

THE SWEET SCIENCE OF

DR. ROBERT

Since their first album, *The Imaginary Boys*, in 1979, The Cure have been an integral part of the Great British punk and rock'n'roll. After 27 million album sales, and much drama and a little personnel change, they are back with arguably their most accomplished work to date. SC Mag reporter, Robert Collins, had the pleasure of a lengthy telephone conversation with the man that makes it all happen – none other than Robert Smith himself...

Robert Smith may be the driving force behind one of the most influential British rock bands of all time, but he hasn't forgotten his manners. He's meant to be calling us to chat about his new Signature guitar from Schecter, but forty minutes after the agreed time, we're wondering if it's ever going to happen. Then the phone rings.

"Is that Robert?" a familiar nasal voice asks. "It's Robert Smith here. Sorry I'm late but I'm running a bit behind schedule. Is it ok if I call you back in another twenty minutes when we can talk properly?"

Crikey. We're expecting the godfather of gothic moodiness and we're getting a personal call apologising for his tardiness. Not from a personal assistant or a record company press officer, but from the great man himself. What a gent.

The guitar in question is the Schecter UltraCure, designed and built in Burbank, California to Robert's exact specifications. And when Robert calls us back, just like he promised, he's more than happy to relive the story of how it came into existence.

"The time line's a bit hazy now," says Robert, presumably while scratching the wild thatch on his head. "It was probably late last year. I asked Daryl Bamonte, who kind of looks after us, if he could find out more about Daisy Rock guitars. One of my nieces was taking up guitar so I thought a Daisy Rock would be a fantastic Christmas present. There was a flurry of e-mails and then Michael Ciravalo from Schecter sent an e-mail saying if I was ever interested in any Schecter guitars he'd be happy to send me some. I had a look at their web site and really liked the look of the Ultra. The next thing I knew six guitars arrived and he just kept sending

them. He must have sent us over thirty guitars while we were in the studio."

After twenty-six years in the business, Robert clearly knows how to talk.

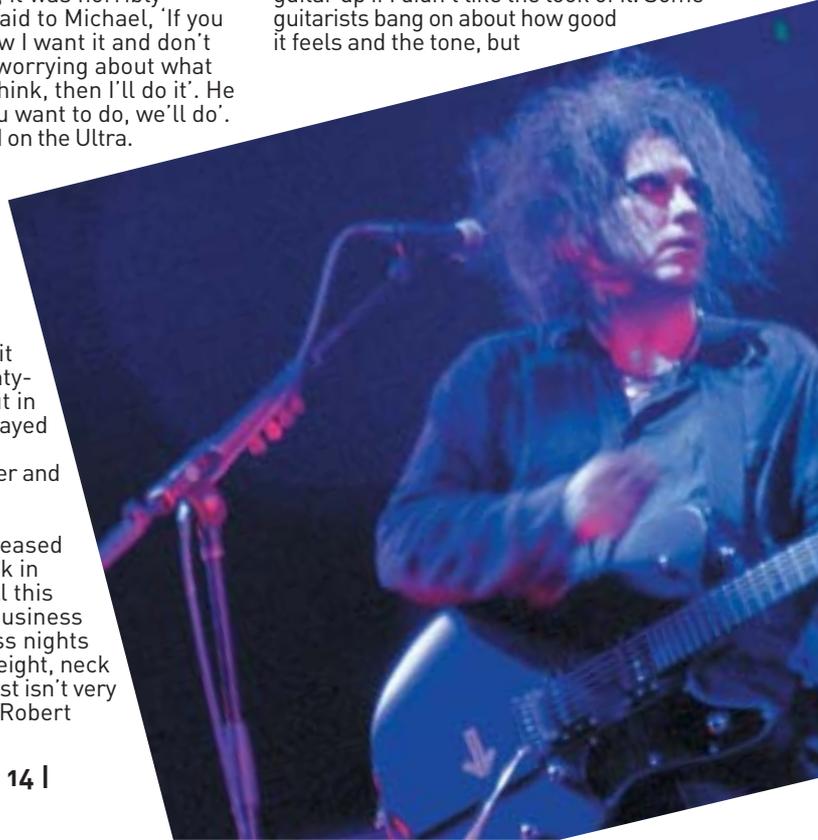
"I met Michael when we did Coachella [the legendary American desert festival] and we started talking about doing a signature model. I'd been approached in the past but I'd never really felt driven to. Someone did make a guitar for me in the 80s but it wasn't quite right. I designed and drew it all out, but I was doing so many things I could never check it. It went from paper to the real thing and when I sat down to play it, it was horribly unbalanced. So I said to Michael, 'If you make it exactly how I want it and don't compromise it by worrying about what other people will think, then I'll do it'. He said, 'Whatever you want to do, we'll do'. It was kind of based on the Ultra.

It reminds me of a Firebird because it's the wrong way round. I really like that in a guitar. I took that as my starting point and made it more cartoon-y. I made it much bigger, twenty-four frets, and I put in my own inlays. I played two prototypes all through the summer and it's excellent."

For a man who released his first single back in December 1978, all this guitar-designing business [spending sleepless nights fretting over fret height, neck shape and so on] just isn't very punk rock. Surely Robert

should be spending his spare time hurling TVs out of hotel windows and pouring vodka into his eyes?

"I didn't start playing with punk," he offers by way of an explanation. "I started much, much earlier. My brother is twelve years older than and played guitar in a band. There were always loads of blokes round our house talking about guitars, so I did get a feel for what was a good guitar and what wasn't. The first electric guitar I got was given to me by one of my brother's friends. He gave me his Epiphone when he moved on to a Gibson. I'm still drawn to the shape of a guitar. I'd never pick a guitar up if I didn't like the look of it. Some guitarists bang on about how good it feels and the tone, but





you've got to love what it looks like to be able to play anything good."

There's an obvious question here. Now Robert has his own signature guitar, is he now an official guitar hero?

"I know too many people that play much, much better than me," he laughs at the suggestion. "In the summer we played Chicago and I went to Billy Corgan's house afterwards. He wanted to play me some stuff that he's doing for his new record. He sat down and started playing and I'd forgotten how fucking amazing he is as a guitarist. He's one of the most underrated guitarists ever. He plays anything effortlessly. He said 'Come on, play along' and I couldn't. That gave me a reality check. There were some great

guitarists on tour with us too. Stuart Braithwaite from Mogwai: he's a genius guitarist. So I don't have any delusions of grandeur in that respect."

Robert's referring to the now fabled Curiosa tour. This past summer The Cure ploughed the highways of the USA as the headline act of their own rolling festival, bringing bands like Mogwai, Muse, Auf Der Maur, Interpol, Thursday and The Rapture to entirely new audiences. Arriving just as the long standing Lollapalooza festival succumbed to falling ticket sales, Curiosa was a slap in the face to critics who said Americans weren't interested in eclectic rock and roll any more. But for Robert, the simple joys of touring outweigh the plaudits that come from saving live music in America.

"It was the most fun I've ever had in 25 years of playing with The Cure," he announces. "Travelling around with bands that are all so passionate about what they do and are all intense yet are really pleasant people. There wasn't a voice raised in anger in the whole six weeks. Everyone was just enjoying it, watching each other play and mingling afterwards. I got to talk to singers and guitarists about my job. It sounds stupid but when you're on tour conversations you have are often one-sided because you're fielding questions the whole time. But sitting down and getting drunk with Paul from Interpol or Stuart from Mogwai, we're on the same page. And stage. I found I was relaxed a lot more than I normally am on tour. Every day I'd get there early to see every band. There'd be a barbecue smell, the sound of beer cans being cracked open and smiling faces."

Selecting the acts for Curiosa himself, Robert was eager to give audiences the

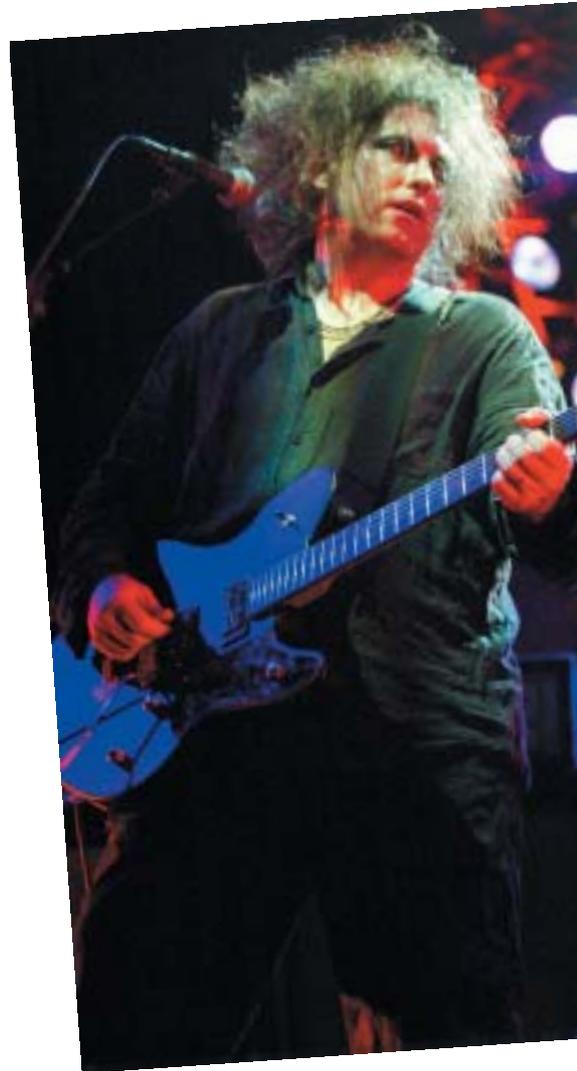
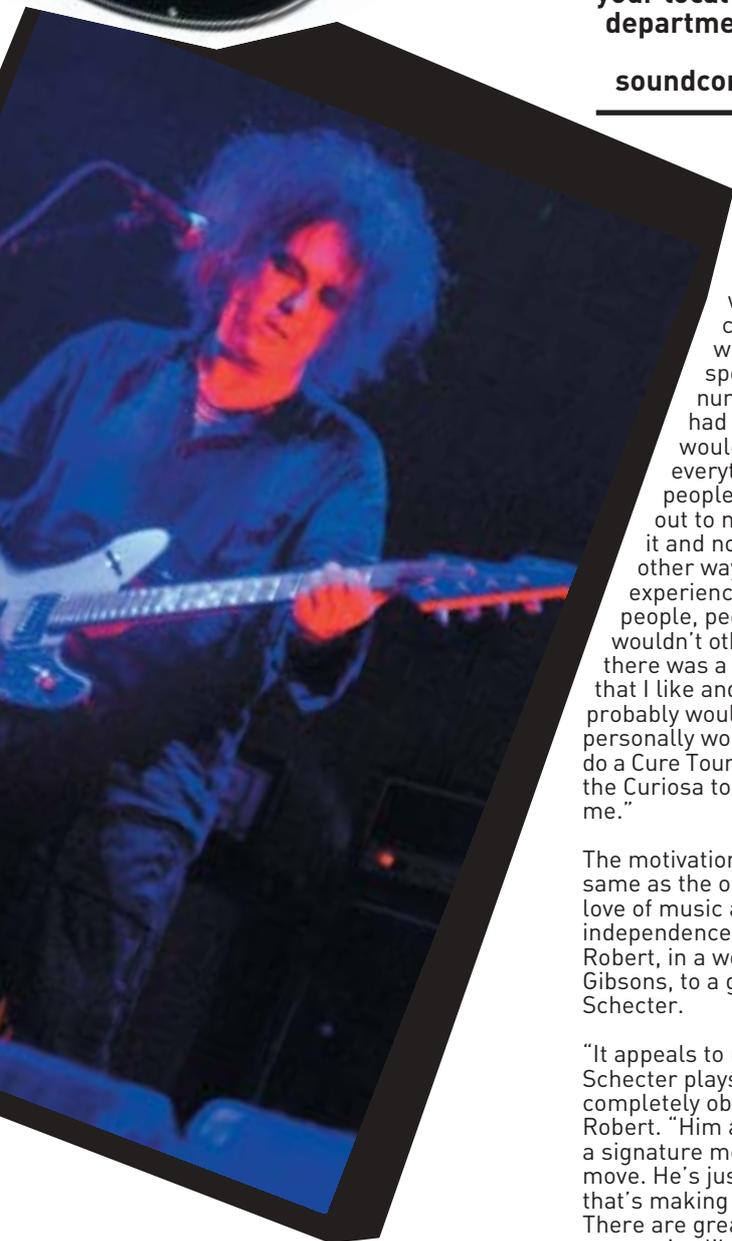
musical diversity that Americans, or Brits for that matter, don't have access to on mainstream TV and radio.

"The Internet kind of does that but there's, like, too much of it," he sighs. "The filter in the late 70s was John Peel. The two hours of music that he played gave you an insight into what you were going to like and what you weren't. He wasn't judgemental. He just played stuff and left it up to you to make your own mind. He played some crappy stuff but you knew in the course of those two hours you were going to hear a lot of different kinds of music. Now it's all niche marketing. If you turn on a radio station you know what you're going to hear. With Curiosa the gap between what Muse and Interpol and Mogwai are doing is vast. Thursday were with us when we started but had to leave after ten dates. They were like, the saddest band on the planet, because they'd never played to an audience so varied that responded to what they did on stage. A lot of people went away surprised that they enjoyed bands that they would never have usually listened to."

As the elder statesman of indie rock Robert clearly feels a responsibility to nurture the next generation of stars. And of course, being successful enough to make your own rules helps too.



For information on the Robert Smith 'UltraCure' Signature model guitar, or any other Schecter guitar, please contact your local Sound Control guitar department on 0845 600 2458. Alternatively, visit soundcontrol.co.uk/Schecter.



"The problem with Curiosa," he admits, "Was that as a business model, we flew in the face of all conventional and perceived wisdom. We didn't have any sponsorship, which was the number one thing for me. If we had corporate sponsorship it would have undermined everything. We've proved to people that you don't have to set out to make a killing. You can do it and not lose money. You gain in other ways. You have a fantastic experience, you bring music to people, people hear your music that wouldn't otherwise hear it, and for me there was a sense of taking the bands that I like and taking them places they probably wouldn't otherwise go. I personally would find it difficult now to do a Cure Tour that wasn't something like the Curiosa tour. It just wouldn't excite me."

The motivations behind Curiosa are the same as the ones behind his guitar – a love of music and the spirit of independence. It's a stance that has led Robert, in a world full of Fenders and Gibsons, to a guitar company like Schecter.

"It appeals to me because Michael at Schecter plays in a band himself and is completely obsessed by music," states Robert. "Him asking me if I wanted to do a signature model isn't a commercial move. He's just enthused with the music that's making people play his guitars. There are great people working at companies like Fender and Gibson but the bottom line is dollars. I'm not being naïve; the bottom line is dollars at Schecter as well, but they come at it in

such a refreshing way that it just instantly appeals to us. As an individual, Michael's just a really nice bloke. He talks about the things that I like to talk about. The Cure have always prided themselves on being slightly outside of what goes on and doing a guitar with Schecter keeps that tradition alive."

Despite his reputation as the panda-eyed dean of depression, Robert Smith is one of the most charming musicians we've ever spoken to. As we bid our farewells he remembers one last thing anyone considering sampling the Schecter UltraCure should take into account.

"Be warned!" he yells, just as we're about to replace the receiver. "It's very heavy. It's a great way to get muscles like what I've got."

Like we said. What a gent.

**Words: Robert Collins
Photography: Kevin Estrada**