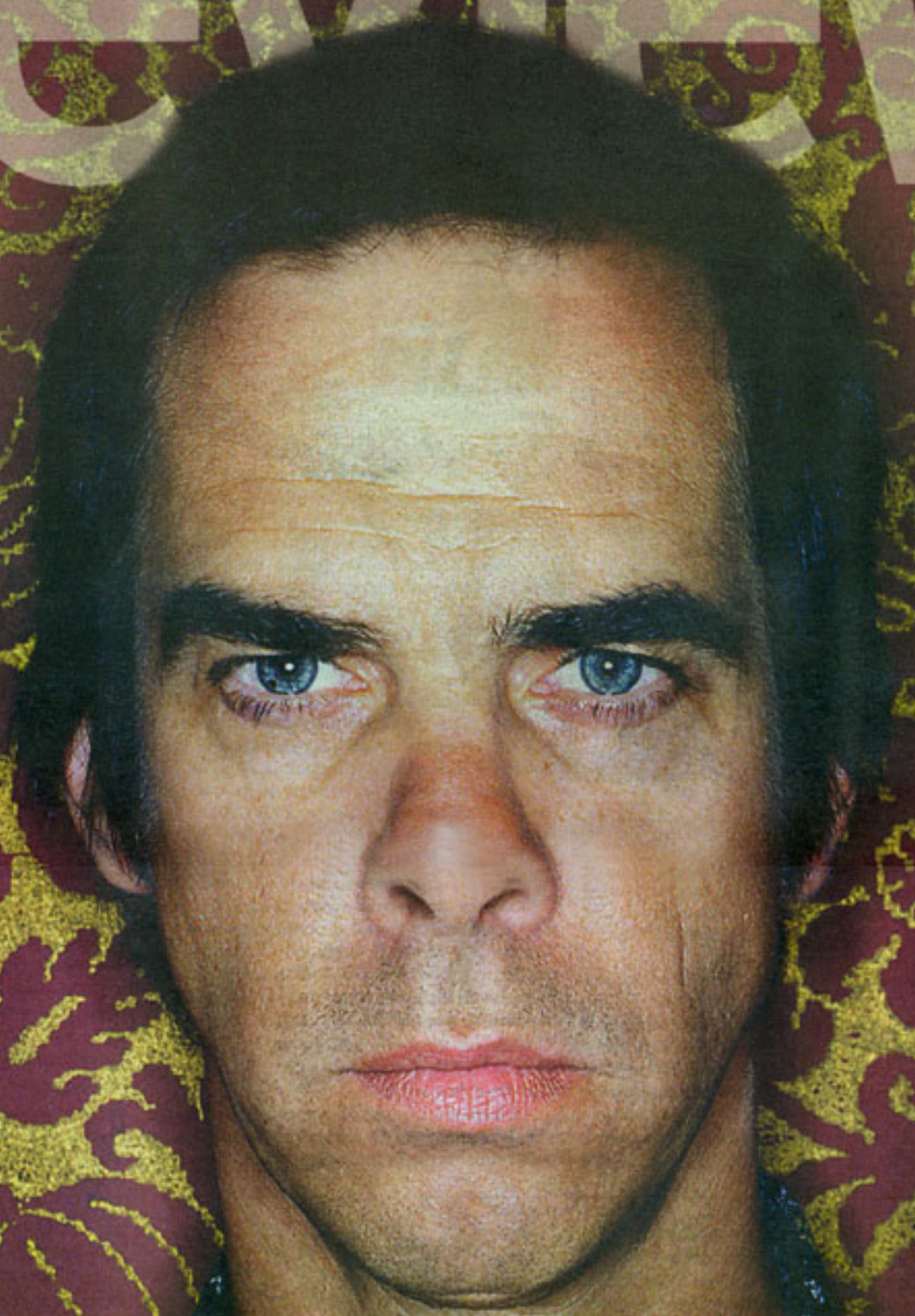


VIEW: GRAEME BLUNDELL IN THE KITCHEN; NETWORK AND PAY TV LISTINGS

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NICK CAVE

Why sad songs say so much

PETER CRAVEN ON AUSTRALIA'S GREATEST WORK OF LITERATURE PAGE 6

DARKER IS

Debbie Kruger spoke to the biggest names in Australian music for her new book, *Songwriters Speak*. In this exclusive extract, Nick Cave explains why he can be 'real happy and write a sad song'

NICK Cave is a spiritual man, so I decided the best way to start was with a confession. "I was a complete Nick Cave virgin," I said boldly. "I'm not sitting here before you having spent 20 years falling at your feet. It was a real experience for me to learn your work. I went on a journey."

"Oh, good," he responded. "And why hadn't you listened to it before?"

"I never went in that direction," I admitted. "I think the kind of music that I was into might be the kind of music you would abhor."

"And you thought that I was a miserable bastard and you didn't want to know," Cave said, eyebrows raised.

"Something like that, yes."

He nodded. "Well, I know deep down that I will always be kind of marginal and that my music isn't going to be universally liked, that your average person, whatever that may be, is not going to really take to my view of things."

"But it's the only view I have; it's not something that I can do anything about. And I happen to be very fond of my view of things, so I don't have any desire to do anything differently. But I do understand that it's not for everybody."

And with that we started our interview at Cave's office — an unkempt one-bedroom flat — in Hove, near Brighton on England's south coast.

Has the way you write songs changed since the earliest days?

Yep. I've always worked hard at it, but these days — at least for the [past] five years — I work a very strict routine with songwriting. Which comes to a degree with a lifestyle change as well. Getting up early, coming into this room and staying here 'til about five o'clock. I do that every day that I'm not on tour or making records or doing other things. And I guess that's something to do with some notion that the muse is unreliable.

So you have to be on standby for it?

Yeah. To walk in and be prepared. And so this office, to me, represents periods of incredible frustration and also amazing periods.

Does it get easier, the process of connecting with the muse?

You have less doubts. The way that I write is, I have a project to do, and I come in and do it. I say: "Today I'm going to start writing songs for the new record." Invariably there's a three-week period of not being able to write anything and it's a deeply frustrating period. But that becomes less and less so simply because I know now after 14 albums that eventually it comes.

You're never flooded with inspiration between projects? You might just be walking along with the kids and an idea for a song comes to you?

No. I'm taking everything in and my inspirations come from everywhere. They come from the good and the bad and the beautiful and the ugly and deeply flawed things and extraordinary things. They come from watching really bad movies, from watching really great movies, listening to really bad music, great music, I find everything is either telling me what not to do or what to do. So you absorb stuff without really realising it.

You've said that you filled the void in your life left by your father's early death by writing. While you've written a novel, plays and film scripts, why have you focused most of your energy on writing songs? Is the song a more powerful form of art?

Yes. It's because music is right up there at the top of



'I wrote that song under very difficult circumstances ... about three days into some drug rehabilitation clinic'

the ladder in regard to the effect that it can have on me. As opposed to the effect that a movie, or even a book, can have on me. I love the immediacy of music; the reliability of a song, that you can play it again three weeks later and it still does the same thing to you, and the mystery of the whole thing. I don't know why one note alone is just this kind of idiot noise but you put another note next to it that suddenly can turn into something that can change your life. I suppose there's something in the fact that my father always considered rock music to be right down the bottom. Like it was something not even really worth wiping your shoes on. My father drummed that literature and poetry were the great spiritual aspirations of mankind. I always felt like I was doing the wrong thing with music; I should have been doing something more worthwhile. Until it suddenly dawned on me that I was. That, actually, music to me means a hell of a lot more, it reaches a deeper part of me than books that I've read.

Do you hold up your body of work as a worthy example of literary achievement?

On a good day, yes I do. On a bad day, definitely not. The whole thing with writing and making music is that when I'm in the moment with it, I feel like a different person, I feel like what I'm doing is the greatest thing not only that I have done but that has ever been done. It's this extraordinary feeling. I get the same feeling performing live on stage, that it feels like I'm exactly the kind of person that I always wanted to be. Unfortunately, when I go off stage or when I finish a record and it gets sent back to me and I have it in my hands, it's very anticlimactic. I realise I'm just this guy like everybody else. One of the reasons I never listen to my music back or never listen to live recordings of what I do is because of this terrible fear I have that I won't be able to regain that feeling once I actually look at it.

Your subject matter has been on the nasty side as opposed to the happy, fluffy side.

I don't really relate to the happy, fluffy side. In the music that I like, I relate to tragedy and to sadness and to violence, to aggressiveness. I find that exciting and I haven't ever thought about that or questioned that. At the same time I find certain songs of praise very exciting as well, but a song of praise or a good uplifting song is usually suggesting an evilness by its absence. What I'm not interested in is songs that don't address that at all.

You've said "All love songs must contain duende". Deep sorrow. If a love song, or any song, is never truly happy, how do you account for the heartfelt joy in the songs of, say, Stevie Wonder, or a song like Wonderful World?

I think *Wonderful World* is putting forward almost a polemic, that it is a wonderful world. It's saying we are all suffering, and we may see this world as a bad place, but I'm here to tell you that it's a wonderful world, the dark sacred night and the bright blessed day, and to look for these kinds of things. And I think that's a very

Nick of time

Four of *The Australian's* resident fans choose their favourite Nick Cave lyrics:

Insect insect insect insect insect insect insect insect

Nick the stripper

A-hideous to the eye

A-hideous to the eye

Well he's a fat little insect

A fat little insect

A fat little insect

A fat little insect

And ooooooooooh! here we go again

Nick the Stripper, from *Prayers on Fire* (1981)

— Matthew Stevens

And like some ragged stranger

Died upon the cross

And might I say it seems so fitting in its way

He was a carpenter by trade

Or at least that's what I'm told

The Mercy Seat, from *Tender Prey* (1988)

— Kerrie Murphy

Amateurs, dilettantes, hacks

cowboys, clones

The streets groan with little Caesars

Napoleons and c--s

With their building blocks and their tiny

plastic phones

Counting on their fingers, with crumbs

down their fronts

Darker with the Day, from *No More Shall We Part* (2001)

— Stephen Romei

Those heathens you hang with down by the sea

All they want to do is defrock you

I know a river, where we can dream

It will swell up, burst its banks, babe, and rock you

But if you're gonna dine with them cannibals

Sooner or later, darling, you're gonna get eaten

Cannibal's Hymn, from *Abattoir Blues* (2004)

— Georgina Safe

OTHER Australian musicians interviewed in *Songwriters Speak* include: Rolf Harris, Harry Vanda and George Young, Ross Wilson, Glenn Shorrock, Tim and Neil Finn, Deborah Conway, Paul Kelly, James Reyne, Christina Amphlett, Daniel Johns, Archie Roach and Kasey Chambers.

THE DAY

beautiful thing, but in some way it's the springboard to the notion that it actually isn't a good world.

How does a songwriter summon deep sorrow? Does one have to have experienced it?

Everyone's experienced sorrow. I don't think I've experienced it any more than anyone else. I don't ever consider myself to have been an unhappy person. I've had troubles like anyone else, so I don't know.

It's interesting that in the joy of your marriage, you wrote a song called *My Sorrowful Wife*.

Well, you met her (Cave is married to actor Susie Bick and they have twin sons, Arthur and Earl).

She looked pretty chirpy to me.

She is chirpy. But there is a sadness that lives in my wife, that I've noticed. That I noticed from the start and I found deeply attractive.

Does it concern or bother you if people don't get your sense of humour?

It doesn't really. It does bother me that people dismiss what I do because they're under the impression that I'm just this ...

Lugubrious?

That it's just this miserable shit. "Oh, I don't listen to that kind of stuff." Because of what they've read about it. When in fact they could quite possibly enjoy it.

If you wake up and you're particularly happy, it's a beautiful day, and you walk down here, where does the sorrow come to you from?

It's irrelevant. My moods, such as they are, seem to have nothing to do with my circumstances whatsoever. It's really to do with the writing and the use of words and rhyme. If I can sit down and write a line, then put another one next to it and it rhymes beautifully, it echoes back and forth in the right way, and it can be deeply sad, it can make me happier than anything. I can feel extraordinarily happy about that. It has nothing to do with my emotional state, what I write. I can be real happy and write a sad song. I only have to sit down and play an A minor chord. It just puts you in that kind of frame of mind; musically, that chord suggests all the sorrow in the world.

You described love songs as the idea of "the cry of one chained to the earth, to the ordinary and to the

mundane, craving flight, a flight into inspiration and imagination and divinity". Did *Into My Arms* exemplify that?

I wrote that particular song under very difficult circumstances. I wrote a few songs like that, but that one I wrote about three days into some drug rehabilitation clinic. You were allowed out of the clinic if you went to church, and I had gone to church that day, it was a Sunday, and I'd come back and I was feeling very ill, and sat down and wrote that very quickly, and I didn't have anything there to play it on, I had the melody in my head. So even though that particular sojourn into rehabilitation didn't work [laughs], at least I got a good song out of it.

Notwithstanding Kylie Minogue's considerable contribution, did you see *Where the Wild Roses Grow* as a commercial hit?

No.

It must have amused you to think about what all the people who bought the *Murder Ballads* album on the strength of that single would have made of it.

Yeah. I was on *Top of the Pops* two weeks running with Kylie, trying to fumble my way through the song. And then I remember being in a toy shop getting a toy for my son and this little kid coming up to me in a Power Rangers outfit, and he goes, "Are you that old guy that was on with Kylie Minogue the other night?" He was just this little kid, but he really loved the song. And I'm just like, [Under his breath] "Oh, f— off, you little bastard." [Laughs] But it suddenly occurred to me that these people may even be buying the record and it deeply troubled me.

How Australian do you think your songwriting is?

I think in some respects it's very Australian because many aspects of the kind of world I've created are just pilfered from other lands, so that I've created my own setting and world for my songs to play out in. I have enormous love for much about Australia. The countryside, the bush and all that stuff. But there's bits of America and bits of England and I've created my own unique land. I think that's quite similar to a lot of Australian cinema, to Australian songwriting, Australian society. It's largely a kind of hybrid, mongrel society.

Songwriters Speak, by Debbie Kruger, \$49.95, will be published by limelightpress on Tuesday.

Man in black: Nick Cave, right, says he loves the immediacy of music; from far left, on stage with the Birthday Party; a duet with Kylie Minogue in Sydney in 1996

