

Gary Numan is known today as one of synthesizer-driven electronic music's patron saints. His image and sound have been cited as inspiration for many of today's alternative artists, while Numan himself is still very much an active creator with a new autobiography out called *(R)evolution*, and a new full-length release, *Intruder*. We caught up with Gary Numan while at home in the UK to talk about his career, how music has shaped and saved his life, and the important question of whether electronic music is emotionally expressive.



Interview by Elizabeth Rhodes | Photographer Chris Corner

Your initial releases were so successful at a time when there was Ultravox, The Human League, and other acts doing electronic music that was pushing through and having some success, but you quickly became the 'star' from the media's point of view. Since then, your relationship with the press has waxed and waned. Where do you stand with the music press now?

Gary Numan : The first few years were a bit unpleasant, but I don't have any bad feelings about that. The British press in particular were really quite vicious. I have no problem with the fact that they didn't like the music. It was different and it was

unusual. It wasn't guitar based, so it's not unreasonable to accept that there was some resistance to that and hostility to that. The level to which it got personal, I didn't expect, and that was unfortunate. But the fact is that they didn't like it. Absolutely, fair enough. You know, there's plenty of things out there that I don't like so if I was reviewing it, I would say so. There were quite a few years, mid-80s onwards, when they ignored me completely. I got used to that. I would put an album out, fans would buy it in the first week or two at the most and then that would be the end of it. The press never talked about it. I thought I'd prefer that to what they were saying before, so I wasn't worried about that. Then about '94 my

music changed a bit, got heavier and darker. Ever since then, things have been much, much better. You know, that's a long time now. That took 27 years, so it's a long time. Most of my career, therefore, has been more positive with the press and I have absolutely no problems about the way it is now or has been for some time. I certainly have no bad feelings about the way it was before. The reviews of my early live shows said that I was wooden on stage. Well, that was really true. I look back at the way I was then compared to the way I am now, and you can see where I learned how to do it over those years, and I wasn't particularly comfortable or confident when I started. So again, I have no problem with regard to reviews. Some of those early albums have been revisited over the last five or ten years where they had bad reviews to begin with and they're now considered to be groundbreaking and innovative and all that. So, from my point of view, it's just gone to this fantastic arc into a much more positive place. I'm really, really glad that it's better now because it was pretty shit when it started.

It sounds like it was a process of the press understanding what your artistry and body of work was about before it started to warm up to you. That's the ongoing relationship between what the artist creates and how the audience receives it. Maybe in the 90s there were enough people understanding darker and electronic music for it to be embraced which made you a sort of martyr, a St. Sebastian character in the music press that, for better or for worse, gained a lot of respect towards you from people within the music industry.

GN : I think you're right, that's when it started to happen. Trent Reznor started to say positive things and over a space of a couple of years there was this wave of people saying things like Prince and other people. I think that made a massive difference as well, them saying the things that they said, and the songs being covered. All of that was really important to my credibility and I think that encouraged people to revisit. You know, Trent's talking about this album [*Telekon* in 1980] that has been massively important for his Nine Inch Nails development and yet, that got like a one out of ten rating when it came out. So, then it got a two-page special feature on how groundbreaking and innovative it was in the NME and that was the most vicious of all of them! I think everybody said when it first came out that it was rated one out of ten with the word "shit" next to it or something like that. I'm glad they changed their mind but that's why you can't take that much notice of any of it, good or bad, because it's just someone's opinion. The thing that's most important for me, which I didn't always appreciate but I certainly have come to from the mid-90s onwards, is that as far as the making of the albums are concerned, the only thing that you must think about is the music itself. It must be as good as it can possibly be. So, you don't think about radio play, you're not thinking about record companies, A&R men and all these suggestions that you're given and this pressure that sometimes you'll get to evolve the direction or go into a different one. I mustn't think about any of that. All you must think about is the music so that

that album is finished, you can honestly say 100% that it is the best music I could have made at that time. There's no songs in there for radio, there's no songs in there to please the fan base, none of that shit. Whatever you feel at that moment, that's what you have to write. When it's finished, I'll work as hard as anyone to try and sell it and I'll be as tactical as you'd like. But in the making of the record, absolutely not, that must not come into it. I didn't do that from the mid-80s to '92. I was corrupted by the desire to salvage the career and get back to where I was, so you start to write for all the wrong reasons and it's soul destroying. I wasn't even any good at trying to write hit songs because I have no gift for writing hit music. I don't think I understand it very well.

This reminds me of the interview you did with Amoeba in 2013 for their "What's in my Bag" YouTube series. The albums you mentioned were T. Rex's *Electric Warrior* (1971), Ultravox's self-titled *Ultravox!* (1977), Depeche Mode's *Songs of Faith and Devotion* (1993), Kraftwerk's *The Man Machine* (1978), Be-Bop Deluxe's *Sunburst Finish* (1976), Marilyn Manson's *Mechanical Animals* (1998), and Nine Inch Nails' *The Downward Spiral* (1994). You talked a lot about *Songs of Faith and Devotion* being a turning point album for you. What significance do those albums have to you today and would you put anything different in your bag?

GN : Nothing. *Electric Warrior* was the one that really made me decide that music was going to be my life. *Sunburst Finish*, I just really loved it. I worked with Bill Nelson [of Be-Bop Deluxe] on one album, and sadly, we didn't get on at all. He found me far too crude, and I think I found him far too pretentious and pompous. I wish I'd been a different person at the time with more patience for people that thought differently to me. The more I realized that he thought I was shallow and vulgar, the more I played up to it way beyond what I really was. We were talking about creativity, why we got into music and so on and I said some horribly shallow thing that I didn't even mean just because we weren't getting on. He believes that creative people have creativity beamed to them from across space. I thought that was the biggest load of shit I ever heard in my life. So, our relationship just fell apart and I really regret it because he's an amazing player and there was no need to be like that. You know, if you think that, fair enough. For me, that's a bit wacky, but that's okay. I shouldn't have been making fun of that. I've done a lot of growing up since then. Anyway, I'll probably never speak to Bill again. I really regret that. But *Songs of Faith and Devotion* was absolutely pivotal in helping me find a new direction to get darker, a bit heavier. In the early 90s my creativity was just nowhere, absolutely nowhere. I was writing really bad songs, just not me. I was really in a bad place. My career was nowhere, and I was massively in debt. Personal life was all to shit. It was just a really bad period and creatively I was struggling. No imagination, I was just concerned about the career and trying to save it. When *Songs of Faith and Devotion* came along it was so brilliant and so much better than anything I'd ever done, let alone what I was doing then. I just thought, give up. So, I went back to making music for a hobby. I had no contract then and there was no obvious sign I'd ever get another one because I was writing pretty badly. I had no ideas and didn't

know what to write about. I looked terrible. Everything was awful. But I met my wife [Gemma], I went out with her for the first time in '92, and it was her that played me *Songs of Faith and Devotion* for the first time. It had been out for a little while and I was just sort of reclusive, I wasn't engaging in much at all. It was her that introduced me to Nine Inch Nails, actually. For that alone, she was hugely important in me thinking and hearing another way of doing things. The thing that was important was because I gave up on the career by default, it goes back to being a hobby because you still want to do it, you're just not thinking about a career anymore. It was as if taking that pressure and that worry away was like a big weight on the creative part of me. As soon as that was thrown to one side because I wasn't saving the career anymore, all the imagination just came pouring out again. So, I did an album that came out in '94 [called] *Sacrifice*, which is totally different to the one before. Much heavier, much darker. The subject matter of it was things I was really interested in. Those passions and things that I felt when I was younger, when I first started making music, all of that came back. I really enjoyed making the record and I didn't think I'd get a record deal for it. It was like falling in love with making music all over again. This new attitude of, "it's just the music, don't listen to anything else," all that was cemented with that record. Without songs of *Songs of Faith and Devotion*, I don't think it would have happened, certainly not quite to the extent that it did. So, without my wife being there, I probably wouldn't have heard it. Without hearing it, it wouldn't have made me think differently.

Have you been able to give this feedback about the album to the members of Depeche Mode?

GN : Well, I became really good friends with Alan Wilder, several years later. I think Alan Wilder is probably the actual genius behind *Songs of Faith and Devotion*. You know, Martin writes the songs, and they are brilliant, but I've heard demos of "Walking in my Shoes", and you wouldn't recognize it. It's sort of a faster, skippy, happy tune and it becomes this sort of mid paced doom anthem. And that's Alan, his contribution to that album and *Violator* (1990) as well as some of the others are amazing. I love it. They have a very different sound now compared to what he did. And so yeah, I've said to him many times, "you know, you unwittingly saved my career."

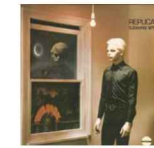
How do you respond to that? How does he respond to that?

GN : He's lovely. He's so modest. Anyway, I think he punched me. I love him. He's great.

In your autobiography (*R)evolution*, you mentioned that while in Tubeway Army you were writing short stories and turning them into songs. You also named sci-fi authors and books that were very influential to you. Are there any films that inspired the visuals you wanted to recreate in songs or in your live performances?

GN : I love science fiction films when they are done well but as far as influence is concerned, not really. My interest in science fiction when I was younger was typical: robots, spaceships, all that sort of thing. My interest in science fiction now isn't even science fiction, it is what

they call science fantasy, where there's no technology and there's magic and swords. It's different, it's brutal. The only thing I've read recently that was vaguely science fiction was the *Foundation* series by Isaac Asimov, and only because I saw it coming on as a TV show, so I wanted to get ahead of it. I'm deaf now, my hearing is really shit, so when I'm watching TV, I sometimes struggle to follow. I have the



captions underneath but often miss things. But that aside, pretty much everything I've read for 25 years or more it's all been to do with science fantasy, which has science in the name that has nothing to do with science. The stuff that I've written book-wise outside of songs is all to do with that sort of thing. I was writing science fiction in '79. "Cars" isn't but the album it comes from there are quite a few science fiction songs like "Metal" and "M.E." and *Replicas* (1979) was very science fiction. But the thing is, even that album was actually about what people would become in the next forty or fifty years or so. So, it's about how technology would be employed and how we have realized that we were the problem, and it would get rid of us, which is exactly what *Intruder* (2021) is saying but for a very different reason. *Intruder* is identifying humans as a problem, and it needs to get rid of us. The previous album *Savage (Songs from a Broken World)* [2017] was looking at what people will become post climate apocalypse in the future. So often when I've dabbled in science fiction, it's the human element of what would happen that I'm interested in. There's endless amounts of songs about brokenhearted people, "if I was the last man on earth" and that sort of thing. I wonder what it would feel like if you were the last machine, and you couldn't die but you could feel at a time when a machine can be self-aware, it has feelings, and it has very human-like functions. If the world ended, but you're still there, a bit like that film *WALL-E* (2008). We are always worried about people, but once machines are able to think and feel, they're as essential as we are. How would it be if you were the last one where the people are gone, or the machines have stopped serving you and you're going to be there for 1000 years or maybe forever? So, I wanted to write about that.

When I mentioned artists like Kraftwerk and The Human League, they were making music that was electronic but one in a mechanized way and the other in a way that seems to be more influenced by Giorgio Moroder and disco. To me, what has always made your music stand out is the lyrics, using metaphor and referencing other creative works through the storytelling we discussed and more recently digging into content that is deeply personal and emotive. So, it begs that question, is electronic music expressive?

GN : I think it's the most expressive of all. If you think about a guitar, a piano, a trumpet, or any conventional instrument, it has a very limited range in which it works. It has a sound of its own: a trumpet sounds like a trumpet, a guitar sounds like a guitar, and you can plug it into some pedals and mess with it a bit. But essentially, it's a guitar. With a synthesizer you can not only play the melody that you write, which has its own degree of expression, you can search for the

very sound itself that expresses what you're trying to say. It's easier for me in a way because I am nearly always trying to express something a bit gloomy. I'm not miserable at all, I'm really happy. The thing that I'm fascinated in is not the thing that I am. The thing I am fascinated in is dark and unpleasant at times. With a synthesizer, it's quite possible to come up with a sound that is every bit as expressive, if not more so than any melody that you could come up with. Just the sound itself can make you feel uneasy or oppressed or whatever, depending on the sound you're looking for, of course. So, in that sense, I think electronic music is able to be far more emotional and expressive than any other kind of music because it can do all the things that other music can. It has the tunes, the melodies, the interlocking harmonies and all that stuff that anyone else can do, but you can find the sound itself. So, you're adding two very, very powerful things together: sound and melody. And if you do it right, then I think that's better than anything else that's out there. So, when it was criticized in the early days of being cold, there's some truth in that, I think. But that's more to do with the limitations of the technology we were using then. And mostly, I think the lack of skill of people like me to be able to find the right sorts of sounds. So, we were learning. I'd made three albums and the total amount of time I had around synthesizers was probably about [twenty to twenty-four] hours because that's what we did. I didn't own one and couldn't afford them so I would rent one from a studio for a two-hour session, do everything I could, and then I had to go away because I ran out of money. I'd made two electronic albums and I still didn't even know what the dials did on one synthesizer. I was doing interviews and magazines asked me all technical questions. I didn't know what I was talking about, like "what do you think about the envelope filter" and Minimoog—I had no idea. They all thought I knew what I was talking about. I was number one, but not a clue. So, I learned how to get better at it. The machines themselves got better; they became more controllable. You could program it in such a way that you press your initial key down and then the way you press it afterwards, the after pressure affected the program. So that sound started to take on a life of its own when it could breathe and move. It was amazing. It just got better and better from then on. So, the technology got better, the way that you could employ those changes and improvements, you learned how to do that. Electronic music just got more and more capable. I don't entirely agree that it was cold to begin with, but it was definitely inferior to what came later, as far as being expressive was concerned. But even there it was better than guitars for me. I know a lot of people would disagree with that. The first time I heard a synthesizer and the first time I played one on my own was when I went into the studio, and one was left behind and they let me have a go of it. The sound that came out of it, the power of it. It was the first time I'd ever felt a sound as much as heard it. You heard it coming into speakers and you felt it through the floor. You could feel it up through your body. It was just so overwhelming, an absolutely amazing moment and in that moment, I realized that my future was changed. The album I was there to make would not be the ultimate goal now. It was going to be different. This thing was going to change the outcome that I was going to make over the next few days. I

honestly believed it was going to change music, not what I was doing but that machine, because at the time I thought that very few people even knew about it, which is ridiculous because everybody knew about it. I was like Johnny-come-lately because I didn't know The Human League were out there doing their thing in Sheffield. I didn't know Orchestral Manoeuvres [in the Dark] were in Liverpool doing their own thing. I knew Kraftwerk but Kraftwerk was so synthetic it hadn't really turned me on to it. I liked what they did but it had so little emotion in it.

That's the 'cold' electronic music.

GN : Yeah. It hadn't touched me in a way that I thought, "Oh, I want to do that." I was horribly ignorant of Ultravox who had made three albums by then, which were amazing. So, I made my album and had a massive argument with the record company to try to convince them to release it because it wasn't what they wanted. They wanted a punk album because that's what we were doing, we were a punk band. I found the synthesizer, thought it was the future of music, thought I was the first person to find it—which was ridiculous—but I knew we were at the front end of something and that was my argument with them. I said, you can make me make a punk album if you want. But punk is already fading, you're gonna make me tag on to the end of something that's already dead and buried as far as I'm concerned. Or we put this album out, do what I really want to do and we're going to be at the front end of something that could be revolutionary, this could change music in the years to come and you could be right at the front end of it now. They didn't get it for a bit, so we had a massive argument and it got really childish, really pathetic. But they went with it, and it didn't do anything special, but it wasn't a disaster and they let me make another one. I made another one a few months later, I mean, three albums in twelve months was prolific at that time. But the second one went to number one and had a massive single. I felt pretty vindicated with that. Actually, that was quite a nice moment. But then all the weirdness started happening.

For me, a standout album in your catalogue is definitely *Exile* (1997). That album has been a friend I can turn to if I just need to bring myself back to center or come home to myself, if that makes sense. As we've been discussing the emotionality of electronic music, I can't help but think about that album. Your vocals are vulnerable and haunting and then sometimes they're powerful and fierce. So, to me, that album embodies what we're talking about here of making electronic music that deeply hits the heart. Do you feel the same way about *Exile*?

GN : I do love it. Actually, it's very unusual for anyone to mention that one, so I'm really proud of that. I think it sort of slid under the radar a little bit that one, but I loved it. I thought with *Exile* that a lot of things I'd been trying to do came together and I felt like it was much more accomplished than what I'd done before. I was massively into my anti-religion thing; the whole album takes the point of view of, "What if I'm wrong? What if there is a God? And yet, this is the world we live in? What does that mean? How terrifying would that be?" So that's what it's all about. If God was real, then

evil explains everything. I really enjoyed that because when you've got a little axe to grind it was a lovely way of getting it out, writing things like "Prophecy," "Dead Heaven," "Dark" and those songs. I still do "Dark" and some of those songs live now from time to time. I really like that record.

With your latest release *Intruder*, I immediately noticed that the lyrics are written in the first-person perspective from the Earth. Especially poignant is "Betrayed" and the title track "Intruder." Tell us more about that.

GN : The whole idea of the album *Intruder* is the Earth explaining how it feels. The reason the first song is called "Betrayed" is because that was the first thing that came to my mind as to how it must feel. I tried to find different ways of exploring that same idea, because you could probably say everything that you're feeling in one song if you wanted to, but there are other ways of looking at it and other things to think about. "Saints and Liars," is the contradiction, particularly in America, between the deep faith of people and the belief in religion. Speaking as an atheist, the fact that millions of people can believe in something for which I see no evidence for whatsoever and yet, many of those same people will discount climate change for which there is a mountain of evidence—the contradictory nature of faith versus fact or even common sense—is shocking. I wrote a song many years ago called "Absolution". It's making the same point about the things that people would do or that they would justify either because of religion or because of love, people would do awful things if they believe that their God would wish it. The fact that they would support a God that would wish something that evil is another mystery to me. So, it's been something that has bothered me for a very long time. With *Intruder*, I was able to let the Earth say all those things because when you're going to write something like that you obviously see it from a human's point of view, so you put human feelings and worries and whatever onto this planet. It's not just that the Earth is speaking, it's nature as a system. The idea that nature as a system would have a mechanism for dealing with something that it would identify as an enemy or as an infestation, I don't think is far-fetched and I don't think it's science fiction. Now, I'm not a scientist or have any skills or intelligence in that area whatsoever. But it just seems to me that a system as complex as the one that we live in would surely have some sort of mechanism to deal with such an issue. It strikes me that human beings themselves must surely be one of the rare mistakes that nature makes. It doesn't make many. Nature is an incredibly brilliant system of multi-millions of interlocking species. It is also incredibly brutal and vicious and unpleasant. Another reason for being an atheist. But it works, it has kind of a brutal harmony to it until you put us in a picture. We've got humans in the picture, and it all starts to fall apart: mass extinctions, dwindling resources, temperature, all the things that are going on now. So, it strikes me that with us, nature made a mistake; one level too many of curiosity. You know, one degree too many of ingenuity or intelligence, opposable thumbs—terrible mistake, shouldn't have done that. We should not be here, and I think nature has realized that.

With the album there were already lyrics of a song with the idea that the Earth would fight back against us and then Covid came along. To me, it just meant yes, it's happening. So, I wrote this song called "The Gift", which is about Covid specifically, but it feeds in perfectly to what the album, as a whole, is saying. I started to talk about Covid as being the first of many that the Earth would employ of ever more sophisticated, ever more deadly over the next few years until we cook the planet. But then I started to think maybe it's not the first, maybe we'd been fighting the planet for the last 200 years, we just hadn't realized. There's been this silent war, where maybe you go as far back as the Industrial Revolution in Europe and that's where it probably saw us going one step too far. It probably started then with typhoid or whatever disease, so our ingenuity and our intelligence has meant that we've been able to fight back with the planet for all this time. So here we are now with Covid, the latest of them.

I meant to be making another album, *Intruder* is actually a staggered double, so there's going to be a second one. But I don't want it to be the Earth talking again, as such, because I think I've done that already with this one, but it needs to be connected to it. The idea of this silent war that we've been having, that we're arguably now just becoming aware of, that could be a good way to go with the next one. *Intruder* is what I think the Earth is thinking, probably fighting back, and the next one is this idea that we are actually at war and asks, "Should we win it?" I don't think we should, if you're talking about the planet and its survival, what it needs. As much as I love my life and my children, I think as a species we are awful, and I don't think we should be here. So, there's not a great deal of optimism within *Intruder*.

It's a mirror to what's happening in the world right now. It's not a particularly optimistic time.

GN : I'm not massively hopeful. If you're on the planet and you're seeing what's going on and the rate at which it is accelerating and stupidity that's being spoken a high level, you can't honestly be that optimistic, your hope can only lie in the fact that [the Earth] will be able to get rid of this either by culling us down to so few numbers that we can't do the damage that we're doing now, or better still, get rid of us completely. So that's really what I'm sort of trying to develop for the next one.

How is ritual involved in the way you create?

GN : I wouldn't say as a ritual there is a certain discipline to recording time, but that's really boring actually, because it has to do with children. I like to be there for them in the morning and I like to be there when they come home. I'm away enough touring so I don't want to be away when I'm home, so I make sure that I work when they're not around. I want us as a family to be as untouched by this as it can possibly be, so I don't want to take my worries, either a bad day in the studio or something's not gone well and I'm a bit stressed, I don't want to take that indoors and load that on them. So, I've become really good at compartmentalizing this sort of thing, so as much as that could be seen as ritual.

I think the creative side of it, creative people in general, are very much like a sponge. You know, we're just soaking up things all the time: a conversation about music or film, a book you read, a phrase, a bit of news, a sound when you're outside, the smells, whatever, it's just going in all the time. You don't even know it, but it's all just going in and at some point, when you're thinking about a new album, perhaps you "squeeze" it and all that stuff just comes out, but now it's all mixed together, and this entirely new different mix of stuff comes out. And that's what you use, that's what you write with. Whenever I squeeze the sponge of my creativity, it's a very dark little mix that comes out.

When I start to write lyrics for any particular song, I very rarely have any clear idea of what I'm trying to say. The music will be done first, always. You're just making a piece of music because it makes you feel something, and you develop it, and it moves and has its dynamics. But it all makes sense from a musical point of view and then you let that play and see what comes to mind because the mood of that music will guide you. So, in the sense that you're driven towards a lyric or a theme or an idea within certain parameters, I have a little two seat sofa at the back of the studio, and I turn on the music and have it looping. I just sit back there and wait; I start writing things down. Words come to mind, and you'll start to sing along a little bit just making noises or sounds just to see if the flow of melody works without putting words in. I have a weird notation thing that I do little dots and dashes and curved lines in it. It's a way of writing down what you need to sing—not the words, but the length and the syllables, so that when you do write the narrative fits perfectly, you're kind of creating the glove that your hand will perfectly fit into. You work out what you're meant to work out, where your voice needs to go and then find something that fits, write something poetical that will fit seamlessly to that music. So, I love that part of it that's nearest at the end of it, that's when the soul of it comes out. What you've built up until then is the shell, then when you do the lyrics, you put the essence into it so it's really important that those things work together. I think that you let that lyric form because of what you're listening to and it's a really enjoyable process.

The moment where it becomes ritual is when you sit down on that sofa with the music looping, you go into a meditation of sorts, waiting for that invocation to occur where you know what to do to further develop the song and the lyrics come to you. In *(R)evolution* you talked about The Old Grey Whistle Test and how you were very specific about the lighting for that performance.

GN : Just white light, no colors and lit from the floors so we created shadows. I thought that would be really difficult because everything was always colorful and bright, so I thought, "Well, I'll ask anyway." They were great and they seemed to be really happy that somebody was interested in the lighting and making it look different. So, they were really accommodating. I moved my own keyboard a couple of inches and apparently, I'm not allowed to do that because of the

union, so I got told off for that. But apart from that, they were lovely, and it really made a difference. We looked different to anyone else on there, regardless of the performance, or the image, just for the lighting we looked different. Every time I'd watch Top of the Pops everyone always looked at the camera with a smile and I wasn't going to do that either.

You've been referred to as an "alien" of sorts in the press for as long as you've been making music. Much of this seems to come from the stage persona we see of Gary Numan: the icy, aloof creature shown in otherworldly or future-sci settings. In footage from your early performances and tours, you appear to look beyond the audience instead of at them. Did you want the audience to see you as an isolated figure, or would there be another adjective? Is this part of a character you've developed or is there a purpose behind this stage persona?

GN : No, that would work. When I was doing songs like "Are 'Friends' Electric?" and "Down in the Park" they were all from *Replicas* and that was based on loads of short stories, a collection of short stories I'd written. The image I was using was a character from one of the stories, "The Machman", which is what many years later they made the *Terminator* films about much the same sort of thing. They were a machine with cloned human skin so everything felt normal and the only way you could tell that we weren't human was they couldn't get the eyes right at that time. So, I was a character, a machine. It was important to me to try to create that sense of, "I look like you, but I'm not like you." Not having colors seemed to be important. Like an instinct, I think you shouldn't have colorful things here. The makeup was white, the clothes were black, and I didn't smile. Well, I did a little bit after a couple of performances because it was number one and I was really happy. I was trying not to be happy in the moment because I was trying to see it through.

In footage from those early performances, you and the band were sometimes backlit by a large screen, making the band members look like silhouettes. Was that all part of creating an austere vibe on stage?

GN : I've had a few problems with that over the years because I've always seen the show slightly differently to the band at times. I've seen it more like you're creating a visual experience and the band wants to be seen and say, "there's never any lights on me!" That's because if you're lit up for all the songs, it spoils it a little bit, so I need you to be in silhouette because that looks really effective. The keyboard players sort of rebel slightly by having very large keyboard lights. We do come to a bit more of a middle ground.

I've got Asperger's and I'm not good with eye contact. When I'm talking face to face, I don't look people in the eyes for more than five seconds and not less than three. If it's more than five seconds, I think I'm being too intense. If it's less than three, I think I'm not giving enough interest. This is what I've worked out, I've probably read it somewhere. Having a conversation face to face is actually quite stressful for me because it's really hard work. The thing about

being on stage, it's not so bad now, but when I started it was really bad. I would look at the back of the hall, always, and that's where my gaze for the most part would stay and that was because I couldn't take the risk of looking people in the eyes. If I saw an expression that was 'wrong', it would mess me up. A whole range of weird problems. Some of the whole image thing, the way I moved and the way I looked was calculated. But a great deal of it wasn't; it was to do with Asperger's and the mechanisms that I had to deal with that. You're put in a very strange place for somebody with Asperger's in front of numbers of people and you're the center of attention. So, you have all these mechanisms that you employ, that only you are aware that other people can mess up and not even know because they didn't know there was something in place. When you see it working, it kind of begins to grow and you adapt your own mechanisms to try to fit into that. And all that's going on while you're just meant to be there performing. There's all this other stuff going on around you.

Now I've been doing it my whole life and I'm as comfortable standing on a stage as I am sitting down to have a dinner. It's all I've ever known and everything that could go wrong has gone wrong at some point and you just deal with it, all the things that you were worried about—falling over and forgetting the words—that has happened many, many times and so it's not a big deal. I've got forty-odd years of experience of touring around the world and so I'm really comfortable now and with that comfort comes a relaxation of fear and nervousness until there's none. You can just live the moment and it's a fantastic moment to live in. To be at the age I am now and still be able to do it and enjoy it and feel like you're better at it than you've ever been, it's a lovely place to be. I've still got Asperger's and it still shows itself in certain areas. The thing about Asperger's for me, when you are able to identify or recognize the Asperger's traits you can modify them, recognizing that particular thing you just did or said that upset somebody and you understand why it upset somebody, I try not to do that again. I use the word 'mechanical' too often, but it is like a mechanical process so you can engineer yourself almost to be less inappropriate over time. My wife helped me enormously. So, you get better, and the Asperger's becomes far harder to spot, but it's still there. I don't want to lose it because there are so many advantages to having it that far outweigh the price that you pay for having it.

You talked about this as well as mental health issues when you appeared on the "Headnoise" podcast in February 2021 hosted by Chris Corner and Janine Gezang. Why is it important to you to be outspoken about your own mental health challenges as well as your Asperger's Syndrome diagnosis?

GN : I don't remember ever wanting to deny it or hide it. Mental health in general wasn't really discussed in public and there wasn't any question about it or any forums that you could take part in to deal with it. When I first started to mention it, I got lots of people saying I was very brave. I thought, "What's brave about that?" It's just that's what I've got. I never thought it was an illness and I never saw it as a handicap or disability or mental health issue. What it

gives you is so useful, and I wouldn't change it for the world. I've had so much going on, there's quite a lot of pressure on me at the moment. Life is happening to us all and the pandemic has messed it all up for everybody. I'm worried about getting sick because it could affect my lungs and the rest of my career could be fucked. We're all going through this and worried about it in different ways and how it affects us. People talk about Asperger's people as having obsessive tendencies, as though that's a bad thing. I don't see anything bad about that at all. What's bad about being obsessive about something—if you're on an aeroplane, you would want your pilot to be obsessed about flying an aeroplane. You want someone that is absolutely obsessed about flying aeroplanes. So, there are your areas where being obsessive is a really, really good thing and I think music is one of them. To be obsessed about music, if that's your life, that can only be a good thing as far as I'm concerned. There are so many useful things about having Asperger's and a few that are not so good. I think, ultimately, it's better to have it than not, I wonder about people that don't have it, life must be more difficult for them.

Last question: did you devise your album artwork, especially the early LPs, to be symbolic in a specific way using color, objects, etc. to communicate the theme of the album?



GN : I wish I had a better answer for this so I could make you think I was clever, but no. It's an absolute rip-off of a great painting by [René] Magritte called "The Pleasure Principle" ["Le Principe du plaisir"]. If you look at the painting, it's a man in exactly the same pose but with light coming out of his head and a rock on his desk. Because *Pleasure Principle* (1979) had a certain sort of science fiction element to it, I wanted to just modernize it. Obviously, I wanted my head in it, because I'm vain, rather than the light coming out of it. So instead of the rock, we had a little pyramid made. The idea of the pyramid actually was because when you talked about machines and robots back then, people were always trying to make them as human as possible. If you want to have a machine that is going to travel around then the pyramids, the most stable shape, their center of gravity is right at the bottom, is not going to tip over. So, if we were going to have robots—I was wrong, obviously, but—they would actually be a pyramid shape or square. I was just trying to add common sense to the whole science fiction argument. When we went on tour, I had the two pyramids that would come out and spin around just to see that through. It was my sort of clumsy attempt at suggesting what robots would actually be like in the future and I didn't realize that technology was going to advance the way it did and now we have robot dogs who can dance and jump. It went to places I never expected. || A

Find more information about Gary Numan's music and books at his website garynuman.com and follow him on Instagram @garynuman.