





# DEPECHE MODE

## HIP IT UP & START AGAIN



**OVER THE LAST NINE YEARS, DEPECHE HAVE MOVED FROM RISIBLE ELECTRO-TWIDDLERS TO WELL-RESPECTED POP ICONS WHO'VE BEEN A SEMINAL INFLUENCE ON THE PRESENT-DAY DANCE EXPLOSION. JON WILDE DISCOVERS WHERE IT ALL WENT RIGHT AND TALKS TO SINGER DAVE GAHAN ABOUT THE BOYS FROM BASILDON'S ENORMOUS POPULARITY, MARTIN GORE'S DRESS-SENSE, FAME'S FATAL DISTRACTIONS, THEIR NEW ALBUM 'VIOLATOR' AND WHY THEY'RE 'THE WEIRDEST F\*\*\*ING BAND' IN POP.**

"AS FAR AS PEOPLE IN ENGLAND ARE CONCERNED," SAYS A GRINNING GAHAN, "we've always been a part of the furniture. We've been out there, niggling away, refusing to go away. But that's all changing now. Even people who don't like much of what we do have some respect for us. Attitudes towards us in this country have turned around. Mainly because we've paid our dues, if you like. It takes a long time for that to sink in. But there's no longer a stigma attached to Depeche Mode."

After nine years as a music comic laughing-stock, Depeche Mode are enjoying a sudden reappraisal. Pop writers are currently queuing up to help with this drastic resuscitation. Depeche Mode are on the verge of hip.

"I'm not bitter about the way we've been treated in Britain," Gahan shrugs. "No way. I've got to accept the fact that we made a lot of mistakes in terms of the way we put ourselves across and put ourselves about. We were prepared to do anything. Not necessarily to sell ourselves.

We were just completely naive. We thought it would be good to be in Smash Hits answering questions about our socks, appearing on Saturday morning television, making prats of ourselves.

"We didn't realise at the time that we were degrading ourselves. Then it reached a point where we realised it wasn't helping us anymore. In fact, it was becoming very negative. So we made a conscious decision to say no. From that point, we've been able to pick and choose. We decided not to make prats of ourselves anymore."

**FIVE** years ago, the offer of an hour or two with Depeche would prompt any self-respecting pop critic to punch his way out of the nearest wall. Depeche were synth-wimps turned toytown socialists. The four prancing ninnies from Basildon who arrived at a time when pop and rock was still reeling from the punk blast. When groups like The Birthday Party, The Associates, Human League and Soft Cell were throwing out new, exotic shapes.

Depeche arrived on the coattails of the New Romantic splurge, hitching a ride with OMD, Duran and Spandau, tossing their pretty little flop-fringes and denting the chart with their quaint electronic bubblegum. Their record collections were loaded with "Kraftwerk I" and "Kraftwerk II", Bowie's "Low", Iggy's "The Idiot" and early DAF, but they appeared to have absorbed little. Early singles, "Dreaming Of Me" and "New Life" offered the world a Chicory Tip for the Eighties.

It was enough to irrigate the knickers of hordes of teenage girls who demanded something chirpier than Duran or Ant. With "Just Can't Get Enough", they broke through to the Top 10 and found themselves as reluctant teeny heroes. It was all too much for founder member and chief songwriter, Vince Clarke who fled the nest before the release of the debut album, "Speak And Spell".

At the start of 1982, Depeche looked like going the way of other pop transients of the time - Blue Zoo, Marilyn, Haysi Fantayzee, Blue Rondo, Lotus Eaters. But Depeche just shrugged and carried on, Martin Gore taking on the role of song-writer, ex-Hitmen keyboardist Alan Wilder replacing the departed Clarke.

The hits kept coming - "See You", "The Meaning Of Love", "Leave In Silence" - but Depeche were clearly facing a difficult transition. Their 1982 album, "A Broken Frame", was an appallingly dour affair. "Every inch as empty as 'Speak And Spell'," wrote our own Steve Sutherland, "just more miserable than that's all."

**WITH** their third LP, "Construction Time Again", they toughened up, discovered sampling and industrial chic. With a firm nod to the likes of Test Department and SPK, they made a half-hearted stab into the belly of the new metal dance. With the notable exception of "Everything Counts", their first great pop song, the album was way off target. Its only distinction was that it offered the most puerile collection of lyrics this side of Jonathan King. "Taking from the greedy, giving to the needy", indeed.

The first single off their next album, "Some Great Reward" offered little hope of improvement. "People are people, so why should it be, you and I should get along so awfully..." Depeche Mode were becoming a huge irritant. Yet, with "Blasphemous Rumours" and "Master And Servant", they hinted that they could develop into a consistent singles group. The first consistent album still looked as elusive as ever.

They marked the Eighties halfway mark with a single compilation that only served to show how patchy they had been up to that point. With Gore dividing his time between Basildon and Berlin, and with the rest of the group clearly uncomfortable with his choice of leather skirts, rumours of a Depeche break-up were rife. The truth was that they had barely begun.

**DAVE** Gahan has spent a day in a room at the Kensington Hilton International, diplomatically fending off a long line of European journalists armed with inane questions. The last interviewer, a sullen Frenchman, lasted just 15 minutes. Gahan eyes me suspiciously, fearing yet another stitch-up. After two minutes of caution, trust won, he relaxes his guard and talks

relentlessly for the next hour and a half.

"Over the years, I don't think we've interviewed particularly well," he admits with a shrug. "We've never felt that it is our job to explain. That's why we don't do a lot of press these days. I look at someone like John Lydon and he obviously loves sitting there, winding up journalists. It just becomes so boring though. People like Morrissey interview really well. Certain people are entertaining at it. But, to be honest with you, we don't like playing games. We've never gone in for that.

"We've always been fairly self-sufficient. Never had to depend on the press. In Britain particularly, we're always been asked to justify ourselves. We've always found that insulting. It's just not interesting. It just turns out to be a fight between the band and the journalist. You see it all the time. There was a recent article in Melody Maker on The Stone Roses. Did you read that? I forget who the journalist was. It was obvious that the band had been forced into the situation. They could see that the guy hated them. It was all so negative. What's the f\*\*\*ing point?"

Terrible Dave. Absolutely shocking. Shouldn't be allowed.

"What was the name of that journalist? Do you remember?"

It's just on the tip of my tongue... Jon Somebody. A proper bastard, Dave. Watch out for him.

**GAHAN** is a surprisingly loquacious interviewee. Hardly the thankless task of legend. The difficulty is keeping him to the point, nudging a word in edgeways as he rattles on. He is remarkably undefensive as I voice my misgivings about early Depeche.

"I think we all feel that 'A Broken Frame' is, in retrospect, our weakest album. Definitely. It's very, very patchy. Very badly produced. That's when we got labelled as being a very doomy band. We were learning at that point. It was very naive. It was Martin's first album as a songwriter. He was thrown in at the deep-end to be honest.

"I think of 'Construction Time Again' was one of our purer albums. Musically though, some of it was very forced. It was a massive changing-point for us, both musically and lyrically. Maybe we were trying too hard to do too much. Sampling too much and trying to give a message without thinking so much of the structure and the point of the song. We'd do it everywhere and spend days sampling on building-sites. That became the most important thing and the actual songs became a secondary consideration.

"At the same time, we faced the problem that other people wouldn't allow us to grow up and develop. We came out in 1981 wearing these stupid clothes and found ourselves grouped with bands like Duran and Spandau. We just classed ourselves as a pop band. Martin said recently that we may have got more respect if we'd called ourselves a rock band from day one. We just happen to prefer what we'd call pop.

"Most pop or rock basically hasn't changed a lot in 30 or 40 years. Most of it is still blues or R&B based. Depeche Mode doesn't really fit into that tradition. It's more open for us to take any direction that pleases us. If your average rock group started using electronics, they'd be treated with suspicion or derision.

"Depeche Mode have never contrived to be anything. We're never talked about our sense of mission or anything like that. We've just gone out and played, put out records... it's as boring as that, basically. Gradually, we've built up our audience. We haven't set ourselves five-year plans. It's impossible to look at it like that, though groups do try. That would destroy Depeche Mode. If we started thinking like that, we'd be finished."

**"IT'S** when Depeche are being unconsciously throwaway that they attain the sublime," wrote Steve Sutherland in his review of 1986's "Black Celebration". Though far from being a great LP, it showed that Depeche Mode could craft music of throbbing metallic power when they forgot themselves. "Black Celebration" was their most focussed album to date. For the first time, they sounded self-assured enough to take risks and succeed.

Not until 1987 though would they manage to sustain that charge. "Music For The Masses" was a sound-minded sister to New Order's neurotic "Brotherhood". It was the sound of a group who had fully come to terms with their own idiosyncracies. Sumptuously produced, it showed Depeche working within their limits, no longer straining for effect. Their songs were now full of big flashes, tantalising refrains, voluptuous flushes. They had discovered beauty in the balance of their parts. Even Gore's lyrics had taken a turn for the better.

Depeche Mode had discovered their own potential at last.

"We had become aware of highs and lows," Gahan recalls. "We were more conscious of building up atmospheres, heightening the songs to an absolutely massive feeling and then bringing them down again. We had discovered dynamics. It was our first truly arranged album.

"At the same time, we had reached a point where we couldn't go any further in that direction. We knew we had to change our way of working. We had to go away and rethink everything."

**FOR** three years, Depeche have been quiet on the recording front. Last year saw the release of "101", a

double live set containing material drawn from their six studio albums. It suffered the fate of most live recordings. It sounded perfunctory at best.

It was while they were undertaking a massive stadium tour of America that the group began to comprehend just how seriously they were taken outside Britain. As John McCready reported in The Face, they received a heroes' welcome in Detroit's premier techno clubs. Much to their surprise, Depeche learned that they were regarded as a seminal influence on the development of the House sound; spoken about in the same reverential tones as New Order and Kraftwerk; highly respected on the black club scene in New York and Chicago.

The Depeche Mode reappraisal was just beginning.

Next came "Personal Jesus", their most physical pop record to date, a tensile Bolanesque pulse that rode roughshod over any lingering doubts about their potency.

Then there's "Enjoy The Silence", currently threatening to dethrone Sinead at the top of the heap, an irresistible wash of colour which boasts the most breathless chorus since New Order's "Touched By The Hand Of God".

Where did it all go right?

"Like anything with Depeche it has to be an accident," Gahan explains. "We've always been unconscious of the changes taking place. Even though we knew something had to change after 'Music For The Masses', we couldn't force anything to happen. We just had the time, for once, to sort ourselves out.

"Like with all the compliments that were paid to us by the people in Detroit. We were never conscious of our influence on Eighties dance music. That's the charm of it really. We've just gone about things in our own way, unaware of how much influence we're having on other groups.

"We've always been unique in what we've done. I don't really want to blow our own trumpets, but we've always been out on our own. We're just coming to terms with that ourselves. Recently were were in the studio and Martin (Gore) was listening to a lot of our old albums. He suddenly turned round and said, 'Y'know, we're so f\*\*\*ing weird!' It was as if he's suddenly rediscovered Depeche Mode.

"We tend to get away with an awful lot, lyrically and musically. Yet we still manage to get played on Radio 1. It's like there's this curtain over us that protects us all the way. We seem to be able to go on doing things. I don't know why that is. But there's something exciting about that.

"We do break down a lot of barriers in our own way and open up a lot of possibilities musically. The type of instrumentation we've used which has now extended into House and Acid music. That's all very flattering. When we get namechecked by people in Detroit and Chicago, that's great."

**IT** seems as though Depeche are just beginning to break away from their own predictability.

"I think so, definitely. As far as Martin's song-writing goes... well, he writes about certain kind of subjects, often the same subject over and over again. His cynicism towards love and religion. His interest in the taboo side of things. The darker side has always fascinated him a lot more than the, er, chickety-boom type of thing."

Say again?

"Chickety-boom. Chickety-boom. That goes for all the band. If we're working in the studio, we'll always go for something out of the norm. Musically, we'll take things the hard way round. We won't do the easy thing. If there's a certain part that lends itself to a guitar, we won't necessarily use a guitar for the sake of it. We'll try to find something else and we'll possibly come back to the guitar anyway. Picking up the guitar and playing it is the easy way out for us a lot of the time.

"Martin played more guitar on this new album than any album before. But he always uses it in a different way. On 'Violator', there's a lot more rootsy type stuff. We've managed to marry a bluesy type feeling to hard electronics, hard technology. We've also managed to do it in what I see as a soulful way. Coming up with something that sounds new without being aware of it.

"It was only when I played this album at home that I realised how right Martin was. It's pretty weird. Not off-the-wall weird necessarily. It's just that our approach is weird for a band that's considered commercial. When we're writing and recording, we don't consider ourselves to be weird. To us, that's just the way we do it. That's normal for us. I suppose it's other people who consider what we do to be odd. Some people just can't handle us. That's good. That's really healthy. I think it's good to rub people up the wrong way at the same time that we're appealing to a wider audience."

**BACK** in the days when Depeche were something of a music paper in-joke, they were constantly reprimanded for not being extreme enough. Gore would shrug and say, "Real life is not extreme, so we're not, and nor is our music." When he started wearing frocks, it was as though he was attempting to subvert his own and the group's ultra-normal image.

"Oh I think Martin does think life is extreme," says Gahan. "It's the darker side of those extremities that appeals to him. That's a lot more interesting. It involves a lot more. That side of things expands your mind more

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than the so-called normal things in life. We all do those normal things though. I'm not saying that we're one of those weird bands that are into black magic and stuff like that."

"We're all of us perverts under the skin. 'Yeah exactly,' he laughs. 'We've all got our perversities. What's normal at the end of the day? Who's to say? You have to be able to laugh at yourself. We've always done that. Martin has laughed at himself publically a lot of times. There's been periods that he thought were really funny. Of course, we tried to stop him going through those periods.'"

"We're talking about the frocks here?"  
"Mmmmm, that's right. If it had been T. Rex or Gary Glitter in the Seventies, it would have been considered the norm to be like that. Or Bowie and the New York Dolls for that matter. It was cool to be like that then. Lou Reed, Iggy Pop... everyone was at it. They all got away with it. When Martin comes along in the mid-Eighties and does it in a straight-faced way, he gets all this flak."

"It was Martin's problem. He thought it was funny. Away from the cameras, he would be having a good old laugh about it. We'd all have a good laugh. Then we realised that it was doing none of us any good. So we kept saying to him, 'Look, you can't go out dressed like that!' Sure we did. Martin, of course, carried on doing it. These ludicrous f\*\*\*ing dresses! Now he looks back and says, 'What the hell was I doing?' The funny thing was that we just about got away with it."

"See, pop music isn't something which should be taken too seriously. We're very serious about our music. At the same time, we have to laugh at ourselves and laugh at the whole music business. The whole thing is basically a huge joke. It's a money-making business. It gets so nauseating when you get these bands going on and on about charity records. They're all great causes, sure, but we've always avoided that sort of thing. If we want to do something for charity, then we'll do it in private, as quietly as possible. We don't ever want to be seen to be using any kind of charity to help boost our career. No matter what the intentions of these bands are, that's how it comes across to me. It's become very trendy. We'll always avoid things like that like the bloody plague."

"So you have to balance the serious side and the humorous side. I think the reason Martin wore dresses was just for fun. Nothing deeper than that. People read other things into it, like he was some sort of transvestite or something. I certainly got a lot of stick in Basildon, that's for sure. Thank God it's over."

Can we expect a Dave Gahan weird-out phase at some point?

"You must be f\*\*\*ing joking mate! You won't catch me in a f\*\*\*ing dress. No sodding way! I'm the yob next door. Never worn a dress in me life. Never f\*\*\*ing will!"

**GAHAN** is very much the lad next door. The car-thief made good. The Sham 69 fan who started out singing carols with the Salvation Army. At 27, the youngest member of Depeche Mode, he's still young enough to remember why he started all this in the first place, croaking along to "Mouldy Old Dough" in a Basildon garage with the nascent Mode.

"I don't really think I've changed that much since then," he decides. "I'm still regarded as the cheeky one. The joker in the pack. At the same time, I know exactly what I want from the band. I know my limits as a vocalist. I know what my role is in Depeche Mode."

"What I've learned is that success can be a dangerous thing. You only know whether you like it or not when you've been through it. Then you can stand back and judge it all. You then realise what you like and what you don't like what you want and what you don't want. Times do change, things you used to think were part of a good time become very boring. As you get older, different things interest you. You go through these extremities - playing the field, excesses of alcohol and stuff - and you come out of it a lot wiser."

"I'm a family man now. I like to go back home and be with my wife and little boy. Going about everyday things like everyone else. That may seem pretty boring, but a lot of people have this idea that pop stars lead this life of Riley where they're out on the razz every night. That just ain't the f\*\*\*ing case y'know. It might have been the case in the Seventies with your Gary Glitters, your Keith Moons, your Mick Jagger. Now, I think pop and rock is a lot more normal and controlled."

"That's sad, I agree. I think the music business itself is partly to blame for that because of the way bands are manipulated. The way management sells bands. Yeah, it's sad that the rebellion has gone out of pop. That's what interested me in the first place in bands like Sham 69, The Clash, The Damned and The Banshees. That's what made me want to be in a band, y'know."

"For me, that was the most exciting period of my life. At the time, nothing else mattered. I did the classic thing - dropped out of school, not bothering with exams. Now I look back and wish I'd done it. I wish I'd got a better education. Learned some languages. When I got to France, Italy or Germany, I realise how thick I am. Just another stupid Englishman who hasn't learned another language. An ignorant bastard basically."

**HAVE** Depeche Mode made things more difficult for themselves than they might have been?

"Well, we've never played the game have we? We've never placed too much importance on image. Well, maybe we did in the early days...and it backfired on us. We were just young kids then, teenagers y'know. Like the kids on the street now are wearing flares, right? I suppose if we were starting out now, we'd be wearing flares."

Saints preserve us!  
"In fact, Fletch (Andrew Fletcher) is trying to get us to wear flares. He thinks it'll give a good boost to our career. We just told him to f\*\*\* off, basically! If he climbs into a pair of bloody flares, he's straight out of the band. No questions asked! If you wore 'em in the Seventies, there's no way you'd go back to them. That was the worst period for fashion, ever. Horrendous when you look back on it."

"But I really like seeing that. I like to see young people latching

onto scenes if they can hang on to some individuality. You're always gonna have groups of people who want to latch on to something. Especially in England, where everyone has to be a member of some kind of club. You have to belong to something, otherwise you're treated like an outsider. You don't really see that anywhere else."

"When we play in America, there's all these people doing these weird dances, completely out of time. Nobody's copying anyone else. They just don't care. They're just having a good time. They're not worried about making prats of themselves. British people are so self-conscious like that. You have to dress a certain way and behave in a certain way. If you're not part of something, they'll make you part of something."

**NOW** that Depeche have hit the stadium circuit in America, is there a risk of being vulgarised?

"Not really. See, in a way, the Americans can see us for what we are. You were saying that we've never been an extreme kind of group. Well, that's fair enough. But the Americans do see us as a pretty extreme kind of group. To them, a group like Depeche Mode is very off-the-wall."

"The people who buy the records are totally convinced by us. But there's people in the record industry who don't think we should be there at all. There's still people who are scared to play Depeche Mode in case they lose their Bruce Springsteen listeners."

"Again, we're doing it at our own pace really. We've always moved at our own pace. We've never whored ourselves just to sell a few more records. We've stopped doing things we're uncomfortable with. We're fortunate enough in that we don't have to do those things anymore. Mute aren't going to say, 'Look, we need to crossover, you have to do "Saturday Superstore".' Who makes the f\*\*\*ing rules anyway? People who are totally out of touch."

"We've proved that you don't need to do all that. If you stay in control of what you're doing and you're happy with the songs you're putting out. You know when you're putting out something that's substandard. I know we've done that ourselves, but, at the time, it felt right. That's as far as we'd gone, that's as much as we knew. That's as much experience as we'd gained. So we learned from mistakes."

"Over in America, it's taken us a long time to get through to people, but it's been worth waiting for. On our last tour over there, we played to over half a million people, playing the same circuit as bands like Fleetwood Mac and Bon Jovi. They're selling 20 times the number of records we are. But, by the time we'd finished touring, people in the industry were beginning to realise that something strange was going on, something wasn't right. So they sat up and took notice."

"I mean, 'Personal Jesus' has just gone into the US Top 30 six months after it was released. It sold half a million records before it started being played on the big radio stations. It just built up in the clubs for five months and the radio ignored it. Most of them still aren't playing it. Too weird mate! Too f\*\*\*ing weird! They just don't get it."

**WITH** "Violater", the forthcoming album, Depeche Mode have stripped themselves down and put themselves back together again. It sounds like a bold new start.

"It does feel like a new start. We wanted this album to be very direct, very minimal, as minimal as Depeche Mode can possibly be. We've tried to take things as far as possible away from what we would normally do. I know it's a real head-up-the-arse word but, this is a very mature Depeche Mode record. We're getting more and more in every time."

"This is a very solid-sounding Depeche Mode, very uplifting. I want people to hear this record. A lot of people who think they don't like the group will find themselves liking this. After this record, people will definitely want to reassess us as a group. It feels right. Who knows where it will go from here."

"Y'know, being in a band for 10 years, it's a f\*\*\*ing strange way to grow up. Completely abnormal. It's like being a kid in a playpen in a lot of ways. In the last 10 years, we haven't really stopped. We've just carried on, one album to the next. In future, we will definitely tour less. We'll also make records less and less. That's bound to happen. It's happened already, actually. We're into three years between albums now. I think it will become more and more important to us in the future, to make a record when we're ready to make it. It's becoming less and less important to do it because the time is right."

How much life is left in Depeche Mode?

"Well, we used to really worry about things like that. We'd wonder if we'd still be around in another five years, wonder if we were going to be left there with nothing to show for it all. It comes down to whether we'll carry on being friends and how long we'll want to record together. Depeche Mode is a band, very much so. A group of four people. Those four people make the sound of Depeche Mode. If one of those people left the group, it wouldn't be Depeche Mode anymore. If we split up, that would be it. None of your comeback tours in the year 2010."

Gahan pauses for thought, trying to put this weird thing called Depeche Mode in a neat nutshell. He shrugs and decides that it's explaining itself quite nicely.

"Y'know, it's really important to Depeche Mode that we are an identity. We're proud of that. People can knock it as much as they want, but the fact is that we've survived. Well, that's the wrong word. We've been constantly successful. Even in Britain, things are turning around for us. We've gone through a period where we've sold exactly the same number of records every time. Now it's opening up, people are finding us hard to ignore."

"Basically, you have to take Depeche Mode as they come. It's all pretty straightforward, really. If we want to be more extreme, we'll be more extreme, but we're not going to be more extreme because a journalist tells us to be. We'll do it for a reason. Very straightforward. But f\*\*\*ing weird when you think about it."

Surprising as it seems, it might be good to have Depeche Mode around in the Nineties. Weird. F\*\*\*ing weird. But very straightforward.



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