

## Q&amp;A



Scarlett Page

## SMASHING PUMPKINS

Billy Corgan's latest features familiar-but-fresh sounds and a new Crüe

SMASHING PUMPKINS FRONTMAN Billy Corgan doesn't mean to burst your bubble—but if you're thinking "hopeful and positive" when you hear "Monuments," a standout track on the new Smashing Pumpkins album *Monuments to an Elegy*, then you're mistaken. Speaking from Chicago, Corgan says that the line "I feel all right tonight" is "kind of meant to be sarcastic"—a jokey take on the feel-good refrains you hear in car commercials. That's not to say this self-professed cynic is in an especially negative place. *Monuments* is an excellent, energetic album pitched somewhere between classic '90s Pumpkins psych-grunge and the synth-driven sounds that pass for alternative today.

It's also a continuation of *Teargarden* by *Kaleidoscope*, the 44-song cycle Corgan began in 2009 and plans to finish with the album *Day for Night*, due out in 2015. Although Corgan, 47, has always been the mastermind behind the Pumpkins and now stands as the lone remaining original member, *Monuments* hinges on his collaborations with producer Howard Willing, guitarist Jeff Schroeder and Mötley Crüe drummer Tommy Lee.

However, hiring a character like Tommy Lee raises a few eyebrows, as has Corgan's recent appearance on the cover of *PAWS Chicago*, a charity magazine promoting no-kill animal shelters. But Corgan isn't making

any apologies for working with Lee, or for cuddling with two of the kittens he helped rescue. If fans aren't willing to read past the headlines and understand what this animal-loving alt-rock legend is trying to accomplish with his life and music, they can take a hike.

### Why release this album now?

It just felt right. I got sick of working on music and in the back of my head thinking, "No one's ever going to listen to this." For every person who says it's a qualitative issue: I'm sorry, I don't buy that argument. Everybody's in the same boat right now. Overall, music is getting more middling to satisfy the casual consumer. You're either driven to being a

niche artist or a heritage artist, where you continue to play in your past. I find the whole thing maddening. I had to find something I could fully invest in and get excited about.

### Does this nine-song format fit with the concept of *Teargarden*?

*Teargarden*, as strange as it sounds, was never meant to be a musical thing as much as it was a spiritual journey: "If I start here, I should end up in a better place by the time I'm done with this." And even though I've had to augment the process as I've gone along, I have ended up in that better place. I think it has been effective. I'd have to go into a rambling dissertation into why that is.

### Go for it!

(Laughs) In the beginning of 2009, when [drummer] Jimmy [Chamberlin] left the band, I made the decision to continue under the name Smashing Pumpkins, which you knew was going to be a problem. So how do you do that in a way that feels good? For me, it was going back to "Why do I make music? Who do I want to make music with?" There was a collective voice that was saying, "If only he'd go back to *blank* and/or go away"—neither choice being desirable to me. I knew I had to get back under the hood of the Smashing Pumpkins engine.

### The album sounds like classic Pumpkins, but at the same time, it's fresh. You're not rehashing anything.

One funny thing is that fans often act like I hit my head and don't remember how to make records like that, when I was the architect of those records. I could make those sounds—those tones and textures—anytime I want. To me, they're like paint on a board or something. You choose red or blue or green. So I get these questions, "Were you trying to do that?" No, I was just trying to do what sounded right to me. Keying up a certain guitar sound or a particular way to sing after 15 years felt right to me, where it didn't feel right to me those other 15 years.

### Did Howard push you to new areas?

It's more just Howard being the bad cop in the studio and saying, "That's not going to fly in today's landscape," and getting into pseudo-intellectual conversations about what that really means. If a lot of the songs getting played on alternative radio these days don't have guitar, how does a guitar band exist in the universe in a way that's morally equivalent? Do you make music that's like that, or make music that's as cool—

or hopefully cooler—by using the guitar in a different way or approaching density in a different way, or approaching space in a different way?

### How did Tommy get involved?

It was born out of the idea of thinking Tommy would sound good on this one particular song, and the next thing we knew, I'm sitting with Tommy in L.A. and playing him the whole record, and he says, "I want to play on the entire record." And I was like, "Cool, let's go for it." An album, for me, is a really intense process. Being in a foxhole, you've got to believe the person you're getting in with has your back, and they're going to follow through and give you everything they've got. And Tommy gave me 150 percent. This was no stunt thing, like, "Ha-ha, let's get Tommy Lee and see what people think." It's not even close to that. He's a great musician who connects with what I'm doing, and he gets it. Then you have three weeks of the two of us practically nose to nose in the studio going over every second of the album, down

people don't like the album, they're not going to like it because Tommy's on the record. If they like the record, they're not *not* going to like it because Tommy's on the record. At the end of the day, it's about the songs and how well they're played and whether you create something that's unique. The Crüe has had great records and the Crüe has had OK records, and the same goes for me.

### So you don't sweat the small stuff.

Look at my musical life. Now detach it from the personal stuff: my mouth, the dumb things I've done, people's opinions, the cat magazine. Take all that away and just look at the musical accomplishment of it all. Now compare that to my generation. There's little comparison. Not even close. When you ask that question, the answer is, "Yeah, I exist in a dual Star Trek world where I'm treated one way based on perceptions that don't have anything to do with music, while I continue to go around the world and play for countless thousands of people because of my music." It's like living a strange life of



Onstage in London, 2014

**'I've been pronounced dead so many times it's not even funny.'**

to every cymbal crash and drum hit. That's not the flashy part—that's the unattractive part of making an album. Tommy knows and I know you've got to really want to do that.

### Any concern about skeptics?

Honestly, I don't factor that stuff in at all. I've been pronounced dead so many times it's not even funny. You get to the point where none of that stuff really makes a difference. If

being told you're somebody that you know you're not and having to constantly prove who you already proved you were to a bunch of people who can't read beyond a headline. That's their problem.

—Kenneth Partridge

**'I had to find something I could fully invest in and get excited about.'**

