

Introduction

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Commissioned especially for the exhibition on Nick Cave recently held in Melbourne, Australia, and given pride of place on the front cover of the accompanying catalogue,¹ is a photographic portrait of Cave, its frame drawn in with visual motifs from eras other than those of the twenty-first century. The backdrop is by Tony Clark, a brightly-hued landscape of acrylic dusty pinks and aquamarine; in the foreground is Cave, photographed by Polly Borland and cast between two swaying, impressionistic trees. Given the ostensible outdoor setting, Cave's left elbow and right wrist sit somewhat incongruously on a low shelf or high table on which a marble bust of Jesus rests. The subject looks directly at the camera: is this look a challenge or an invitation? Cave's shoulders are slightly sloped as the placing of his arms would necessitate, and they are somehow formally, solemnly rigid; his white shirt collar, casually opened beneath a dark suit jacket with which it strikingly contrasts, contributes to the sharp geometry of the photograph, a feature that sits interestingly, jarringly, alongside the more fluid, imprecise paint strokes of its surroundings. In yet further contrast, the Sacred Heart of Jesus bust, itself formally smooth, monochromatic and in the margin of the composition, has a gaze that is typically downcast, suggesting more an inner reflection than the public self-fashioning that the portrait of Cave is presenting, making clear that what is facing out from the cover of this catalogue is not so much Cave as yet another image of Nick Cave and asking its viewers to regard it as such.

Inside the catalogue are many other photographs of Cave, as might well be expected. Most are familiar to anyone who has a passing interest in Cave's career: Cave photographed, skinny and secularly Christ-like, above São Paulo; Cave hamming it up with various band members; Cave nearly always sensibly suited. Perhaps that is why there is one photo of the adult Cave in the collection, also by Borland, which stands out. Located on the set in Winton, Queensland, Australia, of the film, *The Proposition* (2005), to which Cave provided the script and the soundtrack (the latter with Warren Ellis; long-time collaborator John Hillcoat directed the movie), this photograph has much more of a documentary feel about it than the one adorning the catalogue's cover. By all accounts, the film set was, to use the fitting Australian vernacular, 'stinking hot', with temperatures soaring above 40 degrees Celsius for days on end, and the background of this Borland photograph is appropriately bleached of colour with long, parched grass

¹ Janine Barrant and James Fox, *Nick Cave Stories* (Melbourne, 2007).

protruding in the foreground of the shot and a spindly, leaf-less tree trunk in the background. Cave is pictured with Tom E. Lewis, a musician and actor who played the character of Two Bob in *The Proposition*, and a bridled white horse, which is placed at the physical centre of the photograph but on the viewers' left-hand side of the unlikely trinity. It is Cave who draws the eye, however, not only because an audience might be particularly looking for him in the context of the photograph's publication: this pull is also felt because, in part, this is not the image of Nick Cave so many other photographs, both those in the catalogue and beyond, would have us know and recognise. Here, in the Australian outback, the heat-trapping tailored suit is understandably discarded and Cave stands – his gaze this time directed somewhere outside the frame, his arms awkwardly straightened by his sides – dressed in knee-length shorts (shorts!) and thongs (thongs!, or flip-flops as they are sometimes known outside Australia). Yes, the signature cigarette hangs from his left finger-tips (one fears of the bush-fire carelessly discarded ash might produce in such a dry, brittle place), and there is nothing, really, to prompt such expressions of surprise at the fleshy exposure of knees and toes – remember the inhumane temperatures – except for the fact that this image of Cave is not part of the cluster, with internal modifications, that is routinely circulated to signify and identify 'Nick Cave'.

If the image of Nick Cave has a recognisable shape that is thrown into particular relief by a photograph of Cave 'out of place', out of 'his' urbane, suited setting, then the work of the subject who might resemble an occasional likeness to the picture is arguably even more diffuse. As Ginny Dougary pointed out some years ago: 'if you didn't know what Nick Cave does, you would be hard-pressed to guess' from his 'unusual curriculum vitae'.² This comment, most apt in 1999, is even more so now. In the past four years, in addition to his release of the latest Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds album, *Dig, Lazarus Dig!!!* in 2008, and in 2007 of the self-titled debut album of a new band-project, Grinderman, and an induction into the ARIA Hall of Fame (the peak Australian music industry body), Cave has been awarded an honorary Doctor of Laws from Monash University in Melbourne, Australia; lectured at the State Library of New South Wales in Australia; curated the Berlin segment of a film festival in Brighton, England; seen his screenplay of *The Proposition* actualised as film; spoken about the poetry of Philip Larkin on Britain's Radio 3; co-scored a number of plays for the Icelandic Vesturport Theatre; and been voted fifth 'Best Dressed Man in the World' by *Esquire* magazine, among many other accolades and achievements. He has also won the *Q* 'Classic Songwriter' award, the inaugural Gucci award for 'personalities outside the movie industry who have made a remarkable artistic contribution to film over the past 18 months', and, with Warren Ellis, the Australian IF and AFI Awards

² Ginny Dougary, 'The New Romantic: Interview, Nick Cave', 23 Mar 1999 [Online], available at <http://www.ginnydougary.co.uk/category/musicians/page/3>, accessed Oct 2007. Versions of this interview were published in *The Age* and *The Sydney Morning Herald* on 1 May 1999.

(national film industry awards) for best music score for *The Proposition*. No less significantly, at least to those living in his former hometown of Melbourne, Cave's song 'Release the Bats' (1982) was chosen as the symbolic 'first song' to be played in the new premises of the iconic, independent community radio station, 3RRR. Even for a radio station that long used the breathy and hilarious Bongwater lyric, 'They have Nick Cave dolls now? I *want* one' as a promotional sound bite, this is indeed an honour.³

Cave is now widely recognised as a songwriter, musician, novelist, screenwriter, curator, critic, actor and performer. From the band The Boys Next Door (1976–80), which formed in Melbourne, Australia, and included Cave's school friends Tracy Pew, Mick Harvey and Phill Calvert, to the spoken-word recording 'The Secret Life of the Love Song' (1998), to the recently acclaimed screenplay of *The Proposition* and *Grinderman*, Cave's career spans 30 years and has produced a comprehensive (and sometimes controversial) body of work that has arguably shaped contemporary alternative culture and generated wide-spread comment. His songs have been covered by artists as varied as Metallica, Johnny Cash and the Afghan group, Hhalil Gudaz, Fazila Hijeb & Ramen Nawa, and he has been photographed by Anton Corbijn and painted by Howard Arkley. It is no exaggeration to state that Cave is an almost daily reference point in the international news and music media, a distinction of sorts that arguably reached a new height with Cave's 1995 duet with pop superstar Kylie Minogue. This cultural moment was seized by many as particularly resonant; whether it was 'light' meeting 'darkness', the 'alternative' becoming 'mainstream', or the 'turning point' in Minogue's career depended on your viewpoint. What was not in question in media coverage of the coupling, however, was the felicitous strangeness or irony of the partnership, deriving from the polar opposites each party was seen to represent. Despite this intense media interest in Cave, though, there have been remarkably few comprehensive appraisals of Cave's work, its significance and its impact on understandings of popular culture. It is this absence the present volume seeks to address and redress.

This book is the first collection of essays on the work of Cave. It is a 'scholarly' book in the best possible sense, involving people who have taken time to reference their sources because they care about the sharing of ideas. The aims of the collection are threefold: to compile a comprehensive scholarly and critical overview of Cave's work and its wider, ongoing cultural significance; to bring together interdisciplinary scholarship addressing Cave's work and its influence from a number of perspectives; to produce an edited collection that is of interest to general audiences and academics alike.

From the essays commissioned for this volume, three central areas of concentration have emerged: contexts for Cave's work and its reception; the importance of Cave's work from different perspectives; and the nature of Cave's engagement with both religious and secular mythologies. As such, the essays are

³ Bongwater, 'Nick Cave Dolls', *The Power of Pussy* LP (Shimmy Disc, 1991).

not intended as critique in any narrow, negative sense, but rather, as Michel de Montaigne first conceived the term, as *essais*: explorations, ‘trials’, perspectives taken for the purpose of testing thought, and what it is that is useful to know. In many ways these essays are not about Nick Cave at all, but about the worlds his work has variously opened or revealed. The chapters that follow offer a mixture of close textual analysis and broader theoretical and historical discussion that are accessible both to those without specialised knowledge of Cave’s career, and to those unfamiliar with the specialties of academic discourse. Indeed, the volume recognises that scholarly analyses of cultural producers who have achieved their primary fame in the field of popular music are often criticised for paying undue attention to the textual dimension of the artist’s work. We have sought to avoid this (perceived) problem by inviting contributors from a range of different perspectives and disciplines. The contributors secured for this volume have expertise and/or experience in music history and analysis, cinema studies, performance studies, media studies, popular culture studies, and cultural and literary studies, and all write with an eye to a broad audience. The variety of essays in this volume attest to Cave as an interdisciplinary artist who warrants attention from literary, visual and cultural studies, as well as from the popular music press.

With this in mind, the book is squarely aimed at the general reader interested in the intersections of music, literature and popular culture, and it is hoped its appeal will extend to undergraduate and postgraduate students, and to teachers in the arts and humanities. As mentioned above, despite Cave being an almost daily reference point in international news/music media, there is remarkably little literature in scholarly periodicals and collections. On the one hand, and to date, Cave’s work has featured (fairly negatively) in chapters of books with their own cultural studies agenda: examples include Simon Reynolds and Joy Press’s *The Sex Revolts* (1995);⁴ McKenzie Wark’s *Celebrities, Culture and Cyberspace* (1999);⁵ Susan Broadbent’s *Liminal Acts* (1999),⁶ and a scattering of academic articles. This is in stark contrast to the attention that Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen, for example, have attracted, artists who are often considered Cave’s mentors, if not peers.⁷ On the other hand, more ‘personal’ aspects of Cave’s life and career have been

⁴ Simon Reynolds and Joy Press, *The Sex Revolts: Gender, Rebellion, and Rock ‘n’ Roll* (Cambridge, MA, 1995).

⁵ McKenzie Wark, *Celebrities, Culture and Cyberspace: The Light on the Hill in a Postmodern World* (Annandale, 1999).

⁶ Susan Broadhurst, *Liminal Acts: A Critical Overview of Contemporary Performance and Theory* (London, 1999).

⁷ See, for example, Christopher Ricks, *Dylan’s Visions of Sin* (London, 2003); David Boucher, *Dylan and Cohen: Poets of Rock and Roll* (London, 2004).

extensively covered in biographies⁸ and documentary films,⁹ and in newspaper and magazine features. Numerous interviews have been published and/or broadcast on TV and radio. Recent notable examples include Melvyn Bragg's profile of Cave on *The Southbank Show* (2003)¹⁰ and Debbie Kruger's interview with Cave in *Songwriters Speak* (2005).¹¹ Many of the interviews Cave has given over the years are available online at the unofficial website.¹² Further, Cave's discography and musical influences have been comprehensively charted, most recently in Amy Hanson's *Kicking Against the Pricks* (2005),¹³ and in *Original Seeds Vol. 2* (CD, 2004)¹⁴ compiled and annotated by Kim Beissel. And both *Stranded* (1996)¹⁵ by Clinton Walker and *A Long Way to the Top* (TV series, 2001),¹⁶ produced by Larry Meltzer and Greg Appel, use Cave's career to speak of broader patterns and turning points within the Australian music scene. While none of these projects overlap with the focus of our own, they do indicate growing public interest in Cave as a major contemporary artist.

The first chapter in this volume is a long-gestated essay by Jillian Burt. Burt's wide-ranging essay is informed by her personal, journalistic and intellectual association with Cave. Rejecting the pervasive clichés about Cave as a gothic 'doom merchant' as completely nonsensical, Burt places his work within its wider cultural and aesthetic contexts with a particular interest in sketching out the spiritual landscapes of Cave's songs, and neatly setting the scene for the volume as a whole.

In a similar manner, Clinton Walker's contribution to the volume, which comprises the second chapter, also turns a journalistic eye to the 'early years' of Cave's career, to which Walker was both witness and participant. His essay,

⁸ Ian Johnson, *Bad Seed: The Biography of Nick Cave* (London, 1995); Robert Brokenmouth, *Nick Cave: The Birthday Party and Other Epic Adventures* (London, 1996); Maximilian Dax and Johannes Beck, *The Life and Music of Nick Cave: An Illustrated Biography* (Berlin, 1999).

⁹ Bram Van Splunteren, dir., *Stranger in a Strange Land*, TV documentary (Dutch VPRO TV, 1987); Uli M Schueppel, dir., *The Road to God Knows Where*, 1990, on Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, *The Road to God Knows Where/Live at the Paradiso*, DVD (Mute Records, 2005); Simon Safranek, dir., *The Myth* (Czech Republic, 2002).

¹⁰ *The South Bank Show*, ep. 607: Nick Cave, TV Documentary (UK TV, 2003).

¹¹ Debbie Kruger, *Songwriters Speak* (Balmain, 2005).

¹² Nick Cave Online, website, available at <http://www.nick-cave.com>.

¹³ Amy Hanson, *Kicking Against the Pricks: An Armchair Guide to Nick Cave* (London, 2005).

¹⁴ Various artists, *Original Seeds*, Vol. 2, comp. Kim Beissel, CD (Rubber Records, 2004).

¹⁵ Clinton Walker, *Stranded: The Secret History of Australian Independent Music* (Sydney, 1996).

¹⁶ Greg Appel, dir., *Long Way to the Top*, TV documentary (Australian ABC TV, 2001).

therefore, offers a unique perspective on the context on which Walker proposes to shed new light. Contesting what is often seen as the 'official' historical narrative of Cave's trajectory, which commences with Cave arriving in England in 1980, Walker seeks to recover what are consequently seen as the 'lost Antipodean years', before The Birthday Party relocated to the northern hemisphere. Walker argues that these formative years in Australia, in the band-guise of The Boys Next Door, have been overlooked in the rush to point out Cave's (post-)punk credentials, and he sets himself the task of rethinking and re-evaluating this early artistic and musical milieu.

Together Burt and Walker, in their historical tracking of various Cave career points, highlight both the environments in which Cave has worked and the ways in which Cave's creative output has, in turn, impacted on personal, national and international trends in musical culture. There is something about the immediacy of Cave's diverse music, these writers suggest, that gets inside the individual listener and the wider but by no means homogenous listening community, with profound effects.

The third and fourth chapters of the volume extend on the observations made by Burt and Walker. If Walker implicitly seeks to overturn a history of Cave's career that recycles a familiar colonial inheritance – that an artist has not 'made it' until success is achieved 'overseas', in this case at the not-quite-ex-centre of empire – Karen Welberry's piece on humour, Romanticism and the influence of Colin Cave on Nick Cave's *oeuvre* proposes to take Cave's language of laughter seriously as a decolonising fiction. She convincingly suggests that Cave's satirical interest in Romantic poetry can be read as a response to the demand of school children in Australia, and elsewhere in the British empire, to recite a poetic canon that speaks little of their specific cultural landscape. Yet, Welberry also recognises that this engagement contains an element of recuperation, particularly with respect to the Romantic idea of 'creative imagination', which takes on a special resonance when viewed in the knowledge of the work Cave's father performed in shaping the future direction of education in Victoria in the 1960s and '70s.

Laknath Jayasinghe's chapter on Cave, the fourth in the volume, centres on the production of masculinity through dance performance. Cave is perhaps not widely applauded as a dancer in any conventional sense; Jayasinghe's chapter, for its very focus, draws unique attention to Cave's bodily gestures, particularly as these developed around the 1970s 'Crystal Ballroom' scene in Melbourne, Australia, and against the 'pub-rock' scene of the same era and place. Arguing that recent dance theories attentive to the performance of gender and sexual identity may be applied to rock music performances, Jayasinghe takes as his 'text' recorded Cave choreography and argues that his movements stage a progressive politics of gender and sexuality that contrasts sharply with other imaginings of masculinity on offer in Australia and elsewhere during the 1970s and early 1980s.

The first four chapters in this volume address ways in which Cave has been informed by, and/or informs, particular cultural scenes and how these create levels of meaning to his work. The second part of our volume, 'Intersections',

turns to broader ways in which aspects of Cave's work circulate globally. The chapters in this section offer close readings of decidedly different texts. First up is Chris Bilton's chapter, which explores the way in which Cave has thematised the notion of celebrity death in his song writing from *The Birthday Party* onward. Bilton observes that the idea that the singer/celebrity achieves renown through ever-increasing excess that can only end in his/her own demise is dramatised in many Cave songs, as well as being enacted in often violent and dangerous stage performances. Through close analysis of key songs such as 'Sonny's Burning', 'King Ink', 'Black Crow King', 'A Box for Black Paul' and 'Lay Me Low', Bilton charts the progression of Cave's thinking on this topic. He not only demonstrates that Cave had an early and sophisticated understanding of the marketing of 'rock stars', but that it is this very self-awareness that has saved Cave from fulfilling a similar destiny: he emerges in the twenty-first century as both the least, and most, likely celebrity survivor.

The sixth chapter of the volume sees Carol Hart offer an extended literary meditation on Cave's novel, *And the Ass Saw the Angel* (1989). On publication, the novel attracted wide popular interest, yet to date there has been a curious resistance to engage with the text beyond the review columns of newspapers and magazines. Hart's essay offers an important and timely close reading of the novel that eschews the largely celebratory lip-service paid to the novel on release and chooses instead to explore the gothic qualities of the novel, not in the sense of equating Cave's texts with formulaic assumptions about the genre, but rather in examining what Hart terms the novel's aesthetics of excess and fragmentation.

Adrian Danks's contribution, the seventh in this book, shifts emphasis away from 'the literary' to 'the cinematic' and in so doing draws attention to and offers yet another perspective on Cave's creative interests. As Danks makes clear, and as Hart's piece similarly attests in its own literary context, Cave's contribution to the cinematic medium is little discussed, and he sets out to remedy this oversight by discussing Cave's role as an actor, writer, composer and collaborator on a range of films. The film concept of the auteur is particularly suggestive for Danks's readings of Cave's cinematic forays, and he uses it to good effect to tease out Cave's various roles and endeavours, with a specific focus on *The Proposition*, to provide the first substantive analysis of Cave's work in the cinema.

Angela Jones's work on *Grinderman*, Cave's most recent project at the time of this volume going to press, also offers an extended study of an aspect of Cave's work that the restricted column spaces of popular music magazines simply cannot undertake. In this eighth chapter of the book, Jones takes up the idea of performance that Jayasinghe's chapter, and others, also have an interest in, tailoring it to allow her to discuss *Grinderman*'s deliberate and knowing 'acting out' of rock 'n' roll tropes. She argues that the stated desire to 'strip down' the album is a response not only to the figurings of Cave, as persona and voice, in the *Bad Seeds*, but also to wider musical constrictions and prescriptions that *Grinderman* seeks to expose and reject.

The ninth chapter in the volume marks out the beginning of another of the book's sections; an interest in ideas of myth, the sacred, religion and creativity, which preceding chapters also touch on. Robert Eaglestone's ambitious contribution sets out to chart the shifts in Cave's attitudes to religion. Eaglestone does not presuppose knowledge about Cave's personal faith – he carefully sets out that such a biographical approach is not his aim – but rather examines Cave's public musical career to identify changes in the source and use of religious motifs and discourses, and to set these movements in the context of, and in response to, larger debates about and between religious belief and secular modernity.

Taking a somewhat different tack, Nathan Wiseman-Trowse approaches the sacred, or a contiguous idea of the sacred, by looking to the iconography of Elvis Presley in Cave's music and writing. Using the myth of Presley, and sharing an interest with Jones's contribution, Wiseman-Trowse argues in this eleventh chapter that Cave examines what it is that makes Elvis an archetypal image in Western popular culture suggestively connected to wider rock culture mythologies that underpin rock culture.

Lyn McCredden's chapter returns to more conventional imaginings of the sacred, but not in a commonplace way. Crossing a wider range of creative texts, this twelfth chapter singles out the relations between the erotic and the sacred in Cave's work to raise a number of interrelated questions about the role of theology in Cave's songs and other writings, the force of loss as an absence around which much of Cave's work turns and what it might mean for Cave, and religiosity more broadly conceived, to imagine a poetics of the erotic and the transcendental that interweaves the spirit and the flesh, the earthly and the heavenly, the sacred and the profane.

A shift of gears comes with the last chapter, by Tanya Dalziell. McCredden writes with great elegance on sacredness in Cave's works; Dalziell takes her cue from the most secular and most unlikely of figures to which Cave refers only in casual, good-humoured passing when discussing writerly inspiration: a moose. She does so to forward some ideas about creativity and melancholy in Cave's lyrics and music. Wishing to sidestep now familiar appreciations of Cave's work that deem it (and Cave himself) as melancholic *a priori*, Dalziell, by means of various and seemingly unrelated references – a mid-nineteenth century painting by Holman Hunt, Robert Burton's sixteenth century *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, among others – points to the performance of melancholy in the love songs in particular that comes about in the interplay between music and lyric, and in the face of the limitations of the language of love.

These chapters are beginnings. Each recognises the complexity of 'Nick Cave' and his works in various contexts over the past three decades, and seeks to clarify and explore their significance to contemporary culture.

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