

Depeche Mode

THE GROUNDBREAKING GROUP WAS AN EARLY ADHERENT OF SYNTHESIZERS.

By Ira Robbins

However much we fancy that rock & roll is a thoroughly modern milieu of endless innovation, the vast majority of today's bands still employ the same basic ingredients – guitar, bass, drums, singer – taken up by the founders in the middle of the last century. So it was of no small cultural import that, in the early days of 1981, an 18-year-old London DJ called Stevo hooked technopop into the grid with the release of *Some Bizzare Album*, a watershed compilation that introduced future stars Depeche Mode (or Depeché Mode, as the band initially mispronounced the name nicked from a French fashion magazine), Soft Cell, The The, B Movie, and Blancmange, all of whom relied on, or at least used, synthesizers to carry their tuneful creations.

Timed perfectly for the rise of MTV, Depeche Mode were distilled in 1980 from assorted amateur guitar bands (No Romance in China, the French Look, the Plan, Composition of Sound, and a duo called Norman and the Worms) in which Martin Gore, Vince Clarke, and Andy “Fletch” Fletcher – school chums in Basildon, a town of one hundred thousand that's twenty-six miles east of London – and singer Dave Gahan first tried making music. Inspired by Kraftwerk, Human League, and OMD, Clarke convinced his teenaged bandmates to forgo the strength of

strings for the clarity of keyboards. “To us, it was a punk instrument,” said Gore.

While the designation scarcely covers the band's music over the past forty years, Depeche Mode are the first U.K. “synthesizer band” elected to the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame. As the group said during a 1990 press conference, “Electronics gives us more variety of sound, more possibilities. But we don't just use electronics. We use a lot of acoustic instruments. We have no restrictions.” As Gahan put it, “We've always tried to explore using technology, mashing it up with guitars and acoustic instruments, trying to find an interesting sound that will enhance a particular part of a song in an unusual way.”

Depeche Mode speak a language familiar to lonely, alienated, and confused youth who find hope and comfort in the band's words and music: “a danceable solution to teenage revolution,” as Roxy Music put it. With the force of Dave Gahan's deep voice and the firm pressure of upfront rhythms and dynamic, sometimes raucous instrumentation, Depeche Mode balance beauty, sadness, and power. Who would not take heart from lines like “I don't need to believe/All the dreams you conceive/You just need to achieve/ Something that rings true”?

Technology has another practical purpose. “Live concerts work really well with electronic music,” Gore



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: On *Top of the Pops* in 1981: Fletcher, Gahan, Gore, and founding member Vince Clarke (from left); in the studio, recording *Some Great Reward*, Berlin, 1984; live on German TV in 1987: Gahan, Fletcher, and Gore (from left); the original 1981 lineup: Gahan, Gore, Clarke, and Fletcher (from left).





explained. “Things aren’t a mishmash of sound. You can really hear everything precisely.” Going further, he said, “How you make music is really unimportant. Songs are really important. Whether you record that song with guitar, bass, drums or you do it with electronics is really unimportant.”

That same disregard for convention has been expressed in controversial lyrics, the gender-bending stage gear Gore wore in the eighties, unfettered musical digressions, enigmatic visuals, and a refreshing lack of self-importance rarely encountered among stadium-level bands. (You don’t title an album *Music for the Masses* without expecting some to take that the wrong way.) Their artistic choices balance a deep regard for their audiences and a firm commitment to their own impulses. The occasional critical bashing has never fazed them. Gore said, “We make music for ourselves, music that we like, and then hopefully someone out there likes it.” Fletch said, “You’re influenced by music you don’t like more than by music you like. We try and make original music, so there’s no point emulating stuff we like. We know what not to do more than what to do.”

Through fourteen studio albums recorded all over the world and half as many live releases, nearly sixty (!) singles and two theatrical concert-plus-fans films (*101*, last year’s *Spirits in the Forest*), what they’ve done is address greed, love, lust, religion, treachery, life, and death in songs that are at once both expansive and intimate. And done it with ambitious sonic experimentation and a refusal to stay stylistically still.

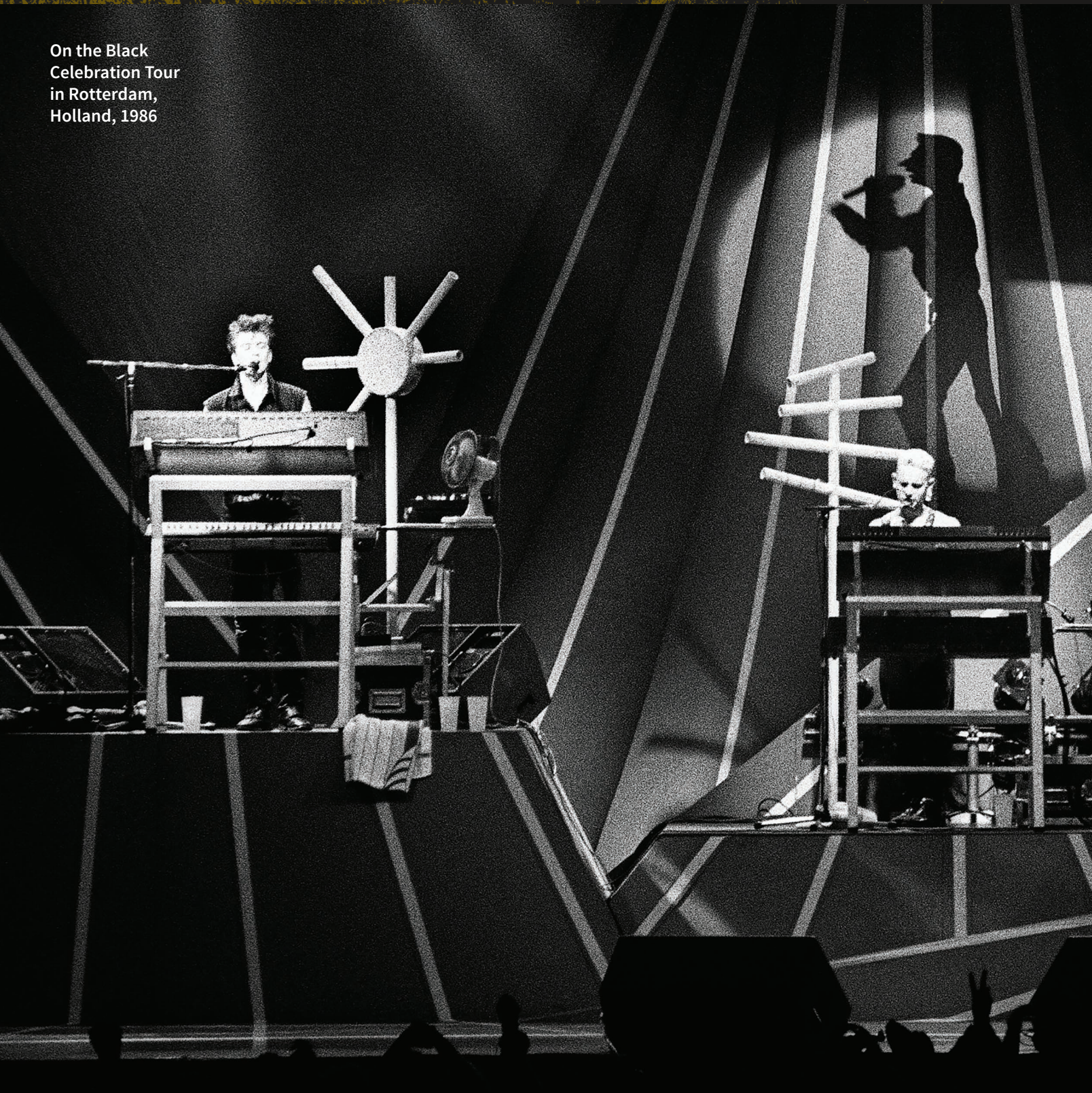
“People Are People” (once a gay anthem), “Personal

Backstage in Munich, 1984

Jesus” (inspired by Elvis Presley and covered by both Johnny Cash and Marilyn Manson), the kinky “Master and Servant,” “Enjoy the Silence,” the God-twit “Blasphemous Rumours,” “Never Let Me Down Again,” “Stripped,” and many other well-constructed songs range from transparent to enigmatic but are rarely opaque. Gore, a master at jamming round words into square holes, is reluctant to discuss his lyrics, but he does acknowledge their essential character – and their impact on the band’s identity: “There’s always some dark quality to what we do because of the way I write. Most of my songs are about relationships, but there’s always some kind of twisted element, a lot of suffering. And Dave’s voice has an I’ve-been-to-hell-and-back quality to it, so there’s always going to be that edge to anything we do.” As Fletch noted, “Martin is fascinated by sex and religion. When he puts pen to paper, that’s what comes out.”

None of the genre names that have been hung on Depeche Mode – techno, dance, post-punk, new wave, goth, pop, industrial, electronica – adequately reflects the band’s breadth. They’ve worked in all of those realms, aided by a diverse collection of producers (starting with Daniel Miller, the technopop pioneer who signed the group to his Mute label in 1981) and remixers, but they’ve never been bound by any. Strong melodies, upfront rhythms, and a vast library of sampled sounds – as well as heavily processed guitars – predominate in a catalogue that has touched on

On the Black
Celebration Tour
in Rotterdam,
Holland, 1986



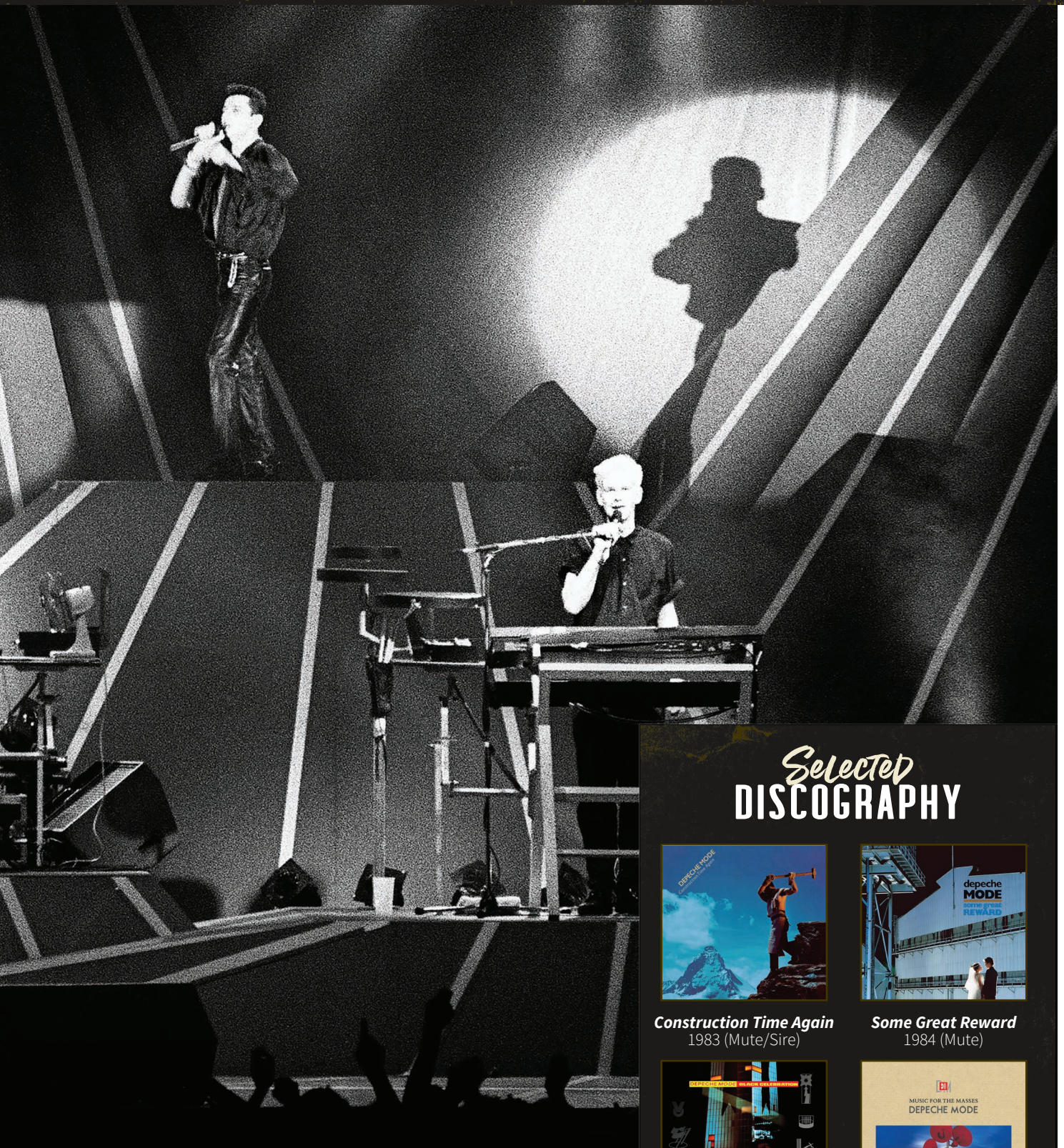
blues, ballads, pop, gospel, grunge, and rock, leading all the way back to "Route 66." Without ever sacrificing any essential character, Depeche Mode have re-defined themselves with each album.

"I just sit down and write songs," said Gore. "I write whatever I'm feeling at the time. Then [we] decide what direction we should be taking them in. There's no conscious move in a direction, it's just doing what you feel like doing and then taking the songs from there." Like very few other bands (notably the Who), the fact that one bandmember supplies lyrics for another to sing has caused problems. Some of Gore's words are just too personal to be voiced by anyone else; Gahan's emergence as a confessional songwriter has been a salubrious development. "I don't write from Dave's perspective," Gore acknowledged. "You

only know what you're experiencing. But we do have a lot in common."

The fact that Depeche Mode have, for long stretches, been more popular in concert than on record is due to the band's health-threatening amount of roadwork and to Gahan, a commanding singer who brings traditional rock-star showmanship to the stage. In 1988, before it had ever visited the Top Thirty of the *Billboard* album chart, the group attracted more than sixty thousand fans to the Rose Bowl in Pasadena, California, a show documented by filmmaker D.A. Pennebaker in *101*.

The band's commercial fortunes have only risen since then: eight Top Ten albums, five platinum albums (*Violator* is past three million), five gold albums, three gold singles, and tours that play to a million or two fans each time they go out. And yet



only one of their five Grammy nominations is for an album (*Sounds of the Universe*, in 2009).

Surprisingly, for a band that detractors have accused of being chilly men-machines (*that's* Kraftwerk), Depeche Mode have survived more setbacks and calamities than most. Clarke, who wrote all but two songs on the band's debut, including the smash "Just Can't Get Enough," left afterwards to form Yazoo, then Erasure. The remaining three dusted themselves off and made *A Broken Frame* (1982), a darker, more serious LP written by Gore. Then came five increasingly accomplished albums as a quartet with Alan Wilder, a formally trained musician who became the band's primary sonic architect, adding new technology and live drumming. In 1995, following an arduous five-month tour that Fletch left midway due to psychological issues, Wilder resigned. Fletch regained his

Selected DISCOGRAPHY



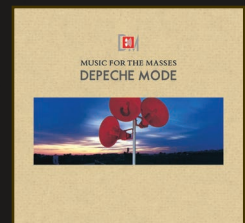
Construction Time Again
1983 (Mute/Sire)



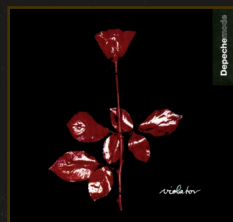
Some Great Reward
1984 (Mute)



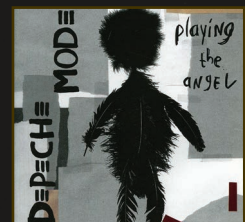
Black Celebration
1986 (Mute)



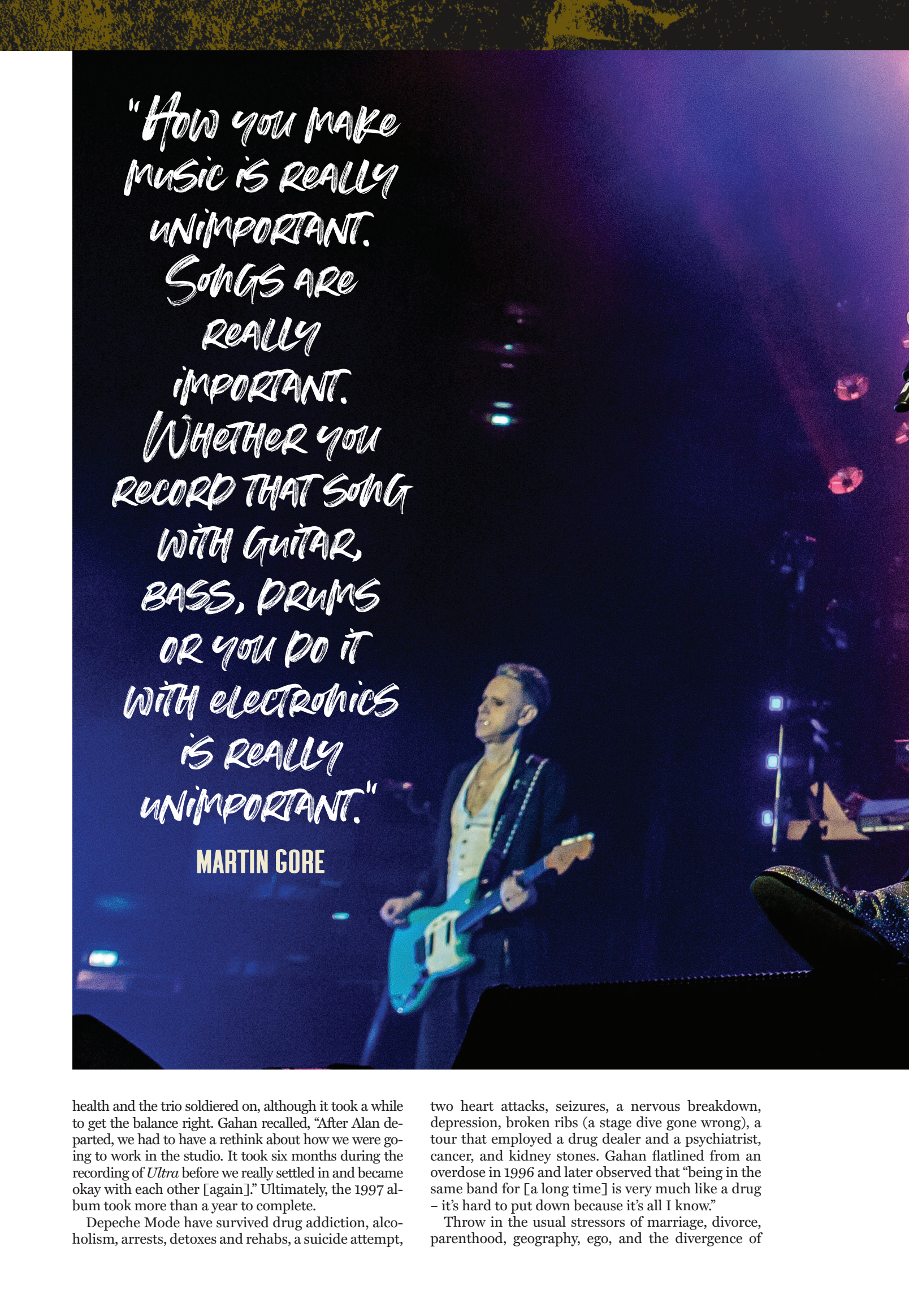
Music for the Masses
1987 (Mute)



Violator
1990 (Reprise)



Playing the Angel
2005 (Reprise)



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MARTIN GORE

health and the trio soldiered on, although it took a while to get the balance right. Gahan recalled, "After Alan departed, we had to have a rethink about how we were going to work in the studio. It took six months during the recording of *Ultra* before we really settled in and became okay with each other [again]." Ultimately, the 1997 album took more than a year to complete.

Depeche Mode have survived drug addiction, alcoholism, arrests, detoxes and rehabs, a suicide attempt,

two heart attacks, seizures, a nervous breakdown, depression, broken ribs (a stage dive gone wrong), a tour that employed a drug dealer and a psychiatrist, cancer, and kidney stones. Gahan flatlined from an overdose in 1996 and later observed that "being in the same band for [a long time] is very much like a drug – it's hard to put down because it's all I know."

Throw in the usual stressors of marriage, divorce, parenthood, geography, ego, and the divergence of



Onstage
at the Mediolanum
Forum in Assago,
Italy, 2018

maturing personalities that make long-term band membership an exercise in unnatural selection, and it's a small miracle that Depeche Mode have not just endured but flourished, passing through many chambers of purgatory to reach its present state: happy, healthy, and sober. Credit friendships forged out of common experiences a half-century ago in Basildon, solid material, the safety valve of solo work, and the lack of a clear leader. While Gahan is the onstage fo-

cus, a reliance on keyboards undermines traditional rock band hierarchy. As Fletch - one of the music world's few player-managers - once joked, "Each member of the band has a function. Martin writes the songs, Dave is the frontman, and my major role is managerial. Luckily, I'm not creative one bit."

As this *very* creative band approaches its fifth decade, we welcome Depeche Mode into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame.