

Nick Cave: You Sweaty, Sexy Beast

Aussie brings his swagger – and Stagger Lee – to Denver



Nick Cave performs at the Ogden Theater in Denver on Sept. 26. Photo by Laurie Scavo

By John Moore, The Denver Post

Demon seed was spilled on the Ogden Theatre stage on Friday as Nick Cave and his Bad Seeds delivered a testosterone-fueled throwback set that proved the vigorous Aussie, four days removed from his own 51st birthday party, has likely made some kind of deal with the devil somewhere along the way.

In a hall that felt appropriately more like a furnace, Cave alternately played sidewalk preacher, cautionary prophet and paranoid acolyte. The dapper, stringy-haired devil in a sweet suit lorded over the crowd with his heathen, boot-kicking swagger. At any age, Cave is one hard-working, sweaty, sexy beast.

He cometh. Denver-bound. And there will be blood. (Seriously, was that Cave up there? Or Daniel Day-Lewis?)

This one go down as one of “those shows,” the full-throttled kind that feels at first memorable, eventu-

ally historic. One that will be long remembered for its unbridled energy, full-on sensuality and waggish theatricality. This was a blast -- a sonic blast -- from start to finish, one that proved an appropriate retrospective of Cave’s 25 years since leaving The Birthday Party.

But forget nostalgia. This night also proved a jaw-dropping introduction to the Bad Seeds of 2008, a band clearly re-energized and amped-up by Cave’s recent discovery, via his guitar-driven, percussive side project Grinderman, that gloom can also grind.

More than a third of Friday’s set-list came from Cave’s superb 2008 release, “Dig, Lazarus, Dig!!!!” Not only did the new material more than hold its own, but several tunes -- namely the title track and the imperative “We Call Upon the Author (to Explain)” -- already can take their place among the best in the Bad Seeds’ catalogue.

The latter forcefully calls The Almighty to task - now, that could mean God, or all the Bushes of the world - for crimes including “rampant discrimination, mass poverty, third-world debt, infectious disease, global inequality and deepening socio-economic divisions.”

It’s also a great song because it invokes the phrase “myxomatoid kids” and uses “mediocre” as a verb - “Who is this great burdensome slaving dog-thing that mediocres my every thought?”

And oh, yeah, it has a refrain that goes, “Doop doop doop doop doop,” which had every busy bartender boogying along in unison.

No need to call upon this author to explain.

No wonder Cave’s seeds have sired so many a great, God-fearing band, many of them right here in Denver, including Woven Hand, Munly, Reverend Deadeye and a half dozen more.

The Ogden crowd was treated to 18 tunes (four more than the crowd at the Hollywood Bowl two weeks ago), and yet the 100-minute set slowed only once, just long enough for Cave to play a tricked-up but still gorgeous variation on the seminal ballad "Love Letter" (which contains perhaps the single greatest love-song lyric of all-time: "Rain your kisses down upon me. Rain your kisses down in storms.")

The last time we heard that song live, Cave was in the classy, concert grand-piano environs of the Buell Theatre back in 2001. The Ogden is a comparative shed, but it was clear halfway through the opening of "Night of the Lotus Eaters" that this is where Cave, surrounded by six bad boys looking and sounding like bad-ass 1970s rockers, really belong.

Few frontmen can match Cave's onstage showmanship; fewer still the rich and vivid and often hysterically funny imagery in his songs. Cave's cautionary tales of loss, horror and sadness are haunting yet hilarious at the same time. Bleak and invigorating. There's Lazarus (you can call him Larry) digging out of his grave; wolves carrying your babies away, Mr. Sandman violating a willing Little Janie in her sleep; where the birth of Elvis brings storms, floods and howls of "the first born is dead!"

Cave lives in a somnambulant world populated by ghosts, fairies, genies and all manner of evil creatures intermingling with Jesus, angels and Ali Baba and his 40 thieves. Where Saturday gives what Sunday steals.

"We Call Upon the Author (to Explain)" is a perfect example of how Cave can lyrically paint for us this big, ugly, hellfire world of his freakish, carnal imagination - and still manage to make pointed commentaries about the vapidness and corruption of our own, all-too-real world.

And yet, Cave's the same sentimental guy who wrote "Love Letter," a sap who's longing and lonely and still out there seeking human connection in oh, such very wrong places.

On top of all that, he's a comedian.

The greatest example of Cave's hyper-literate, visually graphic cheekiness can be found in "The Lyre of

Orpheus," his 2004 variation on Ovid's myth about the heartbroken musician whom the gods let travel to the underworld to retrieve his dead wife - if he can avoid looking at her. It's a cruel and impossible condition to impose upon a man so deeply in love. Those punkish gods.

Only in Cave's world, Orpheus is a musical hack who's responsible for his wife's death. He wakes her up to play for her this instrument he's made, but the sound it makes is not greeted by a great response -- "Eurydice's eyes popped from their sockets, and her tongue burst through her throat." In his grief, Orpheus continues to play the instrument until birdies detonate in the sky and bunnies dash their brains out on the trees. The cacophony even wakes God from his slumber, so God bashes his brains out with a hammer. When Orpheus wakes in hell, alongside both his instrument and his horrified wife, she warns him: "If you play that xxxk-ing thing down here, I'll stick it up your orifice!"

Awesome.

The song, which some know as the "Oh Mamma" song, is a crowd favorite, with Cave instructing us in what he calls "the classic call-and-response singalong," meaning, he says, that,

"I xxxk-ing call, and you xxxk-ing respond." The song builds to almost symphonic climax, a perfect sendoff before the inevitable "Stagger Lee" encore.

The expanded set list for Denver meant we got extra songs like "Today's Lesson" and "Love Letter," but what L.A. got that we didn't included "Into My Arms" and "The Ship Song."

A particular and rare pleasure for the Denver audience was getting the Dylan cover "Wanted Man" ("Wherever you may look tonight, you will see this wanted man. I might be in Colorado or

Georgia by the sea ...")

Set list

1. Night of the Lotus Eaters 2008
2. Dig, Lazarus, Dig!!! 2008
3. Tupelo 1985
4. Today's Lesson 2008
5. Weeping Song 1990
6. Red Right Hand 1994
7. Midnight Man 2008
8. Love Letter 2001
9. Hold On To Yourself 2008
10. The Mercy Seat 1988
11. Deanna 1988
12. Moonland 2008
13. Hard On for Love 1986
14. We Call Upon The Author to Explain 2008
15. Papa Won't Leave You, Henry 1992
16. Wanted Man (Bob Dylan cover) 1985
17. The Lyre of Orpheus 2004
18. Encore: Stagger Lee 1996

The Bad Seeds lineup

Nick Cave - Vocals, guitar, organ

Mick Harvey - Guitar, organ

Warren Ellis - Mandocaster, violin, tenor guitar

Conway Savage - Piano

Martyn P. Casey - Bass

Thomas Wydler - Drums, percussion

Jim Scavunos - Drums, percussion