

# Mode of resistance

*In the midst of political turmoil in Europe and the U.S., Depeche Mode was motivated to make its most political record yet – but hopes never to have to write another one like it*

BY RICHARD SMIRKE  
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Thirty-four years ago, when British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher had just won her second general election, a time of mass unemployment and increased racial tension in Britain, Depeche Mode was putting the finishing touches to its pivotal third studio album.

Released in August 1983, three months after a landslide Tory victory, "Construction Time Again" was the band's first and, until recently, only real digression into politics, with songs like "Everything Counts," "The Landscape Is Changing" and "Two Minute Warning" delivering a polemic attack on corporate greed, environmental destruction and impending nuclear apocalypse. "When we first started out, we were just a pure pop band," said songwriter Martin Gore, speaking to Street Roots' sister paper, Big Issue in the U.K.

"With our second album, we were trying to tread water and work out what we were doing after (co-founder) Vince Clarke left. By 1983, we'd grown up a little bit and done a lot of traveling, so we were worldier. That was reflected in 'Construction Time Again.'"

One hundred million album sales and three and a half decades later, Depeche Mode once again have the political establishment firmly in their sights.

"I feel like we're in a worse place now than we have been for as long as I can remember," said Gore, who channelled his frustration and fears into Spirit, the synth rock group's 14th record, released earlier this year to widespread acclaim. "We decided to go down more of a social commentary/political route and that's always a bit of a risk. You never know if you're going to get slated for doing that, but for some crazy reason everyone loves it."

"It's angry but definitely not bleak," said

co-founder and keyboardist Andy Fletcher, popularly known as Fletch, in a separate phone conversation. "If you look around the world at the moment, it reflects what's happening with Trump, Brexit, Le Pen, Syria. We're normally very ambiguous in the way that we write about politics and life in general, but Martin felt it was the right time to write songs about what was going on."

The record is a powerful commentary on global events, beginning with a vicious condemnation of society's regression ("Going Backwards") and culminating with the brutally somber "Fail," in which Gore gloomily intones: "Our consciences are bankrupt: We're fucked."

In between, the three-piece ensemble – which also includes singer Dave Gahan – rail against political apathy ("Where's The Revolution"), inequality ("Poorman"), nuclear holocaust ("Eternal") and duplicitous politicians.

"Blame misinformation/Misguided leaders/Apathetic hesitation/Uneducated readers," state the lyrics to "The Worst Crime," seemingly referencing the ascension of Trump or – given the band's pro-European sensibilities – last summer's Brexit vote.

Gore, a chipper 55-year-old who has lived in Santa Barbara, Calif., for the past 15 years and wrote the bulk of "Spirit" before the EU referendum and the U.S. election, won't discuss what his lyrics refer to, but does say that the political landscape and Trump directly shaped the album.

"The American election process goes on for so long that the warning signs were there. Watching that whole debacle unfold and so many other horrific things happening in the world, I felt that I couldn't just ignore them. Everywhere you looked, there was something to write about. It felt like humanity had somehow strayed from its path and was going wrong."

Brexit is the depressing icing on an already bitter-tasting cake, he said. "I

haven't necessarily always felt British. I've felt European, and that's about to be taken away."

Fletch, who lives in London, is blunter in his assessment: "Brexit is an absolute disaster in the making."

Both members agree, however, that their despair over recent world events instilled a renewed sense of urgency and purpose in the band as they approach their fifth decade working together.

"The fact that we're still around 37 years after forming and still making music that's relevant and is being well received is amazing," Gore said.

"At the moment, I would say life in the band is better than it's ever been," Fletch said before adding a hesitant caveat. "That might not be the case in five years. That's just the way it is at the moment."

His caution is well founded. Formed in 1980 by Gore, Fletch, Gahan and original songwriter Clarke as part of the then blooming new romantic scene, the band was less than 2 years old and on the verge of a commercial breakthrough when Clarke quit, leaving Gore to steer the ship.

Clarke's replacement, Alan Wilder, lasted until 1995, by which point the group had grown to become one of the biggest alternative acts in the world, releasing a string of classic singles – "Just Can't Get Enough," "Personal Jesus," "Enjoy the Silence" – and acclaimed albums like "Violator" (1990) and "Songs of Faith and Devotion" (1993). Their success masked a dark truth and behind the scenes, the band was in disarray. In 1995, Gahan, who had been battling heroin addiction for several years, attempted suicide. A year later, he overdosed in a Los Angeles hotel, resulting in his heart stopping for two minutes.

"We were in our ways, doing the same things as well, although not with heroin. I had a nervous breakdown. Martin was an alcoholic. But you get through these things, and you become stronger people," said



PHOTO COURTESY OF DEPECHE MODE

Fletch, who says the mid-'90s were the closest the band ever came to ending.

"Dave was in a terrible situation. We went to New York to do six weeks of vocals, and at the end of it we didn't have any. Martin and I were thinking maybe this is it. Thankfully, Dave got his act together, and he's been sober ever since."

Relations within the band have improved accordingly, and although the trio live entirely separate lives outside of Depeche Mode, a tight bond exists among them.

"We're very close to each other. Our families are very close," Fletch said. "Martin's the effeminate one, Dave is the macho frontman, and I'm the average man on the street trying to appeal to everyone."

"We're fortunate that we don't have to do the nostalgia circuit. When we started, we had all the big labels chasing us – offering us tons of money. And we chose a guy (Mute's Daniel Miller) who was offering us no money because we liked the musicians on his label. If we'd been on a big label, we'd probably now be on nostalgia tours as well."

Instead, the band will spend 2017 headlining stadiums around the world, promoting a modern-day protest record that poses as many questions as it answers.

"For every one of the band members the album title means something different," Gore said. "I see it as more of a call to arms – to find our spirit again. For me, that is the hope in the album – that humanity can find some kind of spiritual path again and stop making bad decisions."

"But I hope that I don't have to continue writing songs like this for the rest of my life. I hope the world becomes a better place in the next four years."

Courtesy of Big Issue North / INSP.ngo

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DEPECHE MODE SONGWRITER