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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 3414 words.

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On the pleasures of a creative practice that is uniquely your own

Composer and keyboardist Roger O'Donnell on the benefits of having a solo creative practice that is distinctly your own, choosing the right collaborators to help you realize your vision, and what he's learned about the dynamics of being in a band after three decades of playing in The Cure.

You made a record that is all about the beauty and solitude of the English countryside, and now you are quarantined in the English countryside.

Never would have dreamt it. The record really is very much about isolation and being alone. And I wrote it at the end of a year-long tour, during which time every day I was like "Oh I just want to be at home. I just want to be alone. I can't take this much longer." And then I finally got home, and was completely isolated, and at that time here, in December, it's very bleak. I didn't realize that, in a few months, that kind of isolation would be mandatory. I was talking to somebody yesterday and they said the same thing. They found it very cathartic and therapeutic listening to it. I think that's one of the really nice roles that music can play, to let people not feel like they're alone in life, feel that somebody has gone through or is going through a similar kind of experience that they are.

It makes sense that this would feel resonant right now.

It's this really strange reorientation, and a new awareness of what's important to your life and also what shit you're not going to put up with anymore when all of this is over. It reminds me of when I used to do acid, and things would be just scattered in your head, and then when you're coming out the other side of it, you put everything back into the correct compartments. And now you're thinking, "No I don't really want that in any of my mental compartments. I don't think I do. I don't think I'm going to do that anymore."

I'm lucky to be in a discipline that doesn't necessarily require an audience. I always find the greatest rewards are from the creative side of the process. To me, the performance is secondary, at least with my own personal art. So, for me, times like this can be good because it's easy for me to create on my own. The other side of that is that everybody is saying "Oh it must be great for you. You've got so much time to spend in the studio." And it's actually the opposite. It seems that freedom and limitless amounts of time just make me not want to do anything. I realize now that a deadline or some kind of enforced schedule makes me more creative. So I actually haven't been wildly productive.

We've been working on making videos, talking to people about the record, and going through the details of the release since before all of this pandemic started. So it's actually been very good in that respect, and it's taken up a lot of my time. But creatively I haven't written anything or created anything since this whole thing began.

You've made lots of different kinds of records with lots of different people. When you are left to your devices to work on things that are purely your own, how do you tend to work? I know you have a very long history with Moogs and different kinds of synthesizers, but I'm curious what that process looks like for you now.

So, I've got two prongs on my fork of creativity. One's the electronic side, and the other is the 180 degree different inception, the acoustic side. But the thing that binds them together is that I build everything out one note at a time. When I made the Moog albums, the Moog Voyager at the time, is totally monochronic, and so it's about approaching things one note at a time, and I try to do that, obviously when I'm writing for cello and the strings. It's a similar process. But for me, it always generally starts with the piano. That's my go-to instrument, and it's as much my voice as the synthesizer. So they have equal weight to me.

And if I haven't played the piano for a long time, if I've been focusing on the synthesizer, when I go back it's just like opening a door and this bright light comes shining through. As soon as I could walk, I was playing the piano. I was famously born next to it at home. It's always been there. The black and white, the shape of the keys... when I approach it and when I sit down at it, it's like an extension of me. I know that sounds a bit pretentious, but I'm just very comfortable with it. When I work with a Voyager, which I mean I've got loads of synthesizers, but the Moog Voyager... My hands just naturally fall onto the controls that I need to, as if it was an inflection in my voice or change in the tone of it. My hands

naturally go to those controls. It's a really interesting process, and that really does feel at home.

When it comes to your own work, do you feel like you always need to be working towards a goal? Like making songs specifically with the goal of an album in mind?

So for this album specifically, I came home from a long Cure tour and I just needed to create, because touring is a strange bubble world where you get to play in front of thousands of people every night—which is wonderful—but I don't find it creative because we're playing the same songs and there's never room for interpretation. So when I got home from that tour, I had all this pent up creativity and emotion that needed to get out, so I wrote a couple of songs.

Usually when I start it's absolutely rubbish, and it's like, "Oh god, I can't do this anymore. It all sounds cliché." But if you keep pushing, something will happen. And then it starts to flow, and once you've got a couple of songs, you're like "Okay this could be an album." So, then you try and put pieces together, but still within this larger abstract idea. It's that abstract part of creativity that really interests me. When things are just flying around in your head and coming out. That's what I find most interesting.

It's when you have to make it palatable or understandable to other people that it becomes mundane. We all have these visions and sounds in our heads that are absolutely fantastic and amazing, but you then have to make them understandable to other people. You have to make them palatable, so that people can relate to them. That is less interesting to me, but as a musician or a songwriter, unless people can understand what you're doing, I'm not sure what you're doing it for.

I don't generally write for an audience, obviously. My style of music is very difficult to place and to market, so I just do it because I want to and that's the way it comes out. But for my new record, I think that's why we ended up putting vocals on some of the songs, because that makes them that little bit more acceptable to mainstream listeners, whatever that means. I don't want to belittle anybody or generalize people based on their taste. Whoever listens to whatever kind of music, it's equal. You get enjoyment from whatever music you listen to. But a lot of people find it hard to listen to instrumental music. I personally prefer instrumental music. All my personal favorite bands are instrumental in nature. But putting a vocal, a human voice, on my music I think makes it more acceptable to people.

When you do work with a vocalist, how does that process work?

Most vocalists and lyricists complain bitterly about trying to work with me because there's very little room to play around. Most of my music says everything that it needs to say. So if I then give it to somebody and say, "Sing on this" usually they're like, "Okay, yeah. Where's the space? All of the obvious lyrical lines and melodies are there. There's no room for words." But with Jennifer Pague, who sang on this record, I just sent her the finished tracks and she came back with the vocal arrangement on top of it. I was like, "Wow. It sounds amazing. It's as if it was meant to be."

And in general, when I work with anybody, from any other discipline, I won't work with them unless I respect them and like what they do. And therefore, once I ask them to collaborate, I just let them do what they want. I don't say, "Oh you need to sing it like this. And the lyrics need to be about this." You have to trust them and respect them enough to let them put their own stamp on it.

I mean, obviously, with the string players, I've written the part, and it's pretty much set in my head how it should sound. And generally they play from charts, so I don't really give them any freedom. But they're really just an extension of me in that I can't play a cello, and I can't play a violin, or a viola. So I need somebody to do it. I really wish I could. But I work with people that understand me and sound like I would if I could play those instruments. The two cellists that I work with, Miriam [Wakeling] and Alisa [Liubarskaya], it's just easy. We go into the studio, I give them the cellos and they play it. Very rarely will I have notes for them. And that part of the process is really nice.

When you get a real live musician—an accomplished, talented musician to play those lines—it's just incredible when you hear it back. Usually I've already played the piano parts, so I'm just working purely as a producer and listening. In that moment I can actually feel my ears moving. When you have a big ensemble, like a chamber orchestra, I'm listening to each individual note, and that is an incredible process. It's one thing to write for a five-piece band and then hear the people play your parts. That's really cool. And then put their expression into it. But when you've got 30 people playing these harmonies and melodies that you've written and only heard played by computer samples, that is really an incredible experience.

Your career is interesting because you have been able to experience a lot of different sides of what it means to be a musician, and what it means to be in a band. You make records of your own, but you also play in The Cure and you've played in other bands, like the Psychedelic Furs, where I assume you have a pretty defined role.

Yeah, they're wildly different, your approach to being a solo artist, and your approach to being in a band. In fact, I think that the fact that I have such a strong solo career and the ability to make certain music on my own, makes my time in The Cure much more comfortable and much freer, and I think it makes everybody in the band happier as well, because I'm less frustrated. Because you're one voice in a band. If somebody says, "Do you think we should do two choruses and then a middle A?" And I say, "No." And then everyone else says, "Yes." Then you're doing it, right? The fact that I have that pressure valve, that escape, to be able to do my own work makes my creativity within the band much more relaxed, and my

involvement and the things that I bring forward much easier for everyone.

The Cure has a funny history because so many different people have passed in and out of the band since its inception, but you've played in the band for a long time now. You have all known each other for a very long time at this point. Do you find that makes the dynamic in the band easier as time goes on?

We know each other very well at this point. We know what to expect. We know how people are going to react to anything that comes up. I've been in the band off and on since 1987, which is what? 33 years? That's a long time. That's half my life. And I've grown up with these guys. We've been through highs and lows together. It's like family. When I re-joined in 2011, we had a conversation which was like, "Look. At this age, if we can't get on now and be together to make music and enjoy what and who we are, then we shouldn't even bother trying." And it is really good right now. And like I said, we know each other's playing, we know each other's moods, and we know what to expect in the morning when you come down to the lobby in the hotel. We know who's going to be grumpy, we know who's not. You give people distance when they need it. It is a family. And when we go on stage, it's such a beautiful thing to look across the stage and look at the others.

And like I was talking about the world tour in 2016, we were exhausted by the end of that. By about three quarters of the way through, we were dying. And then you arrive in a new town and people are expecting the best show they've ever seen, and you go on stage and you do it. I remember one show, I don't know where it was, but I looked across the stage and I was so tired, and we walked on stage and it was an amazing show and you just look at the others and think, "Yeah we can do this." It is a really nice feeling. I always joke that, for all those other people that are in bands, if you can get past the 25 year mark, you're in for a good time.

I saw that tour. You guys often play a lot of unexpected deep cuts as well, which means you must have rehearsed an insane amount of songs for the tour.

We rehearsed over 120 songs for that tour. Of course, if we're going to pull number 117 out the bag for the next show, then we'll play it in the sound check the day before. I remember that I was complaining once about trying to remember so many songs and Robert was like, "Yeah, every night I go on stage, I basically have to remember the words from an entire book...and sing them." So I was like, "Yeah, okay whatever. I'll stop complaining." I keep telling him to get a teleprompter, but he doesn't want to. I don't know how he does it. I mean, his voice is better now than it's ever been.

There is a very intense cult of fandom around The Cure. I remember how weird it felt in the '80s to see the band become so huge. The idea that something that you loved so intensely—something that essentially defined your outsidership—could ever eventually become so popular was really kind of a mind bender.

I think a lot of Cure fans struggle with the success of the band. They want it just to be for them, and I understand that. If anybody tells me, "Oh you've got to go and see that film," the first film I won't go see is that. It's like turning left when everybody else is turning right. But as a band we've always done that. We've always shied away from any kind of commercialization. It wasn't until the mid, late '90s that we ever did national TV in America. I mean, we just didn't do promotion. Robert still doesn't do interviews. I'm happy to do interviews, though.

You have this lovely record out, but it must feel like a weird time to be promoting something. What made you decide to release it instead of delaying things, which is what a lot of other musicians are doing right now?

Yeah. The label said to me, "Do you want to delay the release until July?" That was at the beginning of this, when we all thought it would be over in a couple of months. And I was like "No way. I'm not going to. It's taken us this long to get it ready to go. I'm not going to delay it at all." And besides, people are really desperate for anything new right now, and hopefully it's entertaining and comforting for them. You've also got a captive audience at the moment, people who might have the time and the space to spend with a record like this one. Live performance also isn't as important for me as it might be to other bands. It would be nice to play this music live, but it's unlikely. I just wanted to get it out there. From the minute I finish a song, I want people to hear it.

Roger O'Donnell Recommends:

I really love Tortoise. I love that band. In fact, we did a festival with them last year. They were on a different stage and they were on at the same time as us, and I could see them, their screen, while we were playing. I couldn't hear them, so I was very frustrated. And also Snarky Puppy. I really love those guys as well. I'm a kind of a jazz fusion fan. I recently started listening to a lot of Steve Reich, especially "Music for 18 Musicians."

I always recommend Philip Glass. I met Philip and did a seminar with him for Google a couple of years ago, and he's just such an inspiring and incredible musician. That sort of minimalist orchestral music is incredibly interesting to me. Seeing him play "Music in 12 Parts" was one of the most incredible concerts that I've ever seen. I think it was four or five hours long. They stopped for lunch in the middle. It was so transporting. I'll never forget that concert, and I told him when I met him, I was like, "Oh yeah I was there. I saw that show." And he's like, "Oh you survived then?" I think it was over three hours, that show. A bit like a Cure concert.

The funniest thing that he said to me was, "I really envy you guys. I sit down at a piano and I start

playing, and it just sounds like Philip Glass." And I'm like, "Do you know how many musicians would give their right arm to be able to sit down and do that?" So much humility. The other funny thing he said was when we were talking about how we compose. I said, "I use Logic on a computer." And he's like, "Well you know the biggest downside of that, don't you?" He writes everything out with a pencil on manuscript paper. He says, "When you finish a piece, can you sell that manuscript?" I'm like, "No. It's just a file." He's like, "Well, there you are. See I've got this handwritten piece of manuscript paper." That he can sell. So smart!

One other thing – do you know the author Thomas Bernhard? He's Austrian. I love the way that he writes, and his sentence structure. I don't read much, but somebody encouraged me to read his book, Correction, and I started reading it and...well, he doesn't use sentence breaks, and he doesn't use paragraphs. The text just builds and builds with this incredible tension. I tried to experiment with music a couple of times with that, but it's really difficult. Going back to what I said about making things palatable and understandable to people outside of your head. What he does, he doesn't care. He writes in this one train of thought and it just spews out of him onto the page. He wrote in German, and he was completely against it being translated, so I think it loses a huge amount in translation, not that I can speak German. But, it is a really interesting book. If you've got five minutes, go read the first couple of pages of Correction. It's really interesting. It's kind of like Phillip Glass, but with words.

Name

Roger O'Donnell

Vocation

Musician

Fact

Mimi Sheytanova

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