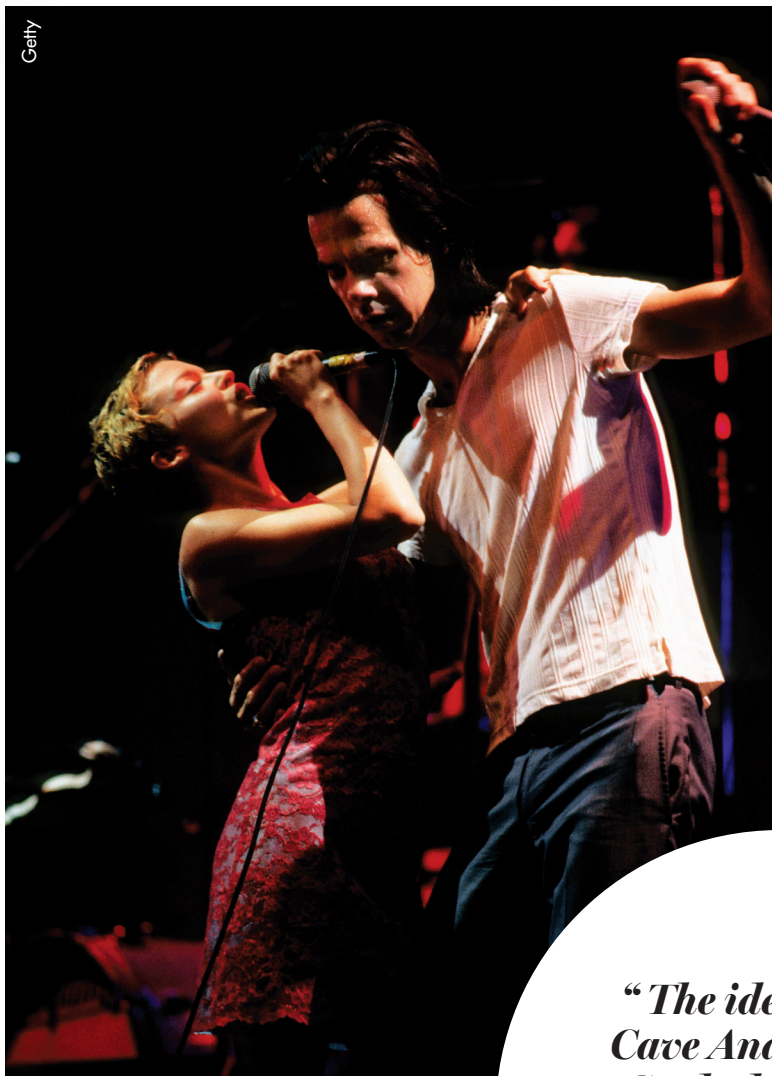


Classic Album NICK CAVE AND THE BAD SEEDS *MURDER BALLADS*

For their ninth album, Nick Cave And The Bad Seeds took a creative left-turn by delivering a collection of songs that was as gruesome as it was enthralling. **Neil Crossley** assesses the sonic delights amidst the slaughter...





“The idea of Nick Cave And The Bad Seeds dedicating an entire album to murder kind of titillated us”

CONWAY SAVAGE

Anyone tuning in to the 19 October 1995 edition of *Top Of The Pops* would have been greeted by an assured and exuberant Kylie Minogue, welcoming viewers to the show. Standing to the left, rear and right of Minogue – with expressions ranging from boredom to mild bewilderment – were the besuited members of Nick Cave And The Bad Seeds. Cave and Kylie were performing their duet *Where The Wild Roses Grow*, from the band's forthcoming album, *Murder Ballads*. The irony of such a dark and visceral outfit as The Bad Seeds appearing on the UK's premier pop-music format wasn't lost on the band. But they were unprepared for the reception that awaited them.

“We were slightly agog... us having to go on *Top Of The Tops* and sing this stuff with Kylie,” recalled Cave in the documentary *Great Australian Albums: Murder Ballads – Nick Cave And The Bad Seeds*. “It all became very surreal after a while, because we had a major hit in England with that song. What those little girls down the front are actually like, what they're actually saying to you when you think that they're actually clapping you, it's really into the lion's den. I mean... seriously.”

“I think it took my fans a while to come to terms with that,” recalled Minogue with a grin. “It's like, these Kylie fans down the front, just growling at him: ‘Who are you?’ ‘Who's that tall, scary man performing with her?’”

Kylie and Cave performing their duet *Where The Wild Roses Grow*, which reached No. 11 in the UK in 1995

ROGUES GALLERY

Where *The Wild Roses Grow* was Nick Cave And The Bad Seeds' most commercial single to date and brought the band and the album to the attention of a much broader audience. The fact that the song was essentially about a woman being battered to death with a rock did nothing to diminish its success. Throughout *Murder Ballads*, Cave gleefully populated the songs with a rogues gallery of some of the most despicable, murderous characters imaginable: from psychotic serial killers and damned souls to a teenage banshee-wailing schoolgirl, basking in the vicious slaughter of her fellow villagers. By the close of the album, the death toll had reached 75, plus one dog.

Such characters fuelled Cave's rich lyricism and fed his abundant dark wit. The Bad Seeds, at this point, were a band at the peak of their powers, a fearsome outfit that breathed real fire into *Murder Ballads*, but one always capable of great musical restraint. Cave has often spoken of *Murder Ballads* as being something of a “holiday” for himself and The Bad Seeds, and there is certainly a playfulness here. This is an album with a glorious, gleeful sense of abandon – and one that, despite its lyrical depravity, is one of his most musically ornate and accessible works. Over three decades on, it remains one of their finest recorded achievements.

EARLY YEARS

Nick Cave was no stranger to the concept of ‘murder ballads’, folk songs dating back to the 17th century that involved accounts of killings, told from the viewpoint of the murderer or victim. Such themes had permeated Cave's work since his formative years with The Birthday Party, whose confrontational post-punk earned them the dubious moniker of “most violent band in the world”.

Gallows Humour

The black humour that pervades *Murder Ballads* is one of the album's great strengths. “There are some very funny songs in there,” says journalist Bernard Zuel in the documentary *Great Australian Albums: Murder Ballads – Nick Cave And The Bad Seeds*. “I think *Murder Ballads* let people feel that they could laugh, even if they were listening to an album full of songs about death.”

The concept of the album also provoked mirth within the band itself. “It's always been loosely referred to in the band as the ‘comedy record’,” said Conway Savage, the Bad Seeds' keyboard player. Cave claims the album actually started as a joke. “Because the idea of Nick Cave And The Bad Seeds dedicating an entire album to murder kind of titillated us in some way, because it was so obvious,” he said.

The Bad Seeds emerged from the ashes of The Birthday Party in 1983, formed around the nucleus of Cave, multi-instrumentalist Mick Harvey and guitarist Blixa Bargeld, from the band *Einstürzende Neubauten*. After relocating to London, they released their debut album *From Her To Eternity* on Mute Records in 1984, followed one year later by *The Firstborn Is Dead*.

Sound-wise, Nick Cave And The Bad Seeds were inspired by a mythic American Deep South, creating dark arrangements that drew on spirituals and Delta blues. Lyrically, Cave focused on themes of death and love. His narrative prose had echoes of Leonard Cohen, while his increasingly rich, resonant baritone evoked a darker, more demonic Scott Walker.

The 1986 album *Your Funeral... My Trial* showed Cave emerging as a songwriter of real depth, creating songs infused with Old Testament ideology and populated by ‘bad’ souls: the murderers, the white trash, the drunks and the prostitutes who would receive little or no redemption. Cave was a decade away from creating *Murder Ballads*. But already, the characters were moving into place.



Cave with his pre-Bad Seeds band *The Birthday Party* at the Ace, Brixton, 1982

The songs

Core personnel

Nick Cave Vocals, piano, organ, Hammond organ, bass, Hammond, space belt, backing vocals
 Mick Harvey Guitar, acoustic guitar, organ, wind organ, bass, Hammond, space belt, backing vocals
 Blixa Bargeld Guitar, vocals
 Thomas Wydler Drums, tambourine, maracas, vocals
 Conway Savage Piano, organ, backing vocals
 Martyn P Casey Bass
 Jim Scavunos Percussion, drums, tambourine, bells

Main production credits

Atlantis, Sing Sing and Metropolis Studios, Melbourne; Wessex Sound Studios, London
 Producers Victor Van Vugt, Tony Cohen, The Bad Seeds

Recorded 1993 to 1995

Released 5 February 1996 (UK)
 20 February 1996 (US)

Mixed at Metropolis with Tony Cohen

Where *The Wild Roses Grow* mixed by Gregg Jackman at Sarm West, London
 Mastered by Ray Staff at Whitfield Street

1 SONG OF JOY

The album opens with what is arguably the most disturbing track of the whole record; certainly one lacking in the gallows humour that balances out most of the other songs. This six-minute Gothic horror is the tale of a father who has witnessed the deaths of his family at the hands of a serial killer. The key to the killer's identity, we are informed, lurks in the pages of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. As with all the tracks on the album, the instrumentation was kept deliberately simple. The stripped-down arrangement is ominous and spacious, a fitting backdrop into which Cave drops verse after verse of graphic detail. “As if she saw into the heart of her final blood-soaked night/ Those lunatic eyes, that hungry kitchen knife”. The carnage begins...

2 STAGGER LEE

Along with *O'Malley's Bar*, this track is one of the real tour de forces of *Murder Ballads* and is Cave's take on the American folk song, *Stagger Lee* or *Stagolee*, about the murder of Billy Lyons by ‘Stag’ Lee Shelton in St. Louis, Missouri at Christmas, 1895. In Cave's hands, the song is transported to a whole new despicable realm as he gleefully recounts the antics of “that bad motherfucker called Stagger Lee”.

Cave and the band had been up partying, listening to the album *The Diary* by US rapper Scarface, when the track first came into being. “Nick said: ‘Give me a bassline’, and I just started playing,” says Bad Seeds' bassist Martyn P. Casey in the documentary *Great Australian Albums: Murder Ballads – Nick Cave And The Bad Seeds*. “It's a great bassline,” adds Bad Seeds keyboard player Conway Savage. “We had a really big, long piano, a big bastard, and I hit the lowest ‘D’ I could find on that... the whole room shook.”

One by one, the rest of the Bad Seeds joined in and, within an hour, they had the basic track. “*Stagger Lee* is brilliant,” says singer-songwriter and band friend Dave Graney in the documentary. “Nick delights in badness, you know? And he's thrilled by the badness. There's fantastic badness in that song. It appals him while he's doing it, but he amazes himself. He heaps it on and on, and he's drawing it from somewhere else.”



Getty

“I felt an incredible pressure to have to keep beating the last record we made... which I think we did”

NICK CAVE

SUPREME ASSURED

Cave’s songwriting went from strength to strength, a point highlighted on *The Mercy Seat*, a sublime seven-minute long song from the 1988 album *Tender Prey*, with biblical imagery and relentless sonic repetition evoking the final moments of a killer on Death Row.

By 1990, Cave had relocated to São Paulo, Brazil and was experimenting with piano-driven ballads. That year, they released *The Good Son*, a plaintive, mournful work which featured the magnificent ballad *The Ship Song*. By this point, three pivotal musicians had joined the ranks of The Bad Seeds: Swiss drummer Thomas Wydler, bassist Martyn P Casey of The Triffids (“the fucking rock of Gibraltar,” says Cave) and solo artist and keyboard player, Conway Savage.

The 1992 album *Henry’s Dream* showcased a harder sound, but it was their eighth album, *Let Love In*, released in April 1994, which was widely regarded as their most cohesive album to date. It was a masterful, elegant work, exhibiting a mellower, yet supremely assured Cave. It also produced one of their finest recorded moments, in the track *Red Right Hand*. The album signposted the band’s future direction, whilst simultaneously harking back to their violent, visceral past. The challenge for Cave was how exactly to follow it up.

Nick Cave performing with Grinderman at the Hammersmith Apollo in London, in 2010

CREATIVE STOP GAP

Cave responded by choosing not to try to eclipse *Let Love In*. Rather, he took a creative diversion, focusing on a concept that was both outlandish and yet wholly in line with the ethos of Nick Cave And The Bad Seeds: an album consisting solely of murder ballads. “I felt an incredible pressure to have to keep beating the last record we made, making a better one, which I think we’ve basically done,” Cave told *With Guitars* magazine in 2011. “I wanted to make a record that was just enjoyable to do, that was open to various other musicians to come along and do exactly what they wanted to do and also to do lots of duets.

I wanted other people to help me write the songs and I wanted to do a lot of cover versions... which was what we did as well. I’ve always enjoyed writing narrative songs and I’ve always especially enjoyed writing about murder and violence.”

A RICH SOURCE

To help him research murder ballads, Cave enlisted the help of broadcaster, musicologist and good friend Mick Geyer, whose copy of *The Anthology Of American Folk Music*, edited by Harry Smith, proved a rich source. But while the research proved inspirational, only three of the 10 tracks that ended up on *Murder Ballads* were covers: *Stagger Lee*, *Henry Lee* and Bob Dylan’s *Death Is Not The End*. The remaining seven tracks were originals, written specifically for the album by Cave.

The first track to be recorded for the album was *O’Malley’s Bar*, which had been written four years earlier, while

recording the album *Henry’s Dream*. The concept of a whole album of murder ballads came from this song, said Cave. “We couldn’t use *O’Malley’s Bar* on any of our other records,” he told writer Clinton Walker in Sydney’s *Triple J* magazine in 1995. “So we had to make a record, an environment where the songs could exist.”

Much of the recording for *Murder Ballads* was done towards the end of the *Let Love In* sessions. By this stage, two other musicians whose sound would prove pivotal to The Bad Seeds’ sound had joined the band: New York percussionist Jim Scavunos and Australian-French multi-instrumentalist and composer, Warren Ellis.

ANALOGUE SOUND

In an age where digital recording dominated, Nick Cave And The Bad Seeds insisted on recording onto tape. “We are one of the few bands that use tape,” said Bad Seeds bassist Martyn P Casey in the documentary *Great Australian Albums: Murder Ballads – Nick Cave And The Bad Seeds*. “We’re not trying to make a perfect piece of music. We’re trying to inject some soul into what we are doing. In some ways, we’re very old-fashioned. That’s how we achieve what we achieve, I think. From playing live in the studio. Particularly on this record, you can really hear that.”

Recording for the album began with demos at Atlantis Studios in Melbourne, with the spirit of collaboration firmly to the fore. In addition to the duet with Kylie Minogue, Cave sang with PJ Harvey on the cover of *Henry Lee*. Shane MacGowan was another artist collaborating on the album, as the band invited friends from across the years to attend sessions and contribute to them. *Murder Ballads* co-producer Tony Cohen recalls that a spirit of bonhomie pervaded the sessions.

COLLABORATION IS KEY

“I remember seeing probably about 20 people all sitting on the floor, banging things and all sorts of stuff and basically having a huge laugh,” Cohen recalled. “I think I once called them the Moron Tabernacle Choir.”

The name stuck, and the Moron Tabernacle Choir was the credited name on the album for the congregation of friends who were invited to contribute backing vocals to the track *The Curse Of Millhaven*. “Those backing vocals were done as rowdily and roughly as possible,” says The Bad Seeds’ Mick Harvey. “They were all sent out and basically nobody bothered getting the note. So it just sounds like a complete rabble – which was deliberate.”

While Cave draws on the theme of murder ballads for the album, the gruesome imagery evoked in his lyrics takes the concept to a whole new dark level. He admits that the dramatic element of the subject matter provided a rich and

A Rose Between Her Teeth

The striking video for *Where The Wild Roses Grow* was inspired by Sir John Everett Millais’ 1852 painting *Ophelia*, and shows Cave’s character laying Minogue’s to rest in a shallow pond after murdering her with a rock (although this part of the story is, unsurprisingly, omitted). The video concludes with Cave’s character putting a rose in Minogue’s mouth and closing her eyelids. “It was really amazing... had her lie for a day in

water,” recalled Cave in the documentary *Great Australian Albums: Murder Ballads – Nick Cave And The Bad Seeds*, on the shoot for the video. “Dropping snakes in the water... a snake winding its way between her legs. She’s lying there. I mean she was just unbelievable, just totally gives herself to the process... and I think that’s why she’s such an extraordinary performer and a national treasure.”

The songs *continued*

3 HENRY LEE

In addition to his duet with Kylie, Cave partnered with PJ Harvey, with whom he had a brief but intense relationship. Cave gave Harvey the choice of singing *The Curse Of Millhaven* or *Henry Lee*, and she chose the latter – but as a duet with Cave. Mick Harvey notes that both songs feature exactly the same chord sequence, but different tempos. As was the case with *Where The Wild Roses Grow*, the video for *Henry Lee*, featuring an intimate and spontaneous performance from Cave and Harvey, really propelled the success of the track. “That video was great,” recalled Cave. “It was one take, you know. They just turned it on, we performed this little song to each other. It’s very intimate. Things are sizzling away... I really like *Henry Lee*. I just really liked the words and changed them a bit and put my own music to it. I think Polly sang that beautifully. There’s a sense she’s kind of on her best behaviour. There was something about the way she sings it that was very effective.”

4 LOVELY CREATURE

All literal reference to killing is absent from this track, but its presence is all-pervasive. Wind organ fuels the oppressive, sinister feel, enhanced by the fact that the song consists of just one chord throughout. Katharine Blake provides additional vocals, a forlorn, repetitive ‘La la la la la la la’ response to the lead vocal from Cave, who is clearly revelling in his hissing, enunciated delivery: “Oh the sands my lovely creature/ And the mad, moaning winds/ At night the deserts writhed/ With diabolical things’. A haunting, hugely atmospheric track.

5 WHERE THE WILD ROSES GROW

Among the tracks on the Nick Cave And The Bad Seeds 2005 album *B-Sides And Rarities* is a recording of *Where The Wild Roses Grow*, with a guide vocal from the band’s guitarist, Blixa Bargeld. This is the version that Cave sent to Kylie Minogue. “The version with Blixa singing it is seriously creepy,” recalled Cave, who says the track was written very much with Kylie in mind. “I’d wanted to write a song for Kylie for many years,” he said in the 2007 documentary *Molly Meldrum Presents 50 Years Of Rock In Australia*. “I wrote several songs for her, none of which I felt were appropriate to give her. It was only when I wrote this song, which is a dialogue between a killer and his victim, that I thought, finally, I’d written the right song for Kylie to sing. I sent the song to her and she replied the next day.” Cave was inspired to write the track after listening to traditional song *Down In The Willow Garden*, a tale of a man courting a woman and killing her while they’re out together. The 6/8 time song and its video had a profound impact on the success of the *Murder Ballads* LP; a haunting piece of pop history.

6 THE CURSE OF MILLHAVEN

Described as “a knees up – a sort of mad polka,” by Bad Seeds bassist Martyn P Casey, this track is one of

The songs *continued*

the true highlights of the album and a staple of the band's live set, a glorious, gleeful litany of slaughter in which the listener rapidly loses count of the number of bodies being bloodily despatched to the hereafter. The narrator is Lottie, a 14-year-old mass murderer who repeats the refrain "All God's children they all gotta die," as she undertakes her grisly deeds.

7 THE KINDNESS OF STRANGERS

This mellow, poignant 6/8 ballad falls somewhere between mournful sea shanty and a twisted 50s pop croon. Cave demonstrates impeccable feel and phrasing as he recounts the devastating tale of poor Mary, who leaves her home in Arkansas, travelling across Tennessee, just to see the ocean. Not too surprisingly, she never makes it, murdered by a man who introduces himself as 'Richard Slade'. The 'crying' from Anita Lane adds a tragi-comic element, while the glorious melodic piano from Conway Savage and the hushed vocals of Mariella Del Conte lend the song real resonance.

8 CROW JANE

Percussionist Jim Scavunos is behind the kit for this track, which intros with some lusciously loose and fluid jazz bass from Martyn P Casey. It's the cymbals, toms and bass that pretty much predominate, with just smatterings of vibrato guitar and some piano vamps helping to drive the track forward. It's minimal – spare and spacious – with some potent descending BVs on the choruses from Geraldine Johnston and Liz Corcoran, as Cave charts another tale of cold-blooded mass murder.

9 O'MALLEY'S BAR

Along with *Stagger Lee*, this is one of the standouts of the album. The idea for the song came to Cave as he was woken by the sound of noisy holidaymakers "in some godawful German town like Essen", after falling asleep by the side of a hotel swimming pool. "And I was kind of in my suit and I had a hangover that you would not believe," he recalled in the documentary *Great Australian Albums: Murder Ballads – Nick Cave And The Bad Seeds*. "I didn't sort of have the energy to get off this banana lounge and find the room. I started to sort of write this song there – basically, give these German holidaymakers names and described them and executed them on the page. And this became like a diary notebook that I would have, that I would keep adding to whenever anyone irritated me on my travels." Cave wrote reams of lyrics and it soon turned into an epic. "He just started playing this song on the piano, which had about 5,000 verses," said Mick Harvey. "After about half an hour of playing it with him singing relentlessly, we started to do a take of it from the beginning once it had settled into some form – just me on bass, Thomas on the drums and Nick on the piano."

10 DEATH IS NOT THE END

And so, after the carnage unleashed over the previous nine tracks, a sense of quiet optimism descends with this cover of the Bob Dylan song. Cave, PJ Harvey, Shane MacGowan, Kylie Minogue, Thomas Wylder and Blixa Bargeld each take on lead vocal duties, with each successive vocalist contributing on the choruses. Therapeutic though the song may sound, beneath the laconic pace, the simple vocal melody and flourishes of church-like piano, a sense of malevolence lurks.

rewarding creative source. "When I was writing this, I was getting very much into the idea of writing violently and what you can do with language. Of course, in rap music these days, you hear it all the time, but at the time, for me at least, the sort of stuff I was writing for this record I hadn't heard. I hadn't heard that kind of singlemindedness about this particular topic, put into songs and the real detail of the violence. There was something that was really exciting me about that?"

ENDURING LEGACY

Murder Ballads was released in the UK on 5 February 1996 to almost unanimous critical acclaim. Clark Collis in *Select* magazine remarked that the album "weaves itself together into a meditation on death that is both beautiful and genuinely unnerving".

11 days later, the album was released in the US, where the reception was equally effusive. Bill Van Parys of *Rolling Stone* wrote that "never before have manic elements elevated Cave's shtick to art as on *Murder Ballads*". He went on to describe the album as "literate, sultry and tortured" and "the performance of Nick Cave's life".

Tony Scherman of *Entertainment Weekly* noted that while *Murder Ballads* was "not for the squeamish," it is "the rare pop record that resonates with the weight of the ages". In 1997, Cave would release the follow-up album *The Boatman's Call*, whose graceful, minimal and melancholic songs could not have been further from the joyous blood-splattered abandon of *Murder Ballads*. In some ways, *Murder Ballads* was a time out for Cave and The Bad Seeds – a chance to simply revel in the joy of creating and playing together – and marks a dividing line between Cave the young performer and Cave the more mature artist. But this glorious, visceral album still stands as one of his greatest works. ●

Cave and PJ Harvey, promoting their *Murder Ballads* duet *Henry Lee*, a 1996 single

