



A deep abyss: Cave's self-definition takes yet another twist with his latest album, *Dig, Lazarus, Dig!!!*



HIS DARK MATERIALS

Age eventually simmers the belly-fire of rock's most infernal rebels, doesn't it? Try telling that to Nick Cave. As the Baddest Seed et al release their 14th studio album, *Sam Tinson* finds him still smouldering.

EVER SINCE 1981, when a 24-year-old Nick Cave scrawled 'HELL' across his scrawny chest and scared the bejesus out the British music scene as the bilious, heroin-addled frontman of proto-punk nasties The Birthday Party — thus completing his transformation from cassock-kissing Melbourne choirboy to England's number-one parent-worrier — critics have had him pegged as the right hand man of Mephistopheles, if not the Ol' Bastard himself.

SO I'M SLIGHTLY disappointed when, on my way to interview the now 50-year-old Cave at a Sydney hotel, the lift doesn't plummet straight to Hades and deposit me at his cloven feet. Instead it takes me to a plush executive suite whose only concession to the diabolic is a relentlessly beige colour scheme and a minion from EMI, Cave's record label, lurking in the hallway outside.

Minion assures me that His Royal Hellness is in a jolly mood. His inaugural tour with Grinderman — the sleaze-rock splinter group he formed last year with fellow Bad Seeds Warren Ellis, Martyn Casey and Jim Sclavunos — has been a success, and the Seeds themselves have a new album, *Dig, Lazarus, Dig!!!*, in the can. Last year also saw him write an acclaimed film score for *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*, enter the ARIAs Hall of Fame (hijacking the ceremony to induct his band mates in the process) and clear out his cupboards to present his life's work in a retrospective exhibition at Melbourne's Arts

Centre. All in all not a bad year for a man who once stomped around his native city wearing a T-shirt proclaiming 'I Hate Every Cop In This Town'. (Allegedly he was once arrested for masturbating at a police officer's wife from the back of a moving tour van, too, but that's another story.)

Today, Cave is just on the shady side of respectable in a skinny black suit, louchely unbuttoned shirt, slicked back hair and gunslinger moustache. Perched on a sofa too small for his famously elongated frame, he fiddles nervously with a lamp stand, pushing it to tipping point then catching it just before it crashes to the floor.

"You know what I hate most about being interviewed?"

As icebreakers go, it's hard to beat.

"What I hate most about being interviewed is that right now I'm thinking, 'Man, I've made a fucking great record.'" Twenty-five years in the music industry has evidently taught Cave a thing or two about how to plug a record. "In Melbourne >



Songs of experience: clockwise from this picture, Cave performing in Vienna in 2002; with wife Susie Bick and children Arthur and Earl; the Birthday Party days; with "not a fucking side project" Grinderman.



I have this nice car, a great big fucking black Statesman with this incredible sound system. I whack on *Dig, Lazarus, Dig!!!*, crank it up really loud and drive around without any particular destination, just listening. And I think, 'Fuck man, this is special. I've made a stone-cold classic.'"

He pauses to harass the lamp some more. "But I can guarantee," he continues, "that once I've finished this spate of interviews I won't play that fucking record ever again. Because I'll be sick to death of it. And I'll realise that all our efforts, all the accumulated hours of anguish that have gone into making it, have fallen on deaf ears."

Ouch. And then what?

"And then I'll make another one."

This artist-makes-record, critics-misinterpret-record, artist-returns-to-studio-in-disgust cycle of creativity might not be ideal, but it has kept Cave prolific. *Dig, Lazarus, Dig!!!* is his 14th studio album with the Bad Seeds, a band which, in one form or another, has served him loyally on a musical odyssey that has encompassed (in no particular order or combination) apocalyptic post-punk, religious rock, folk romance, swamp blues, political ballads, anthemic torch songs and — perhaps most bizarrely of all to anyone unfamiliar with Caveian whimsy — a chart-topping duet with Kylie Minogue.

BUT EVEN THE MOST metamorphic musicians have a base chromosome or two, and Cave's love affair with the piano as a song-writing tool has always been central to the Bad Seeds' sound. Until now, that is. With *Lazarus*, he did the unthinkable and left his piano lid closed, reaching instead for the organ and, despite being a novice, the guitar. The upshot is that every track on *Lazarus* arrives wriggling fresh.

"It's hip and groovy and catchy," Cave says, deadpan to the core. "It's a sexy, groovy, right-on

beat." The flower-power adjectives might seem out of place for a Bad Seeds record, but they're not far off the mark. *Lazarus* is a spacious, glitchy, loop-strewn thing, crackling with fruity organ hooks and raw, strenuous guitars. There's an organised chaos to it, a fizzing energy which, Cave acknowledges, is a product of what he refers to as "the Grinderman thing".

"Before recording *Dig, Lazarus, Dig!!!*, the four of us, the Grinderman four, did a songwriting session together. Warren [Ellis, formerly of Melbourne band Dirty Three] came up with some loops, which we isolated and used for the album. The sound is more stripped-down; we're not all playing all of the time. There's a sonic disarray which might have come from Grinderman."

"IT'S NOT FAIR, RECORD AFTER RECORD, TO INFLICT THE LYRICAL EQUIVALENT OF TOURETTE'S SYNDROME ON YOUR AUDIENCE."

Listening to *Lazarus* it soon becomes clear that Grinderman, far from being merely a plaything for a bunch of musicians bored of their everyday jobs, is a musical laboratory whose most successful experiments filter through to the Bad Seeds. To Cave, the two bands are inseparable. "Grinderman is not a side project," he spells out. "We fucking shouted that from the rooftops from the start. Grinderman are not like a bunch of businessmen who whack on fright wigs and strap on dildos for one crazy night out before going back to being businessmen again. They are a fundamental part of the whole thing.

You've just got to open your mind, man, and not worry about what's Grinderman and what's the Bad Seeds. It's all the same people."

While the musical symbiosis between the two bands is evident, they are worlds apart lyrically. Cave's vocal delivery on the new album is dense and rapid-fire, often morphing into something like spoken word: a technique, he says, that allows him to fit more lyrics into each song. "The lyrics on *Dig Lazarus, Dig!!!* are the most complex I've ever written," he says. "I was working on them for a good few months solid. Usually I edit back, but a lot of this I just really liked so I kept it in. I'd write like that all the time but I don't think it's fair, record after record, to inflict the lyrical equivalent of Tourette's syndrome on your audience."

Cave's both-barrels approach to word-smithing on *Lazarus* produces rich pickings for lyric nerds. The familiar Cavian themes of love, death, sex, religion and politics are present (the obligatory Biblical deluge makes an appearance too) but, Cave admits, it's all in a more impenetrable and abstract form than his fans might be used to. "Look, I'm not expecting you to sit there and tell me what all the songs are about," he says. "In fact I'd rather you didn't. But there are obvious themes. Everything is in a dream state on this record. Everyone in it seems disempowered, in a state of extreme apathy, comatose, asleep or dead."



"BY THE TIME YOU HIT 50, YOUR MIND IS A FUCKING VIPER'S NEST OF REPRESSED SEXUALITY. THIS IS JUST WHAT GOES ON IN MY HEAD, MAN."

sort that I have no interest in writing any more. I mean, I can write them. Sometimes I even start writing them, but then I get into it and I think, 'I've heard this before, I know where this is coming from.' So I don't pursue it." Rather, Cave describes *Lazarus* as having a "non-emotional groove", and says that in many ways the words are more devastating than "those heart-wrenching Bad Seeds epics". "It's not so manipulative," he says. "It's not telling you how to feel. But after a while it's like, 'Oh, fuck.' It gets you."

Cave's refusal to rest on his creative laurels has alienated as many followers as it has won him (disillusioned goths, confused Kylie fans and outraged Jesus freaks have been left spinning in his wake), and partly explains why Australia, his home nation, has taken so long to acknowledge one of their most prodigiously talented sons. At a time in his career when other artists would be content feathering their nest with crowd pleasers, Cave insists on keeping his listeners on their toes. He could probably get away with making another four albums like *Lazarus's* predecessor, *Abattoir Blues/The Lyre of Orpheus*, he muses. "Send the kids to nice schools, blah blah. But it's much more interesting to make a record that polarises people, and see what happens."

Among those most polarised by Cave's music are churchgoing Christians who, if their online chatter is anything to go by, don't know whether to welcome the Baddest Seed into the fold or cast him back into the fiery pit from whence he came. *Dig, Lazarus, Dig!!!*, in which mad prophets warn of apocalyptic rains, little girls wake up with the jawbones of asses stuck in their jeans and lyrics such as "Mr Sandman the Inseminator opens her up like a love letter and enters her dreams" prevail, is unlikely to leave them any the wiser.

Their confusion reflects Cave's own fractious relationship with the Bible, whose spicier Old Testament stories have pervaded his work since the Birthday Party days. On the day of our interview, Cave is wearing a tiny white Buddha around his neck in place of a crucifix ("I'm keeping my options open," he shrugs), so I judge it safe to ask him on which side of the God-fearing fence he stands these days. "I have enormous problems with the Church," he sighs. "Enormous ones. Not with the message itself. But with the medium." But isn't that the case with religion in general? "It's all fucked up," he acknowledges. "It's all fucked up and it can't get any worse. Or maybe it can..."

He trails off, and stares gloomily at the beige carpet. He looks damned miserable, and for a surreal moment I consider giving Nick Cave a hug. Instead I ask him if the state of the world gets him down. "Yeah," he spits. "It makes me nauseous. I feel physically sick when I hear certain people talk about things. Usually

Christians, unfortunately. So yes, it gets me down." So a Grinderman fan base within the Christian right is out of the question then? "Oh, the Christian right love Grinderman," he quips. "It's the beards."

ABOUT HALFWAY THROUGH his new album, in an angry, clanging track called "We Call Upon The Author (To Explain)", Cave holds an unspecified authority to account for an inventory of global grievances including mass poverty, discrimination, Third-World debt, inequality and disease. It's about this time that the 'Oh, fuck' feeling Cave described earlier starts to grip you, and it doesn't let go until some time after the album closes. Unlike *Abattoir Blues/The Lyre of Orpheus*, it has no chirpy, upbeat counterweight to offer relief. Does this mean Cave's outlook on life is actually getting bleaker?

"I'm not a pessimist," he insists. "There's a lot of beauty in the world, a lot to get out of bed for. I'm not the kind to let little details like the fact the entire world is going down the fucking toilet interfere with my day. There's very little I can do about it." That's a matter of opinion. In middle age, Cave is still producing more confrontational material than many of the current generation of young guns whose job, traditionally, has been to change things. Perhaps his self-doubt is that of an old punk who, for the first time in his career, finds himself caught on the brink of mainstream acceptance and is not altogether comfortable with it. As I leave, his parting shot is certainly not that of an artist who thinks his time has passed. "When you write your review make sure you say it's one of the best albums you've ever heard," he says. "If you don't you'll regret it. You'll be like that idiot that didn't sign the Beatles." **GQ Dig, Lazarus, Dig!!! is out 1 March**

→ GRIPER-MAN

SOME OF NICK CAVE'S SPIKIER GEMS

ON MURDER

"This idea of the serial killer being the ultimate atrocity is bullshit. There are far worse things happening in the world and this attention that's been put on the serial killer is a distraction from the political horrors that are going on."

ON THE BOX

"It's watching fucking TV constantly that makes dysfunctional people."

ON CRITICISM

"I've got a mind like a steel trap. It's an unfortunate aspect of my character, but if someone says something negative about me it's in there forever."

ON HIS VIOLENT MUSE

"I want to write songs that are so sad, the kind of sad where you take someone's little finger and break it in three places."

ON NOT SELLING OUT

"People tell me they got married to 'The Ship Song', or that they buried their best friend to 'Into My Arms', and I don't want them to look at the TV and see that they buried their friend to a Cometto ad or something."

ON HIMSELF

"Finding out the way that I feel is like trying to find a dead rat up a drainpipe."

ON US LOT

"People think I'm a miserable sod but it's only because I get asked such bloody miserable questions."

The menagerie of freaks and dreamers who populate *Lazarus* reaches its zenith with the final track, "More News From Nowhere", in which the listener is introduced, one by one, to the characters at an imaginary party. Cave is no stranger to autobiographical songwriting (previous albums *The Boatman's Call* and *No More Shall We Part* dealt, respectively, with his break up with singer PJ Harvey and his marriage to current wife, former Vivienne Westwood model Susie Bick), so I take a punt and ask him if the characters in this song represent anyone special. "Ah, yes. They're old girlfriends, basically."

CAVE IS 50, HAPPILY MARRIED and a dad. Doesn't he think writing songs about ex-girlfriends is a little off at this stage in his life? He runs a thin-fingered hand over his brow and gives me the once over with eyes that look suddenly old and irritated. His voice, when he finally responds, is cut to match: "Listen, you've got all this to look forward to. But by the time you hit 50 your mind is a fucking viper's nest of repressed sexuality. This is just what goes on in my head, man."

Apathy, past romances and repressed sexuality. These, then, are the demons that keep old punks awake at night. I wonder if Cave's preoccupations — and their very public manifestation in song form — ever frighten those close to him. His wife, for instance? "Maybe." He gives the lamp a tentative swipe, then backtracks. "Look, I don't have any reference points. I'm just going where this thing takes me. Ten years ago, if you'd told me I'd make that Grinderman record, I wouldn't have believed it. The kind of things I'm singing about now..."

Things like "No Pussy Blues"?

"Yeah, like that. Back when I was writing songs like "Into My Arms", I wouldn't have believed it. But it's just the way things are going. "Into My Arms" is a beautiful song, but it's the