a bit older and your world shrinks in some way," he says. "You have different needs. If I'm left alone to work and spend a bit of time with the people I love, I feel pretty complete." He is, at least and at long last, comfortable. ■

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