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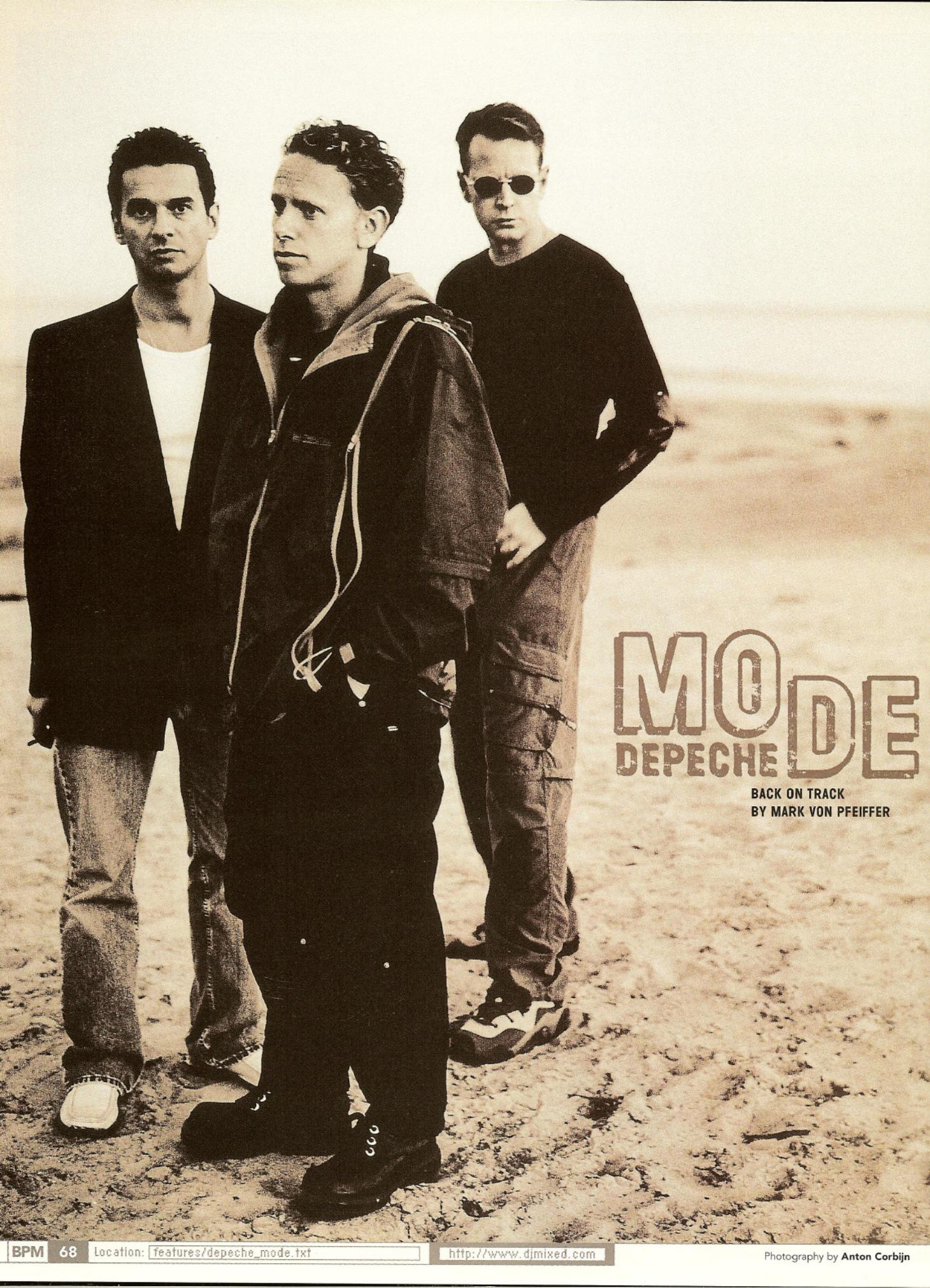
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DEPECHE MODE

BACK ON TRACK
BY MARK VON PFEIFFER

THE FIFTH ORIGINAL MEMBER of Depeche Mode was a tape machine that occupied a spotlight front-stage center and according to front-man Dave Gahan, "would still be our drummer if it hadn't exploded." Of the four humans which Mute record label owner/founder Daniel Miller met at a London gig in 1981 three remain: Dave Gahan, Martin Gore, and Andy Fletcher. Their new album *Exciter* finds Mode navigating away from the mind-numbing sonic booms of *Violator* and *Music for the Masses* towards a more complex and organic electronic/electric blend which is surprising in its texture and originality. **These long-time contenders, who witnessed the advent of the drum machine, have railed out fourteen albums in twenty years with record sales floating somewhere between an estimated 40 and 50 million worldwide.** Certainly there are very few bands in rock, and perhaps none a la electronica who can stake such a claim.

THE GODFATHERS OF SYNTH-POP ON DJS, NAPSTER, THE CRACK HOUSE LAW AND THE EVILS OF THE TELETOOBIES.

Though the temporal gap between releases continues to widen, DM remains focused on evolving their singular brand of music, whilst synchronically keeping one loving eye on the genre they helped create. Movements come and go, things catch vogue and fade away; Depeche Mode is French for fast fashion, and that's simply damn ironic. Love them or loathe them you can never leave them or lose them. BPM recently caught up with the tanned, rested, and ready godfathers of synth-pop (plus Daniel Miller) at the Four Season Hotel in Hollywood.

BPM: You guys have worked with Flood, Alan Moulder, and Tim Simenon. How did you come to choose Mark Bell to produce *Exciter*?

MG: I think we went through a short period where we were struggling to find the right person to work with. Quite a few names came up but we didn't feel that any of them were appropriate for us at this point. When Mark's name was suggested it felt right at first because we really liked the stuff he'd been doing with Bjork, and apart from that, Daniel knew him on a personal level and he felt that the atmosphere in the studio would be right for us working with him. He was very instrumental in introducing a more acoustic vibe into the overall feel.

BPM: I've read that despite the "obvious" religious theme of "Personal Jesus" the song was written with the dynamic between Elvis and wife Priscilla Presley in mind. Are there any songs on *Exciter* that target pop icons?

MG: Funny enough, yes. "The Dead of Night" really has an Iggy Pop and the Stooges feel to it. Early on in the demo tapes we got the most out of that kind of atmosphere.

BPM: Hmmm, yes. Interesting lyrics in that song. "We are the

Dead of night/We're in the Zombie room." What's that all about?

DG: It's a room that did exist. That still exists all around the world. I'm sure you've been in one—usually a sort of utter nonsense that goes on in the zombie room. Strange things.

BPM: Fair enough. A lot of the stuff on *Violator* and *Ultra* were akin to sonic pistol-whips. Do you think that *Exciter* has that kind of power?

MG: The songs on those albums lent themselves more easily to remixes. This is a bit more difficult. Bushwacka has done some interesting stuff with "Dream On." Some remixes are done for dance purposes and some simply to have an alternative version of the song, which might be going a different way.

BPM: What producers or DJs are you currently interested in?

MG: We've got quite a few remixes of tracks off the album which we're not quite sure what to do with. Thomas Brinkman did a remix of "I Feel Loved." Pole did a remix of "Comatose," Kid 606 a remix of "Dream On." The Brinkman stuff is particularly dance floor friendly, although it's very difficult really to make "I Feel Loved" non-dance floor friendly.

DMiller: There's a lot of stuff coming out of Germany that I really like. To Rococo Rot, Kreidler, Tarwater. None of it's really dance music. Most of these people are on their first or second album.

AF: There's one DJ at the moment I'm really not into. He's sitting right here (points to Gore). He might be getting better; I don't know.

BPM: Do you think of DJs as legitimate musicians or glorified samplers?

MG: There's obviously an art to DJing; if you go to a club you want to hear dance music. We just saw Jeff Mills in New York, and that was really good. But dance music, although this is probably sacrilege to your magazine, dance music isn't really what we're about.

BPM: You guys are being pretty cautious about who gets their hands on *Exciter* before its release. How do you feel about Napster?

DG: What did Keith Richards say? "If you ain't being bootlegged, you ain't happening."

BPM: Martin, you're a video game aficionado: Playstation 2 or Sega Dreamcast?

MG: Ps2.

BPM: As far as songwriting goes, Fletcher has been quoted: "If Martin Gore ever goes dry creatively we're all screwed." As the years go by, what kind of pressure does that levy?

MG: I did go through a six-month period where I was really struggling to write songs. Somewhere in the back of my mind I knew I had to do it. I just couldn't motivate myself to do it. It was more lazi-

ness than a writer's block. The moment I got into gear everything flowed very easily. But to actually achieve that I had to get Gareth Jones and Paul Freegard into the studio to work with me on the demos before I got motivated.

BPM: After 20 years you guys are still with the indie label Mute and seem happy as hell about it. Can you give any advice to up-and-comers about signing with big labels while preserving their own interests?

AF: Young bands are always pointing out that we've got such a great deal. The fact is—it was pure luck that Daniel turned out to be such an honest guy. It's because of that we were able to develop as a group. If we had been on a major label I think it would have burned us out by the second album. For a long time there wasn't a contract saying we had to put out a certain amount of albums in a certain amount of time.

DMiller: It's now much harder to do that type of loose arrangement we initially had. That was on the heels of punk, a very idealistic time in the independent scene. The business has changed a lot. Now the first order of business is getting a lawyer and getting a contract. There are some great small labels in Britain right now, Warp and Domino for example. You've got to figure out why the label wants to sign you—because they think you're a great long-term artist or because you've got a song they think they can get on the radio? If it's the latter, and you can't immediately get another single up and running, you're probably fucked. It's particularly that way in America.

BPM: Who do you dig on Warp?

DMiller: They have a lot of really good stuff. To pick a favorite? Maybe Autechre.

BPM: Tom Yorke a la Radiohead has likened the contemporary US alternative scene to the hum of a refrigerator. Do you think the term alternative is dead?

MG: Probably. At first it was all about being out on a limb. Now it all sounds completely the same. The singers are interchangeable. That's not alternative music; it's everyone creating the same thing.

DG: Back in the day it was interesting how much fear came into play with a lot of rock journalists for example, that we were going to destroy how "music is supposed to be." We were circus freaks at the time—one of the only bands making electronic music and having pop success with it. You don't get that now; it's really embraced.

BPM: Yea, going to a Chemical Brothers or Crystal Method show these days and not seeing anyone playing a guitar is run-of-the-mill. In the early '80s it was a different story. Did people seem threatened by that?

MG: Our fans weren't. Our music has always been complex to a point that it becomes difficult to reproduce live. We do as much as we possibly can, which is quite a lot. Some stuff simply has to be programmed. There are certain fast sequences you just can't play manually. They wouldn't have the same effect; part of the beauty is their roboticness. It's no good being almost repetitive; they need to be robotically repetitive.

BPM: What do you think about the proposed "Crack House Law," where promoters could be held at least partially responsible for drugs seized at their events?

DG: It's a really touchy subject, but where are you going to stop? Are we going to go to a stage where booze isn't allowed? I think it's

down to the individual. There's peer pressure with kids and it's about education and that starts in the home. It's unfair. That kind of stuff happened in NY with clubs like The Limelight and The Tunnel. People are going to find ways and means to do whatever they want to do, unless the organizer is himself supplying drugs within the event, that's a different story.

BPM: Do you think the recent roof-blowing evolution in musical technology allows artists to better express themselves, or is it just a longer journey, which ultimately leads to the same point?

DMiller: It's a double-edged sword. If you've got strong ideas of where you want things to go it can be fantastic. If you don't, I think it's a very long road to nowhere. It's easier now to make good music but just as difficult as it ever was to make great music. It doesn't matter what the technology is, an acoustic guitar or a studio full of electronics.

BPM: With bands like N'SYNC and The Backstreet Boys achieving such success do you feel pressure to develop and perfect elaborate dance routines on stage?

DG: We tried that in 1986. There was talk that we needed more on-stage movement, so we got a sort of dance instructor who tried to pull us into his own brand of fruity hysterics. (Much laughter.)

BPM: Do you think it's funny Moby refused to work with Madonna?

DMiller: I think just because someone like Madonna calls you up and wants you to work with her, from the outside you might say, "Why the fuck doesn't he want to do it?" But in this case I think Play was just breaking big and he was working his ass off getting around the world and touring.*

* This question was poised with funny haha joke on Madonna in mind not funny hmmmm... strange.

BPM: You all have families now, and I might as well ask you how touring is going to be with that hanging over your heads. But instead, I'm more interested in whether you feel the Teletubbies are constructive personas in the moral development of youngsters or sinister minions of Satan.

DG: My daughter has decided to get into Barney, which to me is just as Satanic. When he comes on she screams, "BARNEY!" and she's glued to the TV. Bizarre.

MG: That's evil. They watch that show and those horrible little brats are their role models. Watch out for Bob the Builder, he'll be coming to America soon.

BPM: So how about Teletubbies and Barney vs Depeche Mode in a WWF no-holds-barred cage match. Would you guys be up for that?

AF: We are after a younger market...

BPM: What kind of technology are you guys using on Exciter? In the pictures of your studio I've seen it looks as though there are a lot of analog synths lying about.

MG: That was probably Gareth Jones taking pictures in my home studio. A few 2600s. Now we tend to use more modern keyboards.

DG: At Sound Design in Santa Barbara we relied heavily on a Nord keyboard, most everything else comes from the Macs.

MG: ...along with an AK synth, although Mark Bell uses a Korg and does a lot of stuff on the emulator as well.

BPM: As a general theme Exciter seems to concern itself with love. What are some of the other titles you threw around?

MF: Most of the songs on this album do touch on a love theme. We considered Lover, Love, Freelove, Love in General, I Love You, Lovely. Martin didn't like those effeminate titles. (Laughter.)

MG: True. Most of those sound a bit mamby pamby. You might as well call it Lovey Dovey. I myself was in favor of Mark Bell's recommendation of Ladyboy. Very tough. (Laughter.)

BPM: If God does exist, what would you like to hear him say when you reach the Pearly Gates?

DMiller: Here's your laptop.



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YOUR FAVORITE DJS AND PRODUCERS GIVE THEIR THOUGHTS ON
THE BAND THAT HELPED CHANGE THE FACE
OF ELECTRONIC POP.

KING BRITT (I WANTED TO BE MARTIN GORE)

Depeche Mode was the group that brought out the dark side of my being. I remember 9th grade when I first heard *Get the Balance Right*; I nearly was in tears. It was the pop music I was looking for, very clever indeed. You had sadness, rhythm, style and pop sensibility... Fast Fashion!... I will always be a big fan, so lets have a Black Celebration.... Tonight!

DUBFIRE (DEEP DISH)

Depeche Mode was one of, if not the most influential band for me while in my youth. I mean I worshipped these guys! I had the distinction of seeing them live. In 1986 during the *Black Celebration* tour and I've pretty much seen them whenever I could ever since! Though I feel their overall sound has suffered since Alan Wilder's departure, I still continue to enjoy their music.

CHARLES FEELGOOD

I love Depeche Mode! I still have my *Route 66* remixes and my *Personal Jesus* 12 inches in my "Current Section" in my studio. I loved "Music for the Masses" and I've heard the new "Exciter" album!

KEVIN SAUNDERSON

The first time I heard *Strange Love* it sounded different from the Motown sound and disco I had been hearing. I wasn't aware of that kind of sound. It interested me because it was unique and had a high energy and electronic feel that opened the doors for me to investigate technology.

GENE FARRIS

Depeche Mode inspired the music industry by its new wave dance pace and by that it helped dance music evolve from just a basement sound to more of a household item. It inspired a lot of producers to write more music with that 'big' sound.

CHRIS BRANN

Black Celebration really turned me onto Depeche Mode. I was familiar with their earlier work but always felt it was too adolescent. This album ushered in a level of maturity to their songwriting and nice texture to their overall sound. They really started to push the envelope a little more, creating something that was sonically complex yet accessible. It was the perfect foundation for "Music For The Masses" and "Violator" to be built on.

DAVID WAXMAN

Depeche Mode have always re-invented their eclectic sound with each new album. They are one of the last remaining legends spawned from the post punk era.

JONENE

If it wasn't for Depeche Mode I would most likely not be in the industry that I am in today. They are one of the true pioneers of the underground electronic sound. They definitely paved the way for what is today's electronic dance. Thank you for the inspiration and kudos to Depeche Mode!

JASON BLAKEMORE

Black Celebration is one of the best albums of all time. Depeche Mode is one of those groups that when I listen to them in 2001, I hear things I didn't hear in 86 or 88. They've always been ahead of their time with all the electronic sounds they've used.

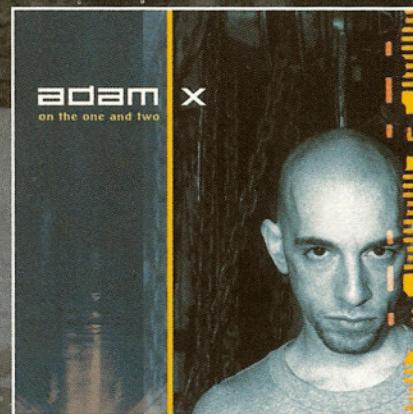
PHENIX

Depeche Mode are the masters of deep and dark dance music, from lyrics to innovative sound programming for instruments in their songs, they are unsurpassed.

LIAM KENNEDY

Depeche Mode's production has always fascinated me. It's complex, progressive, rich and was often incomprehensible to my young ears. But their lyrics always touched me on so many levels, in ways both that I could identify with and are educated by. In many ways, I feel that Depeche Mode's songs helped prepare me to live my life and make up my own mind about the world around me.

adam X
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