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The Cure's Robert Smith Looks Back: 'I've Never Thought About Legacy'

With the release of the concert film, *40 Live – Curætion-25 + Anniversary*, the singer reflects on the group's history, its biggest hits, and its upcoming album, tentatively titled 'Live From the Moon'



Robert Smith looks back on 40 years of the Cure, ahead of the release of the new concert film, '40 Live – Curætion-25 + Anniversary.'

Per Ole Hagen/Redferns

Although **Robert Smith** says he hopes the **Cure** never truly fit in with the cultural landscape, he is very aware of just how unusual the group's success has been over the past four decades. "One of the lovely things about the band is that we're able to headline Glastonbury, play Hyde Park, and be in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, but we're still considered to be slightly weird and outsider kind of band," he tells *Rolling Stone* on a call from England. "It's a perfect position to be in."

Smith has been giving a lot of thought to **the Cure's** position in the world lately, because the last year has given him a lot of reasons to look back. In addition to **performing at their induction** into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame this past April, the group played a career-spanning set for **a 40th anniversary concert at London's Hyde Park** last year, and it also curated that year's installment of the city's Meltdown festival. For their headlining Meltdown set, the Cure played a set that started with their earliest material moving into their most current songs and then spun it back out to their earliest hit, "Boys Don't Cry." They're releasing films of both of their concerts in England as a box set called **40 Live – Curætion-25 + Anniversary** on Friday.

"It took me a long time to think, 'Shall we turn the Hyde Park concert into a film for posterity?' because I thought actually that filming it might change things," Smith says. "People kind of freeze a little bit and become a bit more self-conscious when there are cameras on them. I know that sounds silly, because everyone in the crowd going to film it at various points. So I didn't really tell the others that we were going to film it until the week before."

Ultimately, **he was happy with how it turned out** and trusted filmmaker Tim Pope, who has shot many of the band's videos as well as its *In Orange* concert film in 1987, to turn the films into something special. "I kind of left Tim alone to do the editing part for the film, otherwise I'd meddle with it a bit too much," says Smith, who instead worked with audio engineer Paul Crockett on the surround-sound mix. "He just runs it by me, each song he's editing and asks, 'Do you think this shot works? Do you think we should open with this? Do you think you look too hideous in this shot for me to keep it in?' Stuff like that." Smith was initially reluctant to mark the band's anniversary — he calls it a "spurious" occasion, since the band came together as the Easy Cure originally in 1976 — but he says all of the reflection has played a role in

the creation of the band's upcoming record, tentatively titled *Live From the Moon*. In a wide-ranging chat with *Rolling Stone*, the ever-candid singer-songwriter took a rare moment to embrace nostalgia and consider just how far the band has come, as well as his place (or displacement) in the world.

Watching the Hyde Park concert film, there were several moments where you look out at the 65,000 people gathered. What do you feel when you are surveying the crowd? Are you trying to make eye contact with everyone?

Well, I'm lucky because I'm very shortsighted, so I'm only aware of an amorphous mess. I can never really, honestly make eye contact with the crowd of that size. It's only when we play intimate shows that I can do that. With *Meltdown*, which was in the Southbank Centre, it was more intimidating for me, in a funny way because I was so close that I could touch the front row. There's actually a different kind of pressure when you're playing to people that close, it's like a weird kind of feeling sometimes. It's almost more difficult.

When you walk out on stage in front of a big crowd, it's more like you're "performing," so I allow myself more flamboyant gestures and I kind of exaggerate, ever so slightly; I'm talking relative to my normal, kind of deadpan delivery. I think I've time to just absorb the scale of it. I think maybe a lot of the initial two or three songs I'm adjusting. The key to a good performance for me is actually getting completely lost in it. So, often during the first song, particularly when we start with a slower song, I just try and take in where I am and what I'm about to do and then I forget about it for the rest of the show. So I think at the beginning you'll see me take it in and I think at the end of the film, when we finish the last song, it's like a "click back" into reality.

I don't usually talk onstage because I've kind of lost the ability to communicate with words. It's very odd. I have to kind of get back into reality and start thinking about sentence construction and what I'm about to say. It's very odd. When I'm singing and I'm playing I'm just kind of transported and that's what I feel like doing. For me, it really gets in the way, having to communicate verbally with an audience because I'm doing it through the music. It sounds hippie-ish, but it's always been like that with me. I just feel like if I'm getting lost in the songs, I think there's a fair chance that everyone else is as well.

You've never shied away from showing your sensitivity in your songs, going back to "Boys Don't Cry." How did you find

that side of yourself?

I was singing that at Glastonbury a couple of days ago and I realized that it has a very contemporary resonance with all the rainbow stripes and stuff flying in the crowd. I thought, it's showing the other side of the coin to the #MeToo thing. In no way is it similar, but when I was growing up, there was peer pressure on you to conform to be a certain way. And as an English boy at the time, you're encouraged not to show your emotion to any degree. And I couldn't *help* but show my emotions when I was younger. So I kind of made a big thing about it. I thought, "Well, it's part of my nature to rail against being told not to do something," as with the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame thing, so I did it even more.

I never found it awkward showing my emotions. I couldn't really continue without showing my emotions; you'd have to be a pretty boring singer to do that. So it was just an expression.

After "Boys Don't Cry," the band shifted into more atmospheric sounds. Why was that?

When we reached the end of the *Three Imaginary Boys* period with the three-piece, I was a different person and I wanted to do something different. I thought I'd outgrown that trio. I wanted to play the keyboard and other forms of music had influenced me when I was growing up. I listened to early Pink Floyd, because my older brother used to play it all the time. So I was looking back at other influences and I was drawing on things like Nick Drake, Pink Floyd, and Captain Beefheart. It didn't need to be a trio. It was a natural evolution and we kept adding members, and the sound just got bigger and more interesting. But I never lost sight of the three-minute pop song, and I think that helped particularly in the mid-Eighties when we could have turned into quite a grand thing. Pop singles helped us get through what otherwise would have become very pompous.



The Cure at the Marquee Club, London 1979. Photo by Ray Stevenson/Shutterstock

Speaking of that, when you're playing "Just Like Heaven," do you ever pause and think, "This is a perfect song"?

Yeah, it's one of a handful that when you're playing it in front of people [that I think that]. When I sing, "It's just like a dream," and Roger starts doing the piano bit, I look at people and everyone suddenly looks over at the piano and I look at the crowd and it's one of those really lovely moments. When I wrote it, I thought, "That's it. I'll never write something as good as this again." I remember saying to the others in the studio, "That's it. We might as well pack up." Thankfully, we didn't.

When you were inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame earlier this year, a video went viral of a woman asking if you were as excited as she was to get in and you said, "No, by the sound of it." What did the induction really mean to you?

I was surprised, because we were nominated quite a few years ago when we first became eligible. We were passed over, and I thought, "Well, that was it." It was like a bit of tokenism, "Now let's get back to the rock & roll," kind of thing. So I was surprised when I was told that it was looking very likely we were actually going to be inducted.

Did it go smoothly once you were told you made it in?

I had a slightly difficult time, because there's been 13 members of the Cure through the 40 years and they would induct only 10 of us. And Andy Anderson, our drummer for a couple of years in the Eighties, was really seriously ill and wasn't going to be able to make it. He actually died before the ceremony. So I wrote [the Rock Hall] explaining why I felt that these three folks should also be inducted, because they were part of the story and, in their own way, they contributed. [The situation] kind of angered me, I have to admit. I realize it's their party, and they can do what they want, but I thought why not just induct all 13 of us? So up until about two weeks before the event, I wasn't actually going to go. I told the others, "That's it. See who blinks first." But the rest of the band chipped away at me a little bit and Simon [Gallup, bass] in particular, was like, "If we don't do it, certain other ex-members would go and show up at the event for their own," how do I put this in a nice way ... to the press. "We should go, and thereby this is the Cure. This is us." He said to me it would probably mean more to Andy if we did go.

Did you ever hear back on your letter?

I thought I had written a very reasonable letter explaining why they should be inducted, and I didn't really get very much back. That's actually what made me angry, because we just got back a note like, "It's up to us, and we've decided." So I thought, "Fucking hell, it's just like being back in school," like, cold. I don't mind if you explain why you've made a decision, don't just tell me no. That's the worst thing you can say to me. Once I'd calmed down, I saw Simon's point of view and thought, "Yeah."

And I'm glad we did go because it was actually a really good night. We spent the night with the ex-members of the band, a couple we hadn't seen for a long, long time. We rebuilt bridges, and just on a personal level, it was a really lovely evening. For the band, it turned out to be quite a big thing.

Were you surprised by how people felt about you getting in?

I'd forgotten how much it means culturally in America, I suppose. Seeing it from a U.K. perspective, "Well, it doesn't matter that much." But you get endless emails from various people in America who had our best interests at heart saying, "Please, please, please, you have to go. You don't understand. This means something to us." So once I got there, I was thinking, "Whoa, it really does mean something to people out here."

It was good. We made the right decision. And I thought we were treated really well.



You recently turned 60. How does that feel?

I don't feel my age, really. I don't live the life of a normal 60-year-old, so maybe that's it. I don't have children. I think that's a huge part of how maybe I forget how old I am. The only thing that reminds me is just watching the world go down the tubes.

What got you thinking about that?

The working title of the new album is *Live From the Moon*, because I can remember the moon landing. I was 10 at the time, and I can remember standing out in the back garden with my younger sister and my dad, looking at the moon, and he was explaining to me what was going on, that there were men up there. And I thought, "Yeah, yeah" — an early skeptic. Then I was thinking, what is the world going to be like in 50 years, and it just dawned on me as we turned into 2019, good grief, is this it? Is this really 50 years on from the moon landing? It's so fucking poor. It really is.

When was the last time you had hope?

There was a brief moment in the late Seventies, before Ronnie [Reagan] and Maggie [Thatcher], that you thought, "Hey, maybe the world is moving in the right direction very, very slowly. And honestly, since the Cure started, it's been a relentless downward slide as far as I can see. I

have no idea. I can see the reasons why, and I've read books and articles about why, but it's very sad that kind of the hope that was around [the moon landing] is over. The technology and space race has had much more to do with the military-industrial complex than most people perhaps understand.

What have you read about that?

I read a book recently called *Live From the Moon*, which gave me the idea for the title. It's about the media's involvement in the space race, and how the secret space race took place alongside the big space race which was actually the more important one.

What did the moon-landing mean to you?

What it represented to my generation — I was on the cusp of turning into a real person — was the possibilities that were out there. It seemed like suddenly a switch was clicked and the world changed. It's very disturbing. Hopefully there will be a generation that will come and affect some kind of change. It almost feels like it's happening. Glastonbury was a lot more political this year. I felt that there was a generation building up that feels like it has had enough. I really hope so because I've been waiting an awful long time for it to happen, and that's what makes me feel old: the waiting.

How did all this play into the album?

Originally, I thought it would be out on the anniversary date, complete with, like, NASA crackling vocals and stuff. In the studio, I brought in some 1969 memorabilia that I kept about the moon landing and stuck it on the wall. We had a glowing moon sphere hanging in the middle of the studio, and it was all a bit retro. I even bought a 1969 guitar to play on it just to get the vibe going.

In a funny way, I was trying to achieve nostalgia for a world that never happened. And I think that's still what I want the world to be. That's why I'm struggling a little bit with the lyrics. Musically, I think we've done it. It's just lyrically, I need to make sure that it's working.

How is it coming along?

We finished an almost four-week session in a studio in Wales called Rockfield. It's become well known, because it's where Queen did "Bohemian Rhapsody," so suddenly everyone knows about it. I thought we were done, and I just started finishing vocals and we're going to mix it. And then, since we started playing the songs at festivals, there's a

general feeling we could probably revisit some of the things that we didn't do and make it better. We've reached the point where we're playing [them] so much better than we were at the start of the year. I don't think the tone of it is going to change, but I think I'll probably structurally change some of the bits. Rather than editing the stuff inside a computer, I'd rather we just play it again.

So we're booked to do another 10 days around the time we finish in Paris or Los Angeles. It'll be a rush mix. It's really just down to me to finish the words. We seem to keep rewriting songs. I don't think I've quite nailed some of them. I've sung most of it, but I think it has to be the best thing. I can't do the whole, "That'll do." I've never felt that with a Cure album, but with this one in particular, I think we've waited more than 10 years, and I can't just think, "Oh, that'll do." It's kind of hard because I'm measuring the songs and the whole thing up to *Pornography* and *Disintegration*, in particular, and *Bloodflowers*, maybe, too, to a degree. For me personally, [*Bloodflowers*] is such a great album. It turned out exactly as I wanted it to.



When will it come out?

Realistically, it's going to be November because there's no way it can get mixed in under three weeks. There's ways of speeding up the release of it, although I want it to come out on vinyl. I'm determined it's going to be a full-on double vinyl album. The other thing is we only did my demos, and the band has some songs they gave me to listen to, to turn

into songs that I didn't get around to. So I feel like we should probably explore them for a few days, as well, in the studio now that we're playing again together just to see if something emerges. "Lovesong" was one of Simon's song ideas, so maybe there's something that I've overlooked. I do want it to work in a way those really good Cure albums — my favorite Cure albums — work as pieces. I want people to listen to it from beginning to end and be taken somewhere through that period. So it's not quite as fixed as I thought it was around when we did the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame; but I know in my head pretty much how I want it to sound.

You've never been very political. Roger Waters, who played the day before you in Hyde Park, had a lot of anti-Trump messaging. Do you feel artists should be more political nowadays?

I don't think there's a rule. Some artists are very good at it. It requires a number of different things. One is the music that you make has to reinforce where you're going with what you're saying. And from a young age, I've always held what could be considered a socialist viewpoint on the world. That's why I wail against inequality. What's wrong with the world is essentially inequality. But it isn't reflected in what I want the Cure to be. I wanted the Cure to be something that I could escape into. For me, it was an escape from the world. Like when I was doing the "Love Cats" video, and I'm there caressing kittens, I can't turn around and say, "By the way, I'll tell you what's wrong with the world." It's beyond absurd. Although now cuddling kittens would probably be a political statement in the state we're in.

But you *are* political.

Behind the scenes, the Cure has always been politically active but usually pretty anonymously. It suits the way the band works, and everyone is much more comfortable with that rather than me being overt. They despair sometimes when I've had a few beers and I've done shows and I start spouting off. They're like, "Please, don't start." Because once I start, it's very hard to stop. I think it's a great thing to be able to get up in front of people and convince people of what's right and what's wrong, although that depends on who you think is right and who is wrong.

Your old sparring rival, Morrissey, has gotten heat lately for wearing a button that [supports England's controversial For Britain party](#).

I don't really follow all that, but it has popped up because I've been told a couple of times that apparently, **he's apologized for what he's said** [about me]. It hasn't really been keeping me awake at night. I think that maybe people have invested so much in him that they're let down. I think people just assumed that he would be different. I don't know. I don't see how anybody can be on the right and be right. I think right of center is always wrong, and that's as political as I get in public.

Do you think much about where the Cure fit in in 2019?

I hope the Cure *don't* fit in in 2019. I don't think the Cure have ever fitted in, so no, it doesn't bother me at all. I'm overwhelmed by the love that the band gets as we play around the world this year. It really is genuinely overwhelming. I've never in my wildest dreams thought that we would be doing this this far along and getting the genuine reaction from a generation of people who weren't born when we first started. I think there's something that we do that just appeals to a certain kind of person. I don't think it has to do with age or time or whatever else is going on.

At various points over the years, you've talked about ending the Cure altogether. Why are you enjoying it so much right now? You're doing two-and-a-half-hour concerts?

I think the pace of what we do has obviously slackened off. I think the secret is taking enough time to do other things and actually live a little outside of the band. And those periods become longer and longer as you grow older, and that makes the band more special. It allows me to enjoy it more because when I come back, I think, "This might be the last time we do this." It also helps that everyone gets on so well. It's taken 30-odd years to get to the point where I think we can walk out onstage and I just know that we're going to be really good.

This is going so good that I just feel really good about playing music again. I never wanted music to be a career. I know that sounds a bit odd, but I never wanted it to be a job, so I walked away from it from time to time because I don't want it to become just something that I do or something I feel I have to do. I never ever bought into the idea of, "I have to do it." I don't, because I can sit at home and play guitar and I can sit outside and scream. I don't need an audience. But when we play as the Cure, I want it to be something that makes other people feel something. It's not really just about me. It's just that spark.



The Cure on the Orient Express at Victoria Station, London 1986.

You closed out the Hyde Park concert with “Killing an Arab.” Even though it’s based on Camus’ *The Stranger*, that song has faced a lot of controversy over the years. How do you feel about it now?

I went through a period when I was singing, “Killing another.” There are two periods where I was going to reintroduce it into the set, and both times it’s become a focal point. I’m still getting questions about it. I just wanted to reclaim it. I thought if I can’t do it now with the 40th anniversary of it, that’s it. What am I going to do, pretend I never wrote it? I’ve reached an age where I think if people misunderstand it and don’t bother to try and understand what the song is about, then tough shit, really. I’ve given up explaining. Go read Albert Camus. I mean, go read Albert Camus anyway, because he wrote some great books. It’s been misappropriated, and I thought I should take it back. In modern parlance, I should own that song again. The others will think, “Oh, come on, because it’s going to be a talking point.”

We played London on July 7th, which is obviously the anniversary of a terrible London bombing. And they had an anniversary event in Hyde Park on the morning we played it. So it added a certain poignancy when I put it in the set list. I was showing the others and everyone was looking

me like, “Are you fucking mad? Of all days and of all times to play that? Why are we doing it now?” So I sat down and explained, “Let’s not fall into that trap. This is not about killing Arabs.” Probably one of my few regrets in life is actually calling it “Killing an Arab.” If I’d called it “Staring at the Sea,” none of the controversy would have ever happened. No one would have bothered with it.

It seemed like a natural set closer since it was one of your first songs.

For me, that and “10:15,” which we’ve got the double A-side — it was our first single — if we hadn’t finished with that, it would have been a copout. First and foremost, I wanted to be an artist and not a political commentator. “Killing an Arab” is a song about many things, but essentially, it’s about the value of human life and the value that other people give to their own life and to others. It’s a complex subject distilled very badly into a three-minute pop song. I could probably write a better one now, but I don’t think it would have the same authenticity. I hope I’m not remembered just for that song. But I refuse to be cowed by the pressures not to play it, which are considerable actually. Particularly the moment we stopped playing it in America because, “Here comes another fucking Gulf War.” And it’s like, “I wonder what they’re going to play.” It’s like idiot DJs dusting it off. It’s like a distraction, when it started happening. I’d be tearing my hair out literally, like, what the fuck? How can I counteract this? So I figured the best way would be to start playing it again. In a funny way, it diminishes it. ... It becomes a song again, rather than a title.



Just before we spoke, I got an email from your rep that said, “Robert is NOT a fan of the word ‘goth,’ so please don’t use that in any reference.” What do you have against that word? That didn’t come from me. That probably has to do with the film release. There’s always a lazy tendency when people are writing “puff” to release it. Inevitably before I even opened up the attachment from [the film company], I think it’s going to start with “goth,” “goth rock,” “goth godfather,” “gothfather,” “goth this,” and I think, “For fuck’s sake,” and sure enough, there it was. So I wrote a bit of a stinging email back saying, “For fuck’s sake, can you ... ” you know?

I don’t think of the Cure as a goth band. I never have. I grew up in a world where goth hadn’t quite been invented in the way that we know and love it. And I was part of this subculture inasmuch as I went to the Batcave with [Steve] Severin. The Banshees were pretty much a goth band for a while. But even they really weren’t. But real goth bands were around — the ones that were part of that initial movement. They were goth bands, and I wasn’t. I was doing “Let’s Go to Bed” when goth started. So we’d done *Pornography* and “Hanging Garden,” and there’s a look and a kind of a vibe and an atmosphere, yeah. But was I responsible for goth? No. And if I was, I’d be very happy. But I wasn’t.

Did goth have any role in the Cure?

Inevitably, I think it had some kind of influence. “Cold” from *Pornography*, I think, sounds gothic, inasmuch as you can say it’s got that particular sound. I’m aware we played a part in it, and I think that we’re part of the history of goth, without question, but like a footnote. The Cure just aren’t a goth band. When people say it to me, you’re goth, I say you either have never heard us play or you have no idea what goth is. One of those two has to be true because we’re not a goth band.

I remember just for a while, goths were outraged that people would think we’re a goth band. They hated us because we’d kind of jumped ship, they thought. Because we sounded like we do on *Pornography* and the next thing we do is “Let’s Go to Bed” and “Love Cats” and “The Walk” and all these sort of stupid pop singles. So they’re missing the point that before we’d done *Pornography*, we’d also done *Three Imaginary Boys* and *Seventeen Seconds*. We weren’t anything to do with goth. It’s like we passed through that phase and I did a few things that sounded like we were a part of it, and then we moved on to something else.

Do you like goth music?

I was never a big fan of goth. I loved the subculture. I love subcultural stuff like that where people have a vision of what the world should be, how they should be. I think it can be really charming. There's a slightly sinister edge to subculture-ism, but generally speaking, it's a good thing. It helps people feel they belong to something at the time that they probably feel they need to belong to something. And I'd rather goths than skinheads. And I also like the fact that it represented kind of "other." It's a dangerous thing to look like a goth. In certain parts of England, you run the risk of a beating if you look like a goth, which I think is fucking outrageous. So in that sense, I feel a community of spirit with goths and other subcultures who choose to live an alternative lifestyle. But I wouldn't consider myself to be a part of it.

You said you don't want to be remembered for "Killing an Arab." So what do you want to be remembered for?

Honestly, I don't care. I've never thought about legacy. You don't attend your own funeral. It doesn't fucking matter, does it? I've got a list of things not to pay at my funeral, but beyond that, I don't care much about my legacy.

My intention is really just to enjoy what I'm doing as I'm doing it and to feel that I'm doing whatever I'm doing as well as I can. That's just my upbringing. A thing worth doing is worth doing well. It's very old-fashioned, but you tend to enjoy things more if you put everything into it. You get a lot more out of it. This summer, the intention of the band is to play like there's no tomorrow. If anything, that will be the legacy of the band.

As a band, I think probably the fact that we achieved a certain degree of success and maintained it on our own terms, I think that would be the legacy that I'd be proud of, as I enter old age, to think I was part of it. But a personal legacy, honestly, it's not important. I don't have children, so I don't have to worry about anything that happens after.

This interview has been edited for clarity.