

Q&a

Monday, November 10, 1997

WILD MOOD SWINGS

Robert Smith, despite his rep, sees the silver lining



Robert Smith
(left): Killing an
image.



On a surprisingly warm day in late October, Woody Allen has turned a short stretch of Manhattan's 55th Street into a rain-soaked alternate reality. For about 40 yards, a beautiful fall dusk becomes a dreary chasm of drizzle. The contrast suits the Cure's Robert Smith, who happens to be sitting at a table in the bar of an adjacent hotel, nursing a glass of milk filled with vanilla ice cream after a long day of promoting "Galore," his band's new greatest-hits-since-the-last-greatest-hits album. Like [Allen's](#) carefully crafted rainy day, Smith is living proof that things aren't always what they seem. Portrayed as a messiah of melancholy, Smith is not only quite alive but well-spoken and cheery. "I've always spent more time with a smile on my face than not," he says. "But the thing is, I don't write songs about it."

With the 38-year-old Smith, there have always been two sides to every story: his music, his personality, his life -- right down to what he wears to bed at night. And this air of mystery, along with 21 years' worth of dark, memorable songs, has been the driving force behind [the Cure](#). Now, as the band heads into its third decade, it seems as strong as ever. A new single, "Wrong Number," successfully fuses electronic bells and whistles with beat-friendly guitar licks and typical lyrical Smith-isms while -- given the near-riots caused in New York and Los Angeles over in-store appearances and recent club dates -- the band's popularity hasn't waned at all. Just beyond Allen's faux rainstorm, Smith comments on his life, his fans and what he wants on his tombstone.

You guys still have a manic following after 21 years. Does that surprise you?

I've kind of grown used to it in the strange way I've grown used to a lot of things we do. If I take a couple of steps back, I think, "What the fuck is occurring?" but yet I can't take it for granted. Like people breaking down in front of me and bursting into tears -- all that side of it. I've learned to cope with it. There is just something about the band, the ethic I suppose, that appeals to a certain type of person and they want to live that out. They usually disappear; there are one or two people that have been around for at least 15 years [who] are just insane.

Who has more rabid fans, the Cure or Morrissey?

I'd much rather have our fans than his -- our fans are generally quiet, well-spoken and friendly and not pretentious in the slightest. Hopefully, that reflects the nature of the Cure. Despite what the mainstream media would have you believe, we're a very natural group. The people who have been in the group over the years have been there because they have been friendly with each other. There has been no sense of purpose other than making music together. I think if Morrissey's fans reflect what [Morrissey](#) is like as an individual or the way he projects himself as an individual then ... uh ... I'll stop there.

Has the death of Princess Diana influenced your thoughts on celebrity?

I don't have any interest in it. I think the royal family as an institution is totally redundant. I would say the same thing if it were the 17th Century and I'd probably get my head chopped off for it. I have as little interest in any member of the royal family as I do the family down the road. Essentially, I don't want to see pictures of anybody on the beach looking fat with their kid. I'd rather read a book.

Over the years, you've always been tagged by the press as this melancholy guru of death. Do you think that's a fair assessment of Robert Smith in 1997?

It was never a fair assessment. Because the general public, if they are aware of the Cure, are aware of the group through the singles and the videos. [When I'm recognized by] cab drivers, they'll say, "Oh yeah, you're the bloke that did 'Friday I'm in Love!' And it used to be "Lovecats" or it might be "Lullaby" or something. But I've never had a cab driver who turned to me and said, "You're the bloke who's the Godfather of [Goth](#) -- the doom and gloom bloke!"

What's a better description?

I actually think I'm quiet, but I'm pretty well-balanced. The persona that has developed -- which is essentially driven by the songs and the group -- is a lopsided view, because it's the nature of what I do. But both sides of the group exists -- there is a dark side and light side -- as there is to my life, as there should be to everyone's life. You don't spend all your time running around with a grin on your face, and I don't know anyone who runs around crying all the time. It's a mixture. The music has always kind of reflected how I felt at that particular time. In 1982, we did "Pornography" and in 1989 we did "Disintegration;" those two years for different reasons were bad years for me and the albums reflected that.

Do you find it ironic then that "Disintegration" was one of your most successful studio albums?

I remember playing back "Disintegration" when I finished mixing it. I played it, and there was total silence and then mild applause. Afterwards, it kind of filtered through that it was commercial suicide -- the worst thing I could do to follow up "Kiss Me, Kiss Me, Kiss Me." It was at that point that I realized no one understood exactly what I was doing. It made me feel very vindicated when people took to it, when it actually started to sell millions. And the record company turned to me and said, "See, we told you it was a fantastic album!" And I just thought, "Wankers!"

Given the public's perception of you and the way you perceive yourself, how do you think your epitaph will read?

I don't think anyone in the English media would be bothered to write an epitaph for me, to be honest. I don't even think I would bother writing one myself. Generally, in books that are written about what has happened in pop music for the last 15 or 20 years, you'd believe people listen exclusively to Smiths albums. So we get, like, two lines and they get four and a half chapters. In America, it's a different kind of emphasis, really. They sort of recognize that we've had an influence, however subliminal, on those that have come after us.

So no epitaph?

I'd have one of those new [tombstones] with a screen on it and I would have a video biography of me.

What would it play?

Imaginary scenes from my life acted out by someone else.

KEVIN RAUB

