

The Cure, 1991:
Boris Williams,
Simon Gallup,
Perry Bamonte,
Robert Smith, and
Pearl Thompson
(clockwise from
top left)





The Cure

THE BAND'S SONIC
SIGNATURE REMAINS
IMMEDIATELY
RECOGNIZABLE

BY IRA ROBBINS

A review of *Three Imaginary Boys*, the Cure's debut album, ran in *Melody Maker* on May 12, 1979, under the headline "The Eighties Start Here." ¶ In England, the magnificent fury of punk rock as it broke in 1977 was already being consigned to cliché:

The best bands were off to new stylistic adventures, and the bands they inspired into existence were moving even farther afield. America gave most of it the cold shoulder, waiting for more colorful and diplomatic acts — the kind that MTV could embrace — to give the new decade a look and a sound, calling it everything from new wave to postpunk, New Romantic, synth pop, and college rock.

The Cure didn't need a calendar to see the future. While sharing many of punk's values — commercial nonchalance, willful self-direction, an aversion to showboating, solos, and stage production — the Cure were emblematic of the next era. Theirs was a singu-



Above: Lol Tolhurst, Simon Gatlup, and Smith (from left) at Hurrah, New York City, 1980.
Left: Blondie's Debbie Harry meets Tolhurst (center) and Smith, 1980.

lar sensation of atmosphere, intimacy, and occasional pop charm, brought to visual life in a stream of wildly inventive videos directed by Tim Pope. While some of their peers were crushed under grunge's wheels in the 1990s, the Cure continued to grow and evolve, exploring joy and melancholy, whimsy and doom.

Early photos betray none of that. What they show is an anodyne group of clean-cut school friends

(dubbed Easy Cure at the start of 1977; slimmed down the next year to a more simply named trio) from Crawley, a town thirty miles south of London. Lol Tolhurst, the band's first drummer and a member through 1989, saw the Cure as a product of their environment: "suburban boredom and green forests and asylums for people who have problems. We wove all of that together."





Singer, lyricist, rhythm guitarist, and producer Robert Smith has been the life force animating the Cure for more than forty years now, joined at different times by a dozen other musicians. Ten are going into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame. (Only three bands have as many members inducted: Grateful Dead, Parliament Funkadelic, and the Comets.) Michael Dempsey, bassist in the original trio, left

in 1979. Guitarist Porl (now Pearl) Thompson was for a time in Easy Cure but didn't join the Cure until 1984, staying until 1993 and then returning for a third stint from 2005 to 2010. Boris Williams took over the drum throne in 1984, when Tolhurst switched to keyboards, and stayed until 1995. Perry Bamonte played keyboards and guitar in the band from 1990 to 2005.

The current lineup has been together since 2012: Low-slung bassist Simon Gallup, who first joined in 1979, keyboardist Roger O'Donnell (three stints in the Cure, beginning in 1987), drummer Jason Cooper, a steady presence for more than two decades, and the new guy, former Tin Machine guitarist Reeves Gabrels. He joined Smith's crew seven years ago.

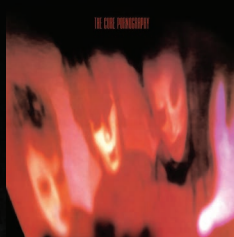
"The Cure has been several distinct groups over the years," Smith said in 1997. "There isn't any kind of linear logic to what we do. It all comes from a central core and it goes off in different directions from there. In the middle of it is me." Each iteration has ably shouldered the band's heritage while reinventing itself around Smith's current state of mind: It's no coincidence that one of the Cure's best albums is titled *Wild Mood Swings*. As Smith once noted, "The only common factor is me and my voice. And I'm a different person to the person that made the earlier albums." You might not know that to look at him: Other than an unplanned home chop in 1986, he has



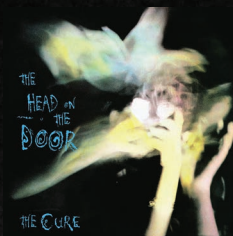
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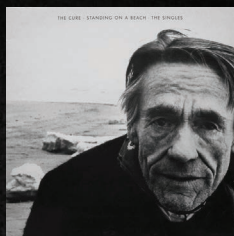
Three Imaginary Boys
(Fiction, U.K.) 1979



Pornography
(A&M) 1982



The Head on the Door
(Elektra) 1985



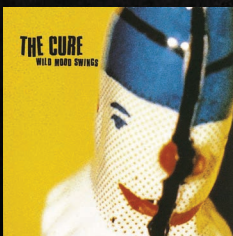
**Standing on a Beach:
The Singles** (Elektra) 1986



Kiss Me Kiss Me Kiss Me
(Elektra) 1987



Disintegration
(Elektra) 1989



Wild Mood Swings
(Elektra) 1996



4:13 Dream
(Suretone/Geffen) 2008

maintained an unruly shock of black hair, smeared lipstick, heavy eye shadow, baggy black clothing, and sneakers. The look – gender disrupted, glamour gone bad – was adapted by Tim Burton for *Edward Scissorhands* (1990) and copied outright by Sean Penn in *This Must Be the Place* (2011).

While demonstrating a genius for pop singles that feel light, brisk, and nearly translucent, the Cure have filled albums with extended expositions of opaque, downbeat layering and a measure of patience few stadium-scaled artists can manage. On the diverse and satisfying *Disintegration* (and elsewhere), many of the long tracks start with a minute or two or even three of an enveloping instrumental swirl before the vocals ever begin. Cure albums have been unutterably bleak (the first line of the drum-driven *Pornography* from 1982 is "It doesn't matter if we all die") and exotically romantic (*The Head on the Door*, from 1985), bare bones minimal (*Three Imaginary Boys*, revamped in the U.S. as *Boys Don't Cry*, adding the band's new-wave pop classic) and loaded to the top with guitar, keyboards, horns, and more (the double LP *Kiss Me Kiss Me Kiss Me*).



“Busking” in London, 1986:
Thompson, Tolhurst, Williams,
Gallup, and Smith (from left)

The singles Smith has written and sung have provoked political outrage (“Killing an Arab”), titled an Oscar-winning film (“Boys Don’t Cry”) and a Reese Witherspoon picture (“Just Like Heaven”), skewered conformity (“Jumping Someone Else’s Train”), scored a Number Two *Billboard* hit that Adele later covered (“Lovesong”), and provided fodder for a million mixtapes (“Let’s Go to Bed,” the winsome sadness of “Pictures of You” and “Inbetween Days,” the giddy joy of “Friday I’m in Love” and “Why Can’t I Be You?”). Yet outside of a few stray minutes in a huge library of music, the band’s sonic signature remains immediately recognizable.

Artists from John Lennon to Morrissey have been lauded for their willingness to bare themselves in song; Smith has built his empire on vulnerability. The Cure are a compelling, if oblique, exhibition of his uncertainties, fears, anguish, anger, delight, and despair. At the same time, he’s been married to his childhood sweetheart for three decades. He acknowledges the dichotomy. “I don’t feel any conflict at all between how I am now in public when I’m with people and

where the songs come from. The two are totally unrelated. I’ve got a house, I’ve got a back garden, I’ve got a telescope, and I live by the sea. I have all the ingredients of a wonderful life. The songs don’t come from any of that.” To some degree, they do come from Smith’s avid literacy. His lyrics have been touched by everyone from Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre to J.D. Salinger and Truman Capote. And those familiar with the symbolist poets will detect traces of their absinthe-infused anomie in the Cure’s.

Currently without a manager, record label, or publicist, the Cure have never prioritized chart success over creative satisfaction. Smith once said the original idea of the band was “making music entirely to please myself” and characterized the selection process for singles as “the least obscure track on the album.” All the same, five Cure albums and three long-form videos have gone platinum in the U.S. They’ve played football stadiums here and headlined many of the world’s top festivals, playing shows as long as four hours.

If all but shunned by the Grammys (two Alternative Music Album nominations, no wins), the Cure



Rooftop Cure in
2004: Jason
Cooper, Smith,
Gallup, Roger
O'Donnell, and
Bamonte (from left)

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have always connected powerfully with their fans. One of them is Trey Parker, who had Smith voice his animated self in a 1998 *South Park* episode, playing the superhero that destroys the Barbra Streisand monster. As he flies away, Kyle yells, “*Disintegration* is the best album ever!” In 1993, Smith told *Q* magazine, “Our audience gets caricatured as these tortured teenagers in their bedroom asking, ‘Why am I here?’ Well, what’s so wrong with asking that? Kafka never stopped asking that. That sense of alienation doesn’t go away. I’m not embarrassed to say that I still feel completely at a loss sometimes. If that’s teenage angst, then I’m delighted I’ve got it.” And, perhaps, he’s been miscast along with them. “I hate people around me that wallow in despair. It really upsets me. I love people that do something. I don’t even care if I hate what they do. I’m not a despairing person, but I’m not sure that I have a sense of true happiness, really. I get dead happy, but I always think it should be happier.”

Early in the band’s career, Smith was conscripted into Siouxsie and the Banshees as an emergency replacement for that band’s departed guitarist. Exhausted by the rigors of leading the Cure, he later joined the Banshees formally for eighteen months. (“I’d got fed up with certain aspects of the Cure,

which is essentially just me, so I’d got fed up with myself, singing and being the front man.”) The sojourn broadened his musical outlook and gave the Cure a new lease on life, but also saddled the band with the “goth” designation, which explained less than it seemed to. As Smith reflected on it later, “We never were goth. A small section of our fans are goths, but that doesn’t make us a goth band.” The Cure have also been called mope rock, shoegaze, and even prog, but none of those labels do more than reflect one facet of a band whose vast catalogue, all of it powerfully mood-altering, defies generalization. As Smith once said, “I always wanted the Cure to exist outside of every fashion, every trend, so it would leave us free to do what we wanted.”

The day after the Cure’s election to the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame was announced, Smith – who several decades ago said, “I’m going to hit 40 in 1999 and I think I’m going to embark on a different life” – announced that the band was at work on its first new album since *4:13 Dream* in 2008. So, in the year that he turns 60, Smith and the Cure have turned the fear of inadequacy he expressed in a song long ago into a proud vow of perseverance: “Whatever I do it’s never enough / It’s never enough.”

Smith live at the
HFStival, Washington,
D.C., 2002

