

Extreme Behaviour

LAURA HARKER & PAUL SULLIVAN ON NICK CAVE
AND THE 80S EAST KREUZBERG SCENE
Photography by Peter Gruchot

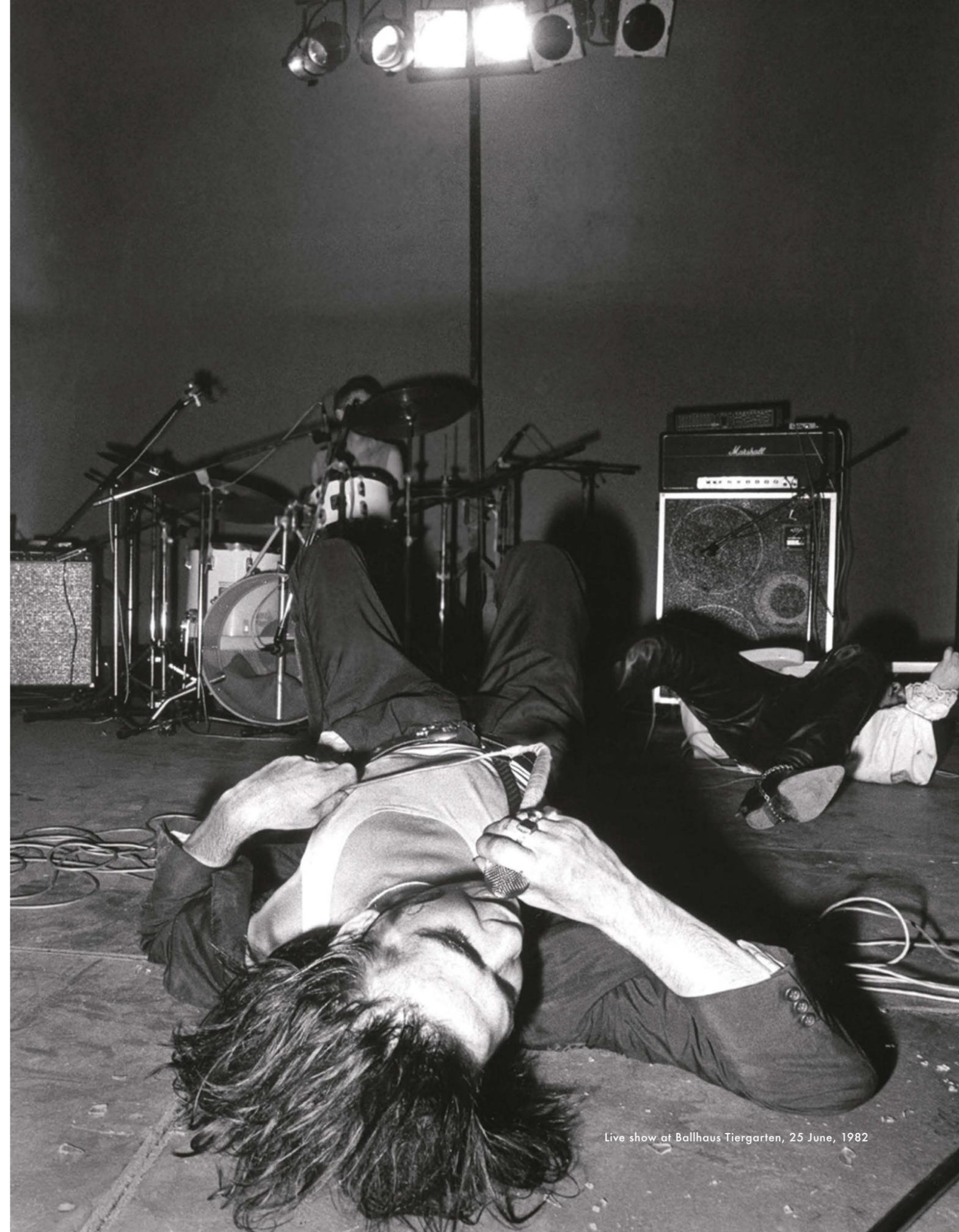
Studio session for the single 'The Singer' (Mute Records), 24 April 1986

Cutting a discreet diagonal between Kottbusser Tor and Oranienplatz, Dresdener Straße is one of the streets that provides blissful respite from East Kreuzberg's constant hustle and bustle. Here, the noise of the traffic recedes and the street's charms surge subtly into focus: fashion boutiques and indie cafés tucked into the ground floors of 19th Century *Altbauten*, the elegantly run-down Kino Babylon and the dark and seductive cocktail bar Würgeengel, the "exterminating angel", a name borrowed from a surrealist film by Luis Buñuel.

It all looked very different in the 80s of course, when the Berlin Wall stood just under a kilometre away and the façades of these houses – now expensively renovated and worth a pretty penny – were still pockmarked by World War Two bullet holes. Mostly devoid of baths, the interiors heated by coal, their inhabitants – mostly Turkish immigrants – shivered and shuffled their way through the Berlin winter.

It was during this pre-Wende milieu that a tall, skinny and largely unknown Australian musician named Nicholas Edward Cave moved into No. 11. Aside from brief spells in apartments on Naumannstraße (Schöneberg), Yorckstraße, and nearby Oranienstraße, Cave spent the bulk of his seven on-and-off years in Berlin living in a tiny apartment alongside filmmaker and musician Christoph Dreher, founder of local outfit Die Haut.

It was in this house that Cave wrote the lyrics and music for several Birthday Party and Bad Seeds albums, penned his debut novel (*And The Ass Saw The Angel*) and wielded a sizeable influence over Kreuzberg's burgeoning post-punk scene. And yet there's no plaque outside, no mentions of the address in any guidebooks, nor – unlike a certain Thin White Duke's former residence in Schöneberg – curious knots of tourists taking snaps of the doorway. Just an anonymous façade and a strange, bourgeois silence.



Live show at Ballhaus Tiergarten, 25 June, 1982

THE BIRTHDAY PARTY

Cave arrived in Berlin in 1982 with his then band, The Birthday Party, which at that time consisted of himself, Rowland S. Howard, Mick Harvey, Tracy Pew and Phill Calvert. Like David Bowie a few years before, Cave was looking for a place where he could kick the drug habit that was exerting an ever-increasing grip over his life and work. He was also seeking to escape what he described as the unwelcoming atmosphere and 'shoegazing bullshit' of London, where he had relocated from his native Melbourne in 1980. When Dreher, with whose band the Birthday Party had toured, invited the band to join him in Berlin, they all packed up immediately.

The problem, of course, was that Berlin at that time was far from a drug-free zone. In fact, West Berlin was pushing Europe's purest form of heroin during those years, and the drug was rife amongst the creative scene. At the same time, Kreuzberg was in the middle of a politically-infused post-punk explosion that The Birthday Party – suitably exotic and anti-establishment – not only fitted into perfectly, but were soon instrumental in shaping.

"Their appearance changed everything," Die Haut singer Oliver Schütz told the Red Bull Music Academy in 2013. "Clothes, how to behave, talk, walk... Everyone had spiky hair all of a sudden... and pointy shoes". In the same article, filmmaker Wim Wenders – who would invite the band to play and star in his 1987 classic *Wings of Desire* – described them as a "bunch of Australians who landed from a different planet".

The band were largely welcomed into the East Kreuzberg scene, and in turn found the anarchic spirit and

creativity there more inspiring than the 'pretentious' scene in the UK. "I knew very little about Berlin at all," Cave told Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard for a documentary they made about the singer's time in the city. "So it wasn't really that Berlin attracted me, more the need to get out of London. We were suddenly welcomed into this incredible kind of nocturnal world that seemed to be populated by people who were alienated in the same way that we were. You were allowed to venture into your own madness. Everything was acceptable. Extreme behaviour was encouraged. It was a madhouse, that thing where the inmates had taken over the madhouse."

From his Dresdener Straße base, Cave explored the city around him. At the weekend flea markets he would pick up vintage pornography and locks of strangers' hair for inspiration, and at bars and clubs like SO36 – which had been taken over by renegade artist Martin Kippenberger in 1979 – Ex'n'Pop, Dschungel and Risiko mingled with members of other post-punk bands such as Sprung Aus Den Wolken, Malaria! and Einstürzende Neubaten. In Pollard and Forsyth's documentary, Cave explains how "...there was no money so there was a level of existence that we weren't used to, a *quality* of existence actually. I worked all day and drank all night, and I would sit in my office space typing away at *And The Ass Saw The Angel*, and at night, or during the early hours of morning, we would go to Risiko, which stayed open 'til daylight. We would just sit there and wage this war against sleep..."

It was in Risiko, a shabby dive bar on Yorckstraße, that Cave met his future collaborator, Einstürzende Neubaten's saturnine frontman Blixa

Bargeld, who sometimes did turns there as a barman. Cave had already seen Bargeld and his band during a live TV performance in 1982. "He was the most beautiful man in the world," Cave once said of that first sighting. "He stood there in a black leotard and black rubber pants, black rubber boots. Around his neck hung a thoroughly fucked guitar. His skin cleared to his bones, his skull was an utter disaster, scabbed and hacked..."

For someone like Cave, whose own performances and music videos were highly theatrical, it was difficult not to be impressed with a band who had used anything from half a pig to mechanical pistons as percussion instruments (after breaking or having to sell their own), and who

"We were suddenly welcomed into this incredible kind of nocturnal world that seemed to be populated by people who were alienated in the same way that we were."

deliberately drilled into the wall at SO36. It wasn't long before Cave invited Bargeld to join his own merry entourage – much to the chagrin of Roland S. Howard, with whom Cave had already been experiencing creative differences.

The difficult, frayed mood of these early Berlin years was captured in Heiner Mühlenbrock's 1983 short film, *Die Stadt*, which records one of the final Birthday Party sessions at Kreuzberg's famous Hansa Studios (where Bowie recorded most of his Berlin trilogy). The band had been practically living at Hansa, grabbing naps under the mixing desk between sessions, and inviting their friends and

entourage over – dealers included. During the 25-minutes of screen time, hardly any of the band members speak to one another, and their excessive drug use is visible, with Cave seen drifting off to sleep for minutes at a time. Shortly after, Howard left the group and the Birthday Party split, leaving Cave free to form a new band; one that would eventually become known by the name of the final Birthday Party EP: *The Bad Seed*.

THE BAD SEEDS

Between 1983 and 1985, Cave moved back and forth between Berlin

and London, also returning to Melbourne for a while. He gathered musicians where he could – Harvey, Barry Adamson and (briefly) Pew included – to play shows and tour. But it was only upon returning to London in 1984 that Bargeld was annointed as a permanent member and the Bad Seeds name and line-up was finalised.

Cave and Bargeld's mutual passion for dark, twisted lyrics, abrasive sounds and gothic performance spilled directly into the Bad Seed's 1984 debut *From Her To Eternity*. The record's sparse but visceral aura made it an instant classic in the post-punk world, with Wenders using the title-track for the band's live performance in *Wings of Desire*.

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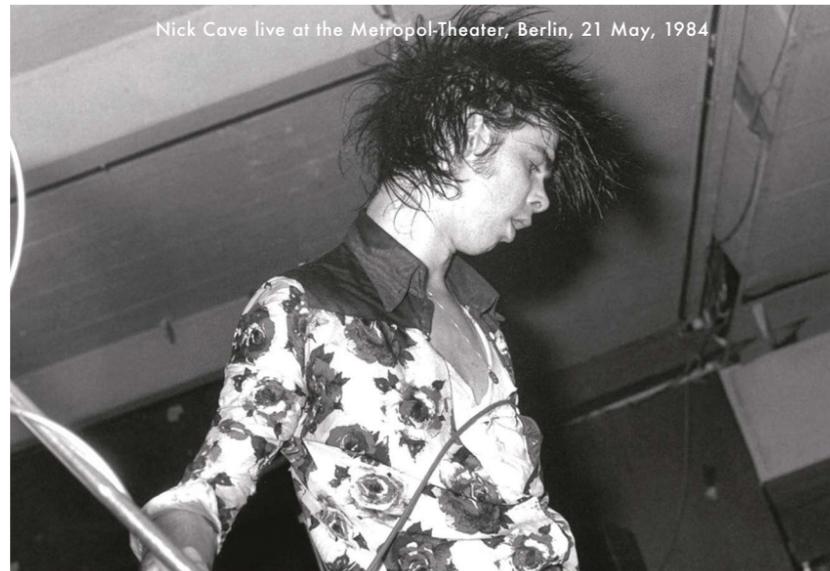
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Though *From Her To Eternity* was recorded in London, with the legendary Flood on production duties, the band returned to Hansa for at least parts of all of their subsequent 80s albums: 1985's *The Firstborn is Dead*; 1986's *Kicking Against The Pricks* and *Your Funeral... My Trial*; and 1988's *Tender Prey*. Bargeld and Cave's relationship strengthened during this time, both creatively and professionally. Ultimately drafted into the Birthday Party sessions for his "radical sensibility", he began to have an increasing influence in the band, even

increasing unpredictability. Mick Harvey has described 1987 as an "utterly chaotic year", a claim backed up by incidents such as Cave allegedly punching engineer Tony Cohen over some unwanted feedback. Some have attributed this behaviour not only to drugs, but to his being creatively stretched. Einstürzende Neubauten's Alexander Hacke claims that "Nick was one of those people that no matter how much fun and excesses we all had, he was constantly working." As well as flitting constantly between London, Berlin and Australia, he was working on songs for *Tender Prey*, trying



Nick Cave live at the Metropol-Theater, Berlin, 21 May, 1984

co-writing a song – "Stranger Than Kindness" – for *Your Funeral... My Trial*.

In *Strangers in a Strangeland*, a 1987 documentary by Bram van Splunteren, Cave is left momentarily speechless when asked what he thinks of Bargeld, before commenting: "He can make his guitar sound, like, he doesn't use pedals or effects or anything like that. Just plugs into any amp, uses any guitar."

Yet despite the subsequent worldwide success of the Bad Seeds, things remained tense, mainly due to Cave's

to finish *And The Ass Saw The Angel* and also appearing in his first feature film, *Ghosts... of The Civil Dead*.

But it was the drugs that got most of the blame. Even Dreher had become sick of the 'shooting gallery' that his flat had become, and Cave was under pressure to find a new place as well as clean up his act. In 1988, after being arrested for possession of 884 milligrams of heroin, an amount that could have put him in prison if he didn't volunteer for medical help, he moved into a converted church in Vauxhall, London.

But that wasn't the end of Cave's Berlin years. He would return once more to the city before the 80s were through, for the final mixing sessions of the 1990 Bad Seeds album *The Good Son* — just in time, in fact, to witness the historic fall of the Wall. "I remember we came out at six in the morning or something and there were all of these people wandering around and people asking us if they could stay with us because no one knew what was going on," recalls Kid Congo Powers, a guitarist on the *Good Son* Berlin sessions.

"They didn't know if they were going to be taken back. They didn't know if it was permanent or whatever. And then the next day I woke up to go to the studio and I was like, 'Wow, it seems like a lot of people here.' There were a gazillion people in acid-washed jeans in all of the train stations and everywhere you were there were just crazy people. And you realised that 'Wow! People are coming through.' It was a really crazy crazy time. It was like a circus."

As for Cave, he allegedly heard the dramatic news from Bargeld, who stormed into Cave's writing den in excitement...only to be sent straight back out with a barked, "Leave me alone, I've got stuff to do!"

EPILOGUE

Cave left Berlin again shortly afterwards, though he didn't finally quit drugs for good until meeting his wife, Susie Bick, in 1997. The Bad Seeds continue to this day, despite Bargeld leaving without warning or explanation in 2003. It was only in 2014's *20,000 Days on Earth*, a biographical film also directed by Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard that showed a fictional 24 hours

in Cave's life, that Cave and Bargeld discuss the decision — which, it turned out, was due to a somewhat prosaic mix of management issues and the difficulty of juggling a marriage with two bands.

Though reluctant to discuss the details of his time in Berlin (he usually describes them, reasonably, as a blur), Cave nonetheless often makes enthusiastic and nostalgic comments about his years here. In the short documentary, he states that "I think the work ethic that I developed and still adhere to to this day, came from Berlin. I also made friends there in a different kind of way and I think that goes back to a place where people always did things...people were always doing something. The thing about Berlin is that I have never experienced that kind of creative intensity anywhere else. I'm not a nostalgic person, but I do often miss the intensity that was happening there." He has also returned many times since the Wall fell, not only to play Bad Seeds gigs (in much plusher surroundings than yesteryear of course), but also for the 2014 premiere of *20,000 Days on Earth* at the Berlinale.

It's tempting to imagine him visiting his old house in Dresdener Straße 11, perhaps trying to make sense of those fertile, edgy years, or visiting his old stomping grounds to see what's left. Does he tut and shake his head? Or does the new Nick Cave like the New Berlin too? Staring in the window of the Deutsche Bahn ticket office that has since superseded Risiko, maybe he smiles at the memories as he watches the ghost of his younger self misbehaving. The skinny, swaggering lad from Australia with the fashionable shoes and untameable Muse.