

20,000 Days on Earth: Sundance Review

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Nick Cave in "20,000 Days on Earth"

Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard's docufiction essay on iconoclastic Australian rocker Nick Cave won awards for direction and editing in Sundance's World Cinema competition.

In his hymn of rebirth out of dark obsession, "Jubilee Street," **Nick Cave** sings, "I'm transforming. I'm vibrating. Look at me now." That seems an accurate enough description of what the post-punk balladeer does in both his electrifying stage performances and in *20,000 Days on Earth*. He invites us to get acquainted with a self-mythologizing heightened version of who he is, a character in his own fully inhabited fiction. Authenticity and magnificently pretentious artifice exist side by side in this cultivated persona, and that duality informs **Iain Forsyth** and **Jane Pollard's** imaginative documentary, which shows an uncommon coherence of vision between the British visual artists and their subject.

An influential figure in alternative rock for more than three decades, initially as frontman of the Birthday Party and since 1984 of the Bad Seeds, the Australian apocalyptic poet-preacher makes no secret of his distrust of the biographical form. But what Forsyth and Pollard are doing here is far more impressionistic – a staged but not entirely scripted depiction of Cave's 20,000th day on Earth. The

filmmakers have acknowledged that they were influenced by such iconoclastic rock movies as **Jean-Luc Godard's** 1968 *Sympathy for the Devil* with the Rolling Stones, and the 1976 Led Zeppelin opus, *The Song Remains the Same*.

The closest they come to straightforward biography is in the opening three minutes, a dazzling visual and aural assault that assembles images of Cave's life from birth to the present in a fast-motion montage on multiple screens.

As if shaking off a dream of those 19,999 previous days of his life, Cave wakes up in the bedroom of his home in Brighton, England, flooded with purifying seafront light. That image, with his wife Susie still asleep, recalls the arresting cover art for "Push the Sky Away," the Bad Seeds' 15th studio album, released last year. Forsyth and Pollard's film looks in on the creation of that elegant collection at La Fabrique, a studio in a 19th century mansion in the South of France. Watching Cave and his band (which includes his film score collaborator **Warren Ellis**) dig deep into the somber, trance-like build of "Higgs Boson Blues" will be a high point for fans.

A traditional documentary might weave performance interludes like that one into an ordered context of talking heads, clips and career recollections. What makes *20,000 Days on Earth* distinctive is that it provides an overview of the man and his art while creating the illusion that this has come together organically – out of poetic ruminations, casual encounters, ghost-like visitations and good old Freudian psychoanalysis. Or out of the sea mist that rolls in over Brighton, the adopted home that Cave says is "always cold, always raining."

Purely for the purposes of this film, the British author **Darian Leader** serves as Cave's shrink. He draws him out on subjects ranging from his early childhood in rural Australia, his father, his first sexual experience, his thoughts on love and marriage, his drug-use days, his religious beliefs, his fascination with the transformative power of performance, and his fears, paramount among them being the loss of memory. These punctuating "therapy" fragments are alternately droll and haunting.

In other scenes we see Cave driving around Brighton in a Jaguar, reflecting on his creative process like a stream-of-consciousness Beat poet. Passengers suddenly appear in the car to engage or challenge him, seemingly conjured out of his mind.

First is **Ray Winstone**, who starred in **John Hillcoat's** outlaw Western *The Proposition*, which was scripted by Cave, and also appears in Hillcoat's gorgeous [music video for "Jubilee Street."](#) Next is German musician **Blixa Bargeld**, the longtime Bad Seeds guitarist who discusses – reportedly for the first time with Cave – his abrupt departure from the band. Lastly, **Kylie Minogue** turns up in the back seat (and rearview mirror) for a lovely exchange about the relationship between performer and audience. Cave and Minogue's 1995 duet ["Where the Wild Roses Grow,"](#) gave the Bad Seeds a rare

taste of having a mainstream hit, and the affection between these two polar-opposite Australian music giants is utterly disarming.

STORY: Nick Cave Performs at '20,000 Days on Earth' Premiere Party

Forsyth and Pollard find another crafty way to pencil in resonant moments from Cave's past by having him swing by his archive to sort through documents and photographs sent over by his mother. (This actually takes place on a set, Cave's real archive being in Australia.) High school, the early days of the Birthday Party and the Berlin years are all touched upon here. Laughing at a pompous clause for a memorial museum in a will he drew up in 1987, Cave comments, "I was always kind of an ostentatious bastard."

It's that hint of playful self-mockery that prevents the film from careening into artsy egomania. Cave acknowledges that the rock star thing is an invention that for him happened early in life and is now inescapable. He talks repeatedly about "forgetting who you are" as one of the narcotic attractions of performing, and for much of this film he is very clearly appearing in the role of Nick Cave. But there's also enough candor here to ground the observations in fundamental truth.

On a purely technical level this is a richly cinematic documentary that showcases some beautiful film craft. **Erik Wilson's** cinematography brings a hypnotic sense of place, amplified in the moody strains of Cave and Ellis' melancholy underscoring. **Jonathan Amos'** editing (justly honored in the Sundance awards along with Forsyth and Pollard's direction) is indispensable in navigating the dreamy shifts in and out of Cave's head. His montage near the end of performance moments from over the years, folded into footage from a Sydney Opera House show, is a stunner.

This won't be for everyone, but longtime Cave-men (and women) will be bewitched, along with a fair share of folks drawn in simply by the film's unique investigation into the mind of an artist.

Venue: Sundance Film Festival (World Cinema Documentary Competition)

With: Nick Cave, Susie Cave, Warren Ellis, Darian Leader, Ray Winstone, Blixa Bargeld, Kylie Minogue, Arthur Cave, Earl Cave



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