



THE CURE

Story: Monica Cady

Remember that time in high school when your girlfriend of six months (a very serious relationship, indeed) got drunk at the big party (you didn't even *want* to go) and made out with that dude from the track team in front of everyone? Then she broke up with you over the phone two days later (that bitch!). Your best friends offered golden words of sympathy; profound things like, "That sucks, man." But then, your older sister gave you a Cure album. There was Robert Smith. He had stuff to say like, "Found myself alone, alone, alone above a raging sea that stole the only girl I loved, and drowned her deep inside of me." You thought, "Yeah, this guy gets me." You went on to date another girl, and proudly blasted "Boys Don't Cry" from the tape deck of your '88 Camaro – and life was good again.

So maybe everyone's introduction to the Cure isn't the same. But you can bet it has something to do with them experiencing an extreme emotion – be it isolation, sadness, love or unbridled glee. It is also impressive how the songs – old and current – are still relevant to every generation, regardless of when they first embraced the Cure or whether they paint their fingernails black.

The Cure is distinctive in sound and style. Smith's spidery hair and MAC-lipsticked mouth have become just as iconic as his hypersensitive vocals that squeal, whisper and croon about everything from images of lime green and tangerine snakes to tortured contemplations on love. The Cure's new-wave, Goth-rock sound established a blueprint that influenced countless bands for years to come.

Since 1976, the Cure has accumulated a discography of some 96 releases including albums, singles, EPs, videos and compilation works. Smith, 47, has been occupied for several months with "Festival 2005," a DVD featuring 30 songs from performances captured by fans, crew and big-screen-cameras. He and the band (Jason Cooper, Simon Gallup, Porl Thompson) are now focusing on completing their next album. At the

moment, it includes 33 tracks that they began recording last summer. Miami's Ultra Music Festival is indirectly playing a part in the completion process.

"I thought that if we set our sights on playing Miami in March, it would give me kind of a deadline that I had to stick to because we have to be ready to play. We have to finish the new songs. If there is no deadline, I could see myself going into this summer and picking up a couple of projects along the way, and never really quite finishing [the album]," he says.

Smith also chose to play Ultra, out of the many performance offers the band receives, because of its focus on dance music. "Just the idea of playing specifically a dance festival is something that we've never done before, and I like the band to experience new things – they are few and far between," he adds.

The band just started discussing the set list for the show. "There's been a bit of conflict – actually, just within the last 48 hours – in the band as to how dancey we should go," he says, thoughtfully. "We have become part of that [dance] culture because of what we do, and I suspect if we try too hard to do what *they* (DJs, dance music producers) do, then we'll kind of miss the point. It's almost like we're approaching it, in that we're choosing a set list of songs that we think sums up why the Cure appeals to the dance community. But we're not really gonna go all out and try and put on a dance show. So, it's a fine balance."

Smith is calling RAG Magazine from his home in the U.K. to talk about Ultra, the new album and other ramblings. He is unassuming, kind and jovial. "It's been a strange period, really," he says. "This is the first interview I've done in ages. I was thinking that, as I was dialing the number. Normally, you kind of get into a groove with these sort of things, and sort of field questions. I've been doing it long enough that I know how to do it. But I haven't really thought about what we do in terms of summing it up in an interview sense. It's quite weird to do it

on the fly.” Here’s what Smith had to say off-the-cuff and on-the-record.

RAG: What can you tell me about the new music? What’s gotten harder and what’s gotten easier with regard to writing songs over the years?

Robert Smith: Well, it’s always the words [that] are the hardest part for me. The music, we could probably record 100 songs a year, I should think; if we put our minds to it. The music isn’t really a problem. It is a lot harder for me to focus this album, or has been, because of the return of Porl on guitar. He’s contributing such a different kind of musicality to the group. And because we are all putting songs in the pot and saying, you know, “What does this sound like?” We’re trying lots of different things. We’ve actually got such a breadth of different stuff. I mean, stylistically it’s kind of reminiscent of the *Kiss Me* album, because there are so many different things going on.

At one point, I was thinking maybe [this could be] a double album with some instrumentals, and being really, really artsy. But after I talked it through with the rest of the band, and primarily the record company (laughs), they weren’t very thrilled about a double album. [The label] think[s] it’s conceptually sound, but in the current climate, probably not commercially viable. So, I’m thinking we’ll probably do the album in two stages. We’ll have one [released], which is, in and of itself, a *thing*. Then we’ll probably have like another kind of album, which will be a download album, and will complement the main album. That’s my thinking at the moment.

So I think the [songs on the] main album will probably be more connected. It’s really, really difficult talking about new music. Because it does sound like us, but it doesn’t sound like us at any particular time. You can definitely tell that Porl is back in the band, so it kind of reminds me of the period of *Kiss Me*, *Disintegration* and *Wish* – just because the mood within the band [shows that] Porl’s character has come back.

We *have* got a keyboard in the studio, but it’s been used very, very sparingly. There are little touches of piano, and little bits of noise here and there. But generally, it’s just a four-piece band. It’s bass, two guitars and drums. And it’s quite stripped down. There’s a lot more space in what we’re doing, but it’s really a lot more powerful, in a funny way. Because we’ve only been back in the studio for two weeks, it seems like a long time ago that we played these songs. It’s almost as though they’re old songs because I’ve been listening to them since last July. It’s amazing that they haven’t leaked. It’s scary isn’t it?

Yeah.

That’s because I’m the only person in the world that’s got a set. (laughs)

Do you write lyrics every day?

Since we released the last album, which was mid-2004, I’ve got – I don’t know how many pages – a box full of words. I write just as a matter of course. I just write thoughts. But I’ve never made myself kind of think, “Now I’m writing. This could be something.” Because I think that would take away [from it]. It’s almost like trying too hard to remember your dreams. It becomes somehow a little bit too intellectualized. I’ll often read back on what I wrote



and just think, “Rubbish!” and tear it up and throw it away. But at the time I’m writing, I know it doesn’t have to be good, and so therefore, it’s a release. It’s like playing guitar when you’re drunk. It always sounds bad the next day. (laughs)

But when we start doing a project, I look through this box of words, and I start trying to match up words to music, and sometimes it’s very easy. Other times, it’s not so easy – particularly after all this time. I’m kind of 300 songs in [at this point in my career]. It’s difficult to try and be genuinely excited about what I’m trying to say. I don’t see any point, really, in writing words so that we can make a record. It’s never made any sense. It was much easier when I was in my 20s, and I had only done like three or four albums. This is like the 13th album along. But I’m not worried about it.

I think I did do an interview in the last six months, and the interviewer took what I was saying [and made it seem like] I was suffering from writer’s block. And I thought, “This is so wide off the mark.” I’ve never understood the concept of writer’s block because if you haven’t got anything to say, then you haven’t got anything to say. It has absolutely nothing to do with trying to write.

I’ve got so many words. But it’s one thing to have sheets and sheets of words in front of you, and it’s quite another thing putting it together in a song. Unless you try it, I don’t think writers – that’s basically journalists – struggle to see the difference in just like writing a few words and actually imagining yourself in front of a microphone, performing those words and singing them. It’s a totally different thing.

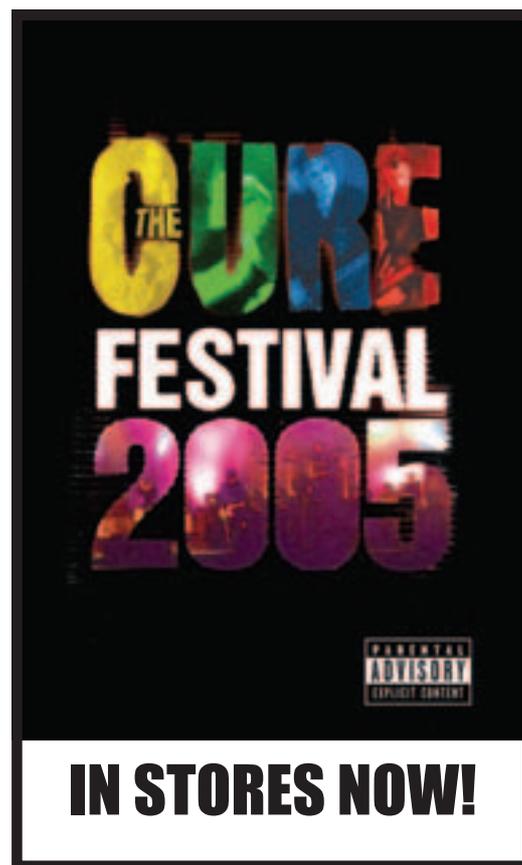
I’ve got an ongoing book, that’s been going on for years, of things that I think are quite good that I’ve written, but I would never sing. I couldn’t dream of singing [them] because the words are wrong. They would sound ridiculous if I sang them. But on paper, and when I read them to myself in my head, I think they work quite well. So at some point, I’ll make that into a thing that will be totally separate. It’ll probably be about 600 pages long. (laughs) The stories of writer’s block will be knocked firmly on the head.

When you write lyrics do you always write as yourself, or do you ever write through the eyes of other characters?

No, well, if I was really honest, I think the best songs that I’ve written are *me* singing, because I feel better. They feel right. Probably some of the bigger songs, or the most popular songs, aren’t really *me* singing. I don’t limit myself to my own experiences. I try to write from other people’s point of view. I try to write from an imaginary point of view. But often, I’ll just come back to something much simpler, and something I’ve written in that particular time when I was feeling strongly about something. And they’re usually the songs that mean something to me.

I think it’s the difference between writing a song that has a lot of emotional content and writing a song that’s just a good song. The trick, I suppose, is making that good song connect with people, and that’s really hard. I think any singer who kind of means what they sing – who doesn’t just read the words off a piece of paper – is trying to get inside the character. Writing it is one thing; but actually trying to inhabit the character when you perform it, is another. There are things that we do, where I’m singing things that in my real life I wouldn’t dream of saying or singing about; but they’re more, kind of, performance things. They sometimes are the songs – when I listen back at our albums, which isn’t that often, but when we do the remasters – I think, *that* I meant, and I can think, *that one* I don’t think I was too sure about.

On the *Kiss Me* album, that was kind the first time I tried to write from another perspective. I think before then, everything I had written was from my point of view. I think the *Kiss Me* album, in a lot of ways, was me trying out different things and the band tried different styles. I tried different ways of singing and different ways of writing. But with *Disintegration*, I went back to my own point of view. And then I tried a different thing again with the *Wish* album. So, I sometimes incorporate it, but I would prefer it if I could write all the songs from a kind of more heartfelt position because I just think they work there – or they last longer, I think.



To what do you attribute your longevity, and even your influence on so many new, younger bands?

It’s partly what we were just talking about. I mean, I’ve met and gotten to know a few of the younger generations of bands. I think that the one thing they all had in common with regard to the Cure was that they enjoy the fact that we’ve kind of hung around, and we’ve done what we wanted to do, and we’ve been successful but we haven’t courted that success. We’ve kind of just forced our own path, and we’ve meant it. I think it’s that the perception is that we have done what we wanted to do, and even if it had gone wrong, we wouldn’t have changed what we did. I think it’s that any young band that’s any good has to aspire to that – anything else is just worthless. If you succeed on someone else’s terms, it might be great at that moment, but I suspect it’s pretty short lived. I mean the idea of being proud of what you do – whatever you do – is far more important than the end result. The experience of doing it is worth more than the end result, to be honest. [It’s] all of those things.

It is difficult to resist the temptation just to become rubbish. So many bands as they grow a bit older, they just get worse. It’s a struggle, and, you know, life has a tendency to take over. It’s a terrible thing to resist [regular life] entirely. You can’t just like keep being in a band. I mean there are a couple of older bands who sort of think all we need to do is be in a band, whereas I like the

idea of sort of balancing playing music with other people and integrating into a more kind of rounded life as you get older. I mean it would be awful for me to feel as alienated and disturbed as I did when I was in my 20s, at this stage in my life. I mean, I would be dead if I felt like that. So, at the same time, when the Cure does do something, I get so immersed in it, I feel like I felt when we did the very first album. So nothing's really changed.

Do you think people have this misconception that you are sad and gloomy all the time because some of your songs are melancholy?

Um, I think there was a misconception for a long time. I don't think it's probably as bad now because when we're (pauses) – that's a tricky one. (laughs) The Cure still makes some pretty dark music. I mean there are songs on this [next] album, which are among the darkest that we've ever done. They reflect a part of my character that's still there, that will never go away. I still am subject to incredible bouts of depression, I suppose. But it's in the same way as pretty much everyone I know who thinks about what's going on, is subject to those kind of dark thoughts and dark moments.

I've always tried to work [my emotions] out and into songs as music. Sometimes they work so well that other people kind of feel that they're about themselves. It's great when that happens because I think that's the reason why I'm doing it. You know, if I was doing it for just myself, I wouldn't bother recording the vocals. So, it's a wonderful thing when that happens.

But, I suppose if there ever is a downside, it's that then this perception starts to grow that that's who I am. But I've always maintained that I'm just not very good at writing happy songs. (laughs) It's really honestly as simple as that. Occasionally I come up with a really good happy song like "Mint Car" or something, and then I shock myself. I think, "I'm genuinely happy in this song." But most of the time when [the band is chatting, they] will say, "Let's do something a little more upbeat," and I try it, and it just sounds awful. (laughs) It sounds really insincere.

Last summer, when we recorded, it was the best time that I've ever had in the studio - ever - like my whole life. It was just such good fun. And yet, at the end of the day, we would listen back to what we had done, and it would be incredibly doom-laden. So it's a weird sort of dichotomy. The happier we get as a band, kind of the gloomier the music gets. I think it's one of those things where if we were really unhappy with what we were doing, we would try and (pauses) – it's kind of what they say about comedians being really tragic, you know, I suppose we must be pretty happy. That's why we make miserable music.

But, all jokes aside, I think the reason that perception has sort of dissolved a little bit or gone away is because the Cure's work is now seen in a slightly different way. [Especially with the remasters] it's kind of saying, "Well hang on. We do songs like 'Mint Car' and all those pop singles." It's kind of like the Miami show. We're being asked to do that primarily because of the singles, not because of the permanent epics, but that's a side of the band that I really enjoy.

There are so many different sides to the Cure that it's very hard for us to think that everyone thinks, "Ah there's that miserable bloke." There are too many instances where I'm not that miserable bloke. It doesn't really work. I think without that really dark side, I don't think the Cure would be a very interesting group.

Do you still wear MAC Ruby Woo?

You know, that's a good question. I have no idea. I still wear MAC because they gave me a huge box of stuff. (laughs) I have no reason to change. It doesn't run on stage, which is what I really care about. I'm not wearing make-up at the moment.

You do your own makeup before you go onstage, right? You don't have someone do it for you.

No, I always do it. I hate people touching my face. It drives me mad.

Tell me about your experience with South Park. Do you keep in touch with Matt Stone and Trey Parker?

Yeah, I saw them on the Curiosa tour. We don't hang out. (laughs) It's kind of hard living on the other side of the world. I still watch South Park. I still think it's one of the best things on television actually. It's excellent how they keep pushing. I mean I think they've been trying to get themselves taken off the air for the last three years. They just haven't managed it yet. (laughs) It's refreshing. They deal with subjects in their own way, which a lot of people are kind of reluctant to touch. I think underlying South Park, amidst all the idiot humor, there's always the part where they say, "What have we learned? I've learned something today." I share my enjoyment of it with my nephews and nieces. It's one of those bonding things. Everyone kind of sits around and rolls with laughter. When I was in [the South Park episode], it was a career high for me.

The story continues... Robert Smith discusses the world's MySpace fixation, his latest interest in astronomy, and more at www.myspace.com/ragmagazine.



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