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## The Cure's Robert Smith Talks 30 Years of 'Disintegration': 'The Whole Atmosphere Was Somber'

**"I get now why people were drawn into it," singer says**



**The Cure's Robert Smith discusses the 30th anniversary of 'Disintegration.'**  
Roberto Serra Iguana Press/Redferns

When **the Cure** played their 1989 album, *Disintegration*, in its entirety earlier this year **at the Sydney Opera House**, the whole experience was “weird” by frontman **Robert Smith**’s estimation. The album is the band’s best-selling release — it’s certified double platinum in the U.S. and made it up to Number 12 on the *Billboard* 200 — and he’s well aware of what it means to his fans and the music world at large. Singles like “Lovesong,” “Fascination Street,” “Pictures of You,” and “Lullaby” have become set-list staples for the band for a reason. But it’s an unusual event where Smith and his bandmates play all of the album’s songs, as well as the record’s attendant B sides, at once.

“We’d only played one of those B sides before ever,” he says. “So it was strange, in a good way, revisiting those. We hadn’t played a couple of the album songs probably since ’89, so that was also kind of weird.

“Playing [*Disintegration* closer] ‘Untitled’ was actually quite difficult for me,” he continues, “because it’s this song that has a lot of emotional ... baggage isn’t the right word. It’s just that for me, it’s a very important song. It proved very difficult, actually, for me to sing it convincingly to myself because I had to put myself back into a time and a place where I was very, very unhappy. Then I found it quite difficult, but it was a good show. It hung together and gave me a new appreciation.”

When Smith spoke with *Rolling Stone* earlier this year for an upcoming interview about the band’s **concert-film releases**, due out next month, and in-progress album, tentatively titled *Live From the Moon*, he reflected on the 30th anniversary of *Disintegration*, an album that proved to be a milestone for the group. He surprised himself in how much enjoyed looking back.

“I supposed we’re reaching the age where there’s this certain nostalgia creeping in,” he says. “And you think, ‘Well, we probably won’t be around to do the 40th anniversary of *Disintegration*.’ So yeah, it was a nice thing to do.”

**This year marks the 30th anniversary of *Disintegration*. You recently played the full album in Australia. What strikes you about those songs now?**

It’s probably one of two or three albums that meant something in the broader cultural sense than just, like, “another Cure album.” It happened at a particular time, and I suppose it had the right combination of songs and it meant a lot to a lot of people. I actually wanted to do the 40th anniversary of *Three Imaginary Boys* instead,

but I was overruled, so we did *Disintegration*, which is probably the wise thing to do.

### **When was the last time you sat down with the record?**

I think when I did the remaster for *Disintegration* in 2010 was the first time I'd listened to the album since we'd made it. At that point I thought, "Yeah, I get now why people were drawn into it." It's a really nice balance of big and small in a funny way. It manages to hang together in a way that on paper it really shouldn't. And when we played it through earlier this year, when we were rehearsing it, I kind of felt that again. I sort of remembered. I thought, "Yeah, it's actually really cleverly put together. I kind of knew what I was doing briefly."



**"Lovesong" has been covered by everyone from Adele to 311. Is it weird for you to hear other people interpret something so special to you?**

Although I've always said I wrote it as a wedding present for Mary, it's a bit of a steal really, since Simon wrote the bass line. That's one of the two songs on the *Disintegration* album that, musically, Simon [Gallup, bass] wrote. It was one of his demos that I adapted. He had a middle-8 section that I took out and I kind of simplified the song and wrote the words to it and played it back to him, and he was like, "Whoa." I was trying to put in one or two beacons of light in amongst the darkness, and "Lovesong" is one of them. I started thinking, that's three minutes. Let's write the other side of this album. "Despite everything, I

will never change. This is how I really am.” When people cover a song, it’s a great thing. It doesn’t really matter whether you like it or not. It’s really nice that other artists — I think the same when I cover someone. I’m covering it because I like the song. I’m not doing it because I think it was going to be a hit.

**Since you’re writing a new album now, did you get a new perspective on *Disintegration*?**

At the same time we were rehearsing *Disintegration*, we were running through songs for the new album that we’re recording this year. I think that helped the band. It’s certainly helped me light the way. While I think [*Disintegration*] is a great album, and I’m never going to think, “If only I’d done this, if only I could have done that,” because that would be foolish, it helped me to see how it was constructed. So it wasn’t done in a purposeful way, but I had an overview of the whole thing in my head before we played the first note I knew how I wanted it to start and I knew what I wanted it to feel like by the time we ended. That informed the recording of the new album. So for that reason, it was a good thing to do.

It was also just nice. I suppose we’re also reaching the point where I look forward to experiences. It was something very different doing five nights at the Sydney Opera House. Playing *Disintegration* to just a small room of people had an intensity about it. I’d forgotten that some of the songs actually have a ... [pauses] “Prayers for Rain” in particular, there’s something incredibly bleak and disturbing about it as a song. And it worked really well in that venue.

**What was your state of mind around *Disintegration*? Were you taking a lot of LSD at the time?**

Not a lot, but enough. There were maybe three times in the Eighties, when I just went through periods of ... “self-exploration” would be a euphemistic way to do it. I was just pushing myself to see how far I could go. It was a big deal to me to be turning 30. I thought, “This is it. This is my last chance to create something really meaningful in my life.” And then, looking back, I was a bit of a prickly character in some respects and maybe a bit difficult, more difficult than perhaps I should have been. But I was very, very focused and very single-minded. So I didn’t really bother listening to what anyone else thought was good or wasn’t good, which is one of those weird things. If it works, it’s great, and if it doesn’t, it’s a really stupid way of doing things. But I just had great self-confidence in what I wanted to do with that particular album.

I think the *Kiss Me* album [in 1987] was much more freewheeling. The band was in the south of France, drinking vast amounts of wine. And the whole thing was just a huge kind of party basically, with occasional pauses for sanity. And then you're like, "Here we go again." *Disintegration* was recorded in a very concentrated burst late in autumn in the English countryside. It was melancholy. The whole atmosphere was completely different. It was very, very somber.

And I didn't speak; it became one of those things that's sort of funny. I used to pass Roger [O'Donnell] notes when he was playing keyboards telling him what he was doing right or wrong because I didn't want to speak. I think he still has some of the notes. It sounds really contrived, really stupid, but I felt like I was trying to create an atmosphere whereby we could communicate with each other in a non-verbal sense. You can tell that I was taking acid, can't you? So somehow, I felt like writing it down was different, which, of course, it's exactly the same. It would have been easier and quicker if I'd just spoken. I just liked it. I used to go back to my room, and I'd burst out laughing. I'd think, "I'm going mad." But as it kind of took shape over two or three weeks, everyone, I think, just suddenly realized what we were doing. It was just a thing.



**Robert Smith, live in Torhout, Belgium on July 7th, 1989. Photo by Frans Schellekens/Redferns**

**So the album was something worth commemorating?**

I think it was worth commemorating its anniversary. It wouldn't really work for every album that we've done. It would be a bit silly. You'd just be on a constant round of anniversary shows. But yeah, it kind of meant something. Also, it was a big turning point for the band. It marked the end of a certain period for the band. For me, it was like, "That's the end of the sort of Eighties Cure," even though the same band made the *Wish* album, which at the time was more successful. I kind of knew in my heart that that was it with this band. It felt like the end. It was just a matter of time before we stopped. And that's for the first time I really felt the whole thing was going to stop, because I couldn't see ... Where were we going to go? We were playing giant stadiums. There wasn't anything bigger. So what do you do? After you have an album that's Number One, what do you do? Do you do more of the same?

I said, like, "Fucking hell." It's my life. And that sounds really terrible now, but I thought, "God, I can imagine nothing worse than becoming famous where everywhere you go they know who you are and everything you do. Ugh. I could just see myself. I mean, I did go a bit [crazy] around that time, when I look back at some of the things I did and said. Luckily, I came out of it. I had enough sane, caring people around me to not let me completely self-destruct. I managed to channel most of that into those two albums, *Disintegration* and *Wish*. They actually turned out all right.

**How do you handle the more depressive or dark feelings these days?**

I don't know. I'm actually a lot more depressed than I used to be in a funny way, and yet I'm probably just generally happier. And it doesn't make any sense. When I look back to how I was when I was really quite young, in my mid-teens, I think, "Why did I feel that bad all the time?" But it was kind of a sense of futility that's never really left me. It's there. If I allow it to, it still kind of creeps up and swallows me, but I suppose I'm more outward looking than I used to be. I don't really worry. I'm resigned, I suppose, to my life. It's like the aging process and everything else that goes with it.

**What's different these days?**

I read a lot more than I used to. When I was in my teens, I used to read

voraciously and then I kind of stopped for about 20 years. I didn't really read very much at all. I listened to a lot of music and didn't read very much. Now I've swung back again. The last couple of years I've just been reading all the books I feel like I should have. I'm even reading Tolstoy and things like that, which is great. But life's too short to read *War and Peace*. But there's no reason not to start.

I do a lot of other things I've always wanted to try. I'm in a position where I don't really have to work. I can do things. So I never feel sorry for myself. I just wish, perhaps I didn't dwell so often on ... [death].

There are lots of people around me who have died in the last two or three years, and it's been quite difficult. It's the same as it is for everyone: You reach a certain age and inevitably people around you are going to start dying. Perhaps the reality is that I used to glamorize it, maybe romanticize it slightly, and use it for artistic purposes. Whereas when it starts happening for real around you — every few weeks, here's another phone call about someone who has died — it becomes less source material, I suppose for art. I don't know. It may not be true of everyone, but it certainly is for me.

So I'm very conscious of the words I'm writing for the new stuff not being too obvious. I'm trying to write more poetically about things that aren't necessarily depressing subjects, which is quite a challenge in itself. That's maybe why I've been reading so much. It's just to steal perhaps. I don't know. I'm lifting wholesale passages from *War and Peace* to drop in the new stuff. That's a scoop [*laughs*].