

Nick Cave – Dig Lazarus Dig (2008)

Written by bluesever

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1. *Dig Lazarus dig* 2. *Toodays lesson* 3. *Moonland* 4. *Night of the Lotus Eaters* 5. *Albert goes west* 6. *We call upon the author* 7. *Hold on to yourself* 8. *Lie down here and be my girl* 9. *Jesus of the moon* 10. *Midnight man* 11. *More news from nowhere* Nick Cave – Vocals, Organ, Piano, Tambourine, Sleigh Bells, Toms, Harmonica, Electric Guitar, Vibra-Slap Martyn P. Casey – Bass Thomas Wydler – Brushed Snare, Shaker, Tambourine, Drums, Hand Drums Warren Ellis – Viola, Loops, Fender Mandocaster, Tenor Guitar, Maracas, 12 String Lute, Drum Machine, Piano, Flute, Mandolin Mick Harvey – Electric Guitar, Acoustic Guitar, Bass, Organ) Jim Sclavunos – Drums, Bongos, Cowbell, Cuica, Congas, Finger Cymbals, Shaker, Maracas, Tambourine, Sleigh Bells James Johnston – Organ, Electric Guitar

Apparently, the Bad Seeds side project Grinderman injected some serious adrenaline into the equation, evidenced mightily on Dig!!! Lazarus Dig!!! This is the 14th album by Nick Cave and company. After the masterpiece that was Abattoir Blues/The Lyre of Orpheus in 2004, Cave and Warren Ellis scored a pair of films -- The Proposition and The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford, and recorded the self-titled Grinderman album with other bandmembers Martyn Casey and Jim Sclavunos. Grinderman was a howling, raucous, rock & roll racket of a set that sweat humorous garage rock blues and raw shambolic guttersnipe stroll that spread its nasty cheer to the listener. The return of the full-on Bad Seeds octet builds on this energy and emerges with an album that is at once snarling, darkly humorous, decadently sexual, and, if you are a religious Christian person, seemingly blasphemous. An obvious example is the title track that opens the album. As always, Cave's lyrics are at the center. They are the focus whether he wants them to be or not, and they certainly are here. The track kicks off with a low-end, loose-limbed bass slog and snarling guitar swagger that simultaneously recall Link Wray and Johnny Thunders. Cave re-introduces the biblical character that Jesus raised from the dead as Larry. Larry gets resurrected in the 21st century. He is utterly lost as he rambles about, utterly disoriented and wondering why the hell he was woken from his dream sleep in the first place. (Think Martin Scorsese's Last Temptation of Christ set in the current day with its Lazarus stumbling around half blind and lost, one foot here, one in the next world.) Larry, who no longer has a sense of who or where he is, partakes of every greasy pleasure known -- sex, dope, violence -- and ends up in the joint, and eventually homeless before ending

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up back in his hole in the ground. Cave wryly explains at the end, "poor Larry." There are bullhorn sounds in the backdrop, sheer noise wafting in from the margins, and the band pumping itself up with every verse. Cave talks more than he sings here, he's reciting something that feels free form but it's rhythmically dead-on and very tightly focused.

Tracy Pew of the Birthday Party could have played the bass rumble that introduces "Today's Lesson." It's all popping riff, one line played over and over as the band brings out organs, acoustic and electric guitars, Ellis playing an electric mandolin, and Cave offering the tale of a young woman who wakes from a dream with a jawbone stuck inside the waistband of her jeans like a gun, who has been repeatedly violated in her sleep by the sandman; when she wakes up all hell breaks loose in the form of a "real good time tonite." She's ready to party, to get while the getting's good -- you are free to interpret whatever that might be.

Dig!!! Lazarus Dig!!! isn't all clamorous craziness, however. For starters, it's not as raw as Grinderman. Nick Launay reins it in while extending the textural and dimensional reach of the Bad Seeds wonderfully rootsy yet complex and swampy sound. There are many different kinds of songs here, like the creepy crawly "Night of the Lotus Eaters" that feels like Night of the Living Dead meets Hammer studios meets the Voodoo Gods of Haiti on 'ludes and cheap wine. It's dark, sinister, slimy, and addictive. "Albert Goes West" suggests the Dream Syndicate at their wildest with squalling guitars. When he says "The light upon the rainy streets/Offers Many Reflections/And I won't be held responsible/for my actions..." only to the same protagonist asks in a Concord bar "Do you wanna dance?/Do you wanna groove?" He means it. It's not as absurd as it sounds and in the context of his character, it's unhinged. When the band screams, crunches, and squeals out of the tuner in its music, they sweetly sing like drunken devilish doo wop boys meeting "Sha La La," right to the fade. Only Cave could get away with lines like "Our myomixtoid kids spraddle the streets/we've shunned them from the greasy grind/the poor things/They look so sad & old/As they mount us from behind...." and "I go guring down the street/young people gather round my feet/as me things-but I don't know where to start." All the while the band chants "doop doop doop" behind him.

In "We Call Upon the Author," Cave has become a cross between the great 20th century poets of history and the outer edges of mental myths like Charles Olson and John Berryman who happen to play rock & roll. The latter of these writers is celebrated in the same tune for writing like "wet papier mache/and going out the "Heming-way." This occurs a mere line after he castigates the late Charles Bukowski for being a jerk. "Hold on to Yourself" brings the swirling cacophony the Bad Seeds can summon live with Ellis playing an electric viola along with a pulsing Farfisa organ and acoustic and electric guitars atop sparse drums. It's a sad love song that might have been a rock outtake from The Assassination of Jesse James, if Jesse were singing it in the current era: "I'm so far away from you/I'm pacing up and down my room/Does Jesus only love a man who loses?" The cinematic reach of the track is alternately heartbroken,

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lost, and furious. "Lie Down Here (And Be My Girl)" is feverish, nightmarish, desperate, and as elegantly ruined and unrepentant as Nikolai in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. Amid the soaring guitars, a backdrop of old rock & roll chorus lines, psychedelic fuzztone leads, and that propulsive bassline and popping snare, Cave's protagonist exhorts his beloved not to worry about the life pouring out of him, and just take in the moment as an eternal one, where all comes down and rises at once. Ellis' moaning Gypsy violin, electric mandolin, a spooky Mick Harvey piano, and a one-two rhythm section shuffle offer another dark and hopeless love song in "Jesus of the Moon," but its drama and punch are almost theatrical in scope. It's dead serious, no camp here; it's all passion, pathos, and an unwillingness to let go despite the fact of having already done so. The last line in the song is, "I say hello." One wonders to what? The abandoned lover? Oblivion? With "More News from Nowhere," the album closes uncharacteristically on what may seem at first to be a light moment. Musically and lyrically it walks the line between Bob Dylan's wry, bluesy, sprawling observations on 21st century life and the light, sarcastic celebration of decadence in Lou Reed's "Walk on the Wild Side."

What it all comes down to is that *Dig!!! Lazarus Dig!!!* is a Bad Seeds record that ups the ante once again. The elegance and poetry, the drama and tension of Cave's more poetic notions are balanced by his Sade-ian humor and social criticisms and his willingness to blend flesh and spirit as two sides of the same coin. Along with this comes a band's sound that is incredibly evolved and unself-conscious. It's an album where a fire breathing, rootsy, garage rock band creates a soundtrack to modern fun house life: where the stakes are high, the odds are hopelessly stacked, and there is little left to do but laugh at its dreadful irony. ---Thom Jurek, AllMusic Review

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