



MADE IN  
DEPECHE MODE  
BASILDON

JAMES NASON

## DEPECHE MODE: MADE IN BASILDON

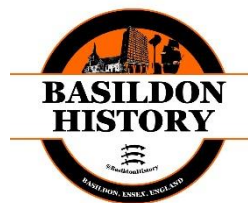
### CONTENTS

3	New Life
5	Speak & Spell
7	Finding Their Voice
9	Violator
11	Evolution
13	Sound
15	Legacy

### SOURCES

- Basildon History
- depeche mode dot com
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- MusicRadar
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Dedicated to Andy Fletcher  
(1961-2022)



## NEW LIFE NEW LIFE NEW LIFE

The narrative of Depeche Mode is not merely that of a successful band; it is the remarkable journey of four young men from the relatively unassuming town of Basildon, Essex, who harnessed the nascent power of electronic music to forge a distinctive sound that would resonate across continents and endure for over four decades. Their story is a testament to artistic evolution, resilience, and the potent alchemy that can occur when talent, technology, and a unique vision coalesce.

Basildon, a New Town established in post-war Britain, provided an unlikely crucible for a band that would become synonymous with sophisticated electronic music. It was here, in the late 1970s, amidst the backdrop of suburban sprawl and the burgeoning punk and new wave scenes, that the seeds of Depeche Mode were sown. The town, while not a traditional hotbed of musical innovation, offered a degree of creative isolation and access to affordable synthesisers, which were becoming increasingly accessible to aspiring musicians. This environment allowed for experimentation away from the established rock norms, fostering a DIY ethos that would define their early sound.

The genesis of the band can be traced to various local projects, eventually crystallising around the core talents of:

- **Vince Clarke.** Vince moved to Basildon having been born in South Woodford.
- **Martin Gore.** Born in London, Martin moved to Basildon from Hornchurch.
- **Andy Fletcher.** Andy's family moved to Basildon from Nottingham as his father, an engineer, was offered a job in a cigarette factor.
- **Dave Gahan.** Dave was born in Epping, Essex and was moved to Basildon by his mother who married an administrator who worked for Shell Oil.

These individuals, drawn together by a shared passion for synthesisers and a desire to create music outside the guitar-driven mainstream, began crafting electronic pop songs. Their initial performances in small local venues quickly garnered attention, not least for their innovative use of synthesisers at a time when many bands were still clinging to traditional instrumentation. This early embrace of electronic textures and rhythmic precision set them apart, marking them as pioneers in a rapidly expanding musical landscape.

Andy Fletcher and Martin Gore were in the same class at Nicholas Comprehensive in Laindon with Perry Bamonte, who later went on to join The Cure and Alison Moyet.

Their name, "Depeche Mode," reportedly inspired by a French fashion magazine, subtly hinted at their future blend of the avant-garde with accessible pop sensibilities. It was a name that carried an air of European chic, distinguishing them from their British contemporaries and foreshadowing their eventual global appeal. From these humble Basildon origins, a band began to emerge that would redefine the parameters of pop music, transforming electronic sounds from a niche interest into a mainstream phenomenon.

Their ambition, coupled with an innate understanding of melody and an evolving lyrical depth, laid the groundwork for a career that would see them transition from synth-pop hopefuls to stadium-filling legends, accumulating millions of record sales and an intensely devoted global fanbase along the way. This introductory phase was crucial, establishing the foundational elements of their identity and setting the stage for one of the most compelling and enduring narratives in modern British music history.

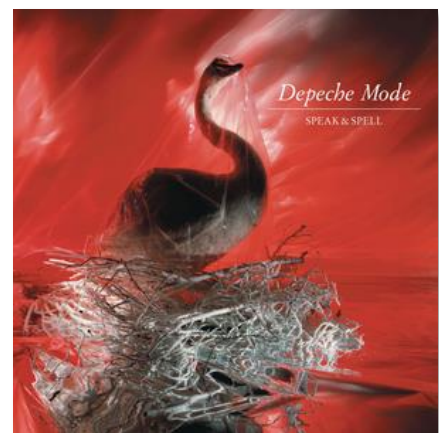


Martin Gore, Andy Fletcher (kneeling), Dave Gahan and Vince Clark

## SPEAK & SPELL SPEAK & SPELL SPEAK & SPELL

The initial phase of Depeche Mode, dominated by the songwriting prowess of Vince Clarke, was characterised by a bright, accessible, and often minimalist synth-pop sound that quickly captured the imagination of the burgeoning British music scene. Their debut album, *Speak & Spell*, released in October 1981, perfectly encapsulated this early direction. Named after a popular electronic educational toy, the album's title itself hinted at the band's fascination with technology and its capacity for creating novel sonic landscapes. Tracks like "New Life," which had already found success as their first charting single, and the iconic "Just Can't Get Enough," showcased Clarke's knack for crafting catchy, effervescent melodies underpinned by simple yet effective electronic arrangements.

*Speak & Spell* was recorded swiftly, largely capitalising on the raw energy and enthusiasm of the young band. The album's production, overseen by Daniel Miller, founder of Mute Records, maintained a relatively sparse and uncluttered sound, allowing the synthesisers to take centre stage. This approach was a deliberate counterpoint to the more bombastic rock productions of the era, aligning Depeche Mode with a new wave of electronic artists who prioritised innovation in sound over traditional instrumentation.



The album's lyrical themes were largely observational and light-hearted, focusing on relationships and youthful experiences, reflecting the band's relatively innocent outlook at that time. It was an instant success, charting well in the UK and establishing Depeche Mode as a prominent act in the burgeoning synth-pop movement.

**Speak & Spell** reached No. 10 in the UK albums chart.

However, the rapid ascent and commercial viability of *Speak & Spell* coincided with a significant internal shift. Following the album's release and a whirlwind of touring, Vince Clarke, the primary songwriter and arguably the musical architect of their initial success, decided to leave the band. His departure, driven by a discomfort with the pressures of touring and the desire to pursue different musical avenues, posed an immediate and considerable challenge to Depeche Mode's future. The sudden loss of their main composer might have spelled the end for many nascent groups.

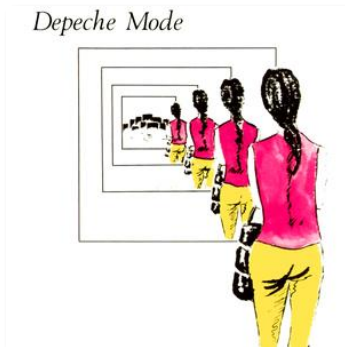
The band's 1981 tour began in Crocs, Rayleigh and took them into London, Birmingham, Cardiff, Manchester, The Netherlands, Germany, Belgium and France but also included a show in Sweeney's, Basildon and two in Raquels in Basildon town centre.

Yet, rather than disbanding, the remaining members – Martin Gore, Andy Fletcher, and Dave Gahan – chose to persevere. This pivotal moment forced a creative re-evaluation and ultimately led to Martin Gore stepping into the role of principal songwriter. This transition proved to be a turning point, steering the band towards a darker, more introspective, and



ultimately more enduring sound. While still firmly rooted in electronic instrumentation, Gore's lyrical themes began to explore deeper emotional territories, delving into subjects such as angst, spirituality, and social commentary. This shift was subtly evident on their second album, *A Broken Frame* (1982), and became more pronounced with *Construction Time Again* (1983) and *Some Great Reward* (1984). The early pop ambitions remained, but they were now infused with a growing sense of melancholic grandeur, laying the groundwork for the band's future global dominance and artistic maturity.

#### 1981: Singles

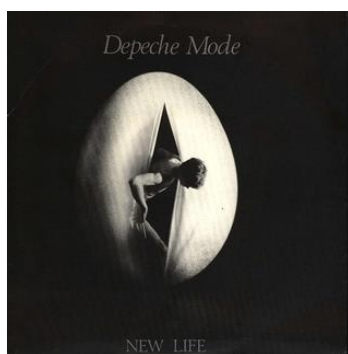


##### **Dreaming of Me**

20 February 1981

UK Chart: 57

Debut single

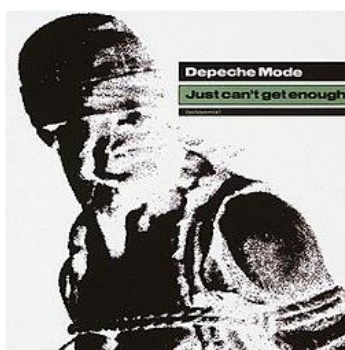


##### **New Life**

5 June 1981

Uk Chart: 11

The band performed this track on Top of the Pops



##### **Just Can't Get Enough**

7 September 1981

Uk Chart: 8

Depeche Mode's first Top 10 hit.

## FINDING THEIR VOICE FINDING THEIR VOICE FINDING THEIR VOICE

Following Vince Clarke's departure, Depeche Mode faced the formidable challenge of redefining their creative core. The band's solution was multifaceted and ultimately transformative. Martin Gore, already a talented musician, stepped unequivocally into the role of principal songwriter, a responsibility he would embrace with a burgeoning lyrical depth and an increasingly sophisticated melodic sensibility.

Crucially, the band also sought a new member to fill the void left by Clarke's precise electronic arrangements. This led to the arrival of Alan Wilder in 1982. Wilder, a classically trained musician and a skilled producer, initially joined as a touring keyboardist but quickly proved to be far more than just a replacement. His profound understanding of synthesis, sampling, and studio production provided a crucial technical and artistic counterbalance to Gore's songwriting and Dave Gahan's evolving vocal delivery. This quartet – Gahan, Gore, Fletcher, and Wilder – would go on to define Depeche Mode's most critically acclaimed and commercially successful era.

The sonic evolution began to manifest clearly with their second album, *A Broken Frame* (1982), which, whilst still finding its feet, demonstrated Gore's developing lyrical themes and a slightly more melancholic tone. However, it was with *Construction Time Again* (1983) that Wilder's influence began to truly embed itself. This album marked a significant departure from their earlier, lighter synth-pop, incorporating industrial sounds and a heavier reliance on sampled noises alongside traditional synthesisers. Songs like "Everything Counts" showcased a newfound lyrical bite, addressing socio-economic issues, and a more complex, layered production. This was further solidified by *Some Great Reward* (1984), an album that solidified their darker, more nuanced electronic sound and explored themes of faith, sexuality, and existential angst with remarkable candour for a pop band of the era. Singles such as "People Are People" and "Master and Servant" propelled them to greater international recognition, particularly in Germany and the United States, where their blend of electronic music with profound lyrical content found a receptive audience.



Alan Wilder with Gore, Gahan and Fletcher in 1985.

The collaborative dynamic within the band during this period became paramount. Gore's songwriting matured, venturing into increasingly personal and often unsettling lyrical territory, complemented by his distinctive, sometimes fragile, vocal contributions. Gahan's role as frontman continued to develop, his powerful baritone evolving to deliver Gore's increasingly weighty lyrics with conviction and a captivating stage presence. Fletcher remained the band's organisational anchor, while Wilder became the vital sonic architect, meticulously crafting the arrangements, experimenting with new sounds, and pushing the boundaries of what was achievable with electronic

instrumentation. His perfectionism in the studio was instrumental in creating the rich, textured soundscapes that would become a hallmark of their work.

This period saw Depeche Mode move far beyond their initial synth-pop categorisation. Albums like *Black Celebration* (1986) and *Music for the Masses* (1987) further refined their darker, more atmospheric style. *Black Celebration* was notably grim and introspective, yet yielded popular tracks like "Stripped." *Music for the Masses*, on the other hand, was conceived with a wider audience in mind, featuring more anthemic arrangements and leading to their legendary "101" concert film and live album, documenting their groundbreaking Rose Bowl stadium show in Pasadena.

It was clear by this point that Depeche Mode had not only found their unique artistic voice but were poised on the precipice of becoming one of the most influential and enduring electronic bands in global music history, transcending their Basildon roots to touch the masses with their sophisticated, often melancholic, sound.

#### 1980s: Albums



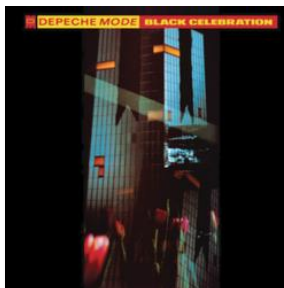
**A Broken Frame**  
27 September 1982  
UK Charts: 8



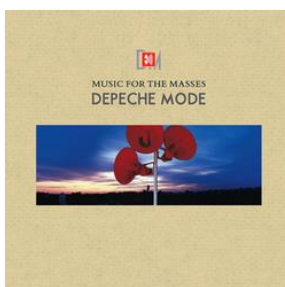
**Construction Time Again**  
22 August 1983  
UK Charts: 6



**Some Great Reward**  
24 September 1984  
UK Charts: 5  
  
Number 3 in Germany



**Black Celebration**  
17 March 1986  
UK Charts: 4  
  
Number 1 in Switzerland



**Music for the Masses**  
28 September 1987  
UK Charts: 10



## VIOLATOR VIOLATOR VIOLATOR

The transition into the 1990s marked Depeche Mode's ascent to unprecedented levels of global stardom, an era fundamentally defined by the release of their seventh studio album, *Violator*, in 1990.



This album was not merely a commercial success; it represented a culmination of their artistic evolution, blending the band's established dark, electronic textures with a newfound accessibility and a more polished, yet still profoundly atmospheric, sound. Produced by Flood (Mark Ellis) and largely recorded in Milan, Copenhagen, and London, *Violator* showcased a meticulous approach to songwriting and production that refined their melancholic grandeur into something truly anthemic.

*Violator* spawned some of Depeche Mode's most iconic and enduring singles. "Personal Jesus," a blues-infused electronic track, preceded the album and became a massive international hit, demonstrating their willingness to experiment with diverse influences whilst retaining their unique sonic identity. Its raw, driving energy and provocative lyrics instantly captivated audiences.



This was swiftly followed by "Enjoy the Silence," arguably their most recognisable and commercially successful single to date. A deceptively simple yet emotionally profound electronic ballad, it won the Brit Award for Best British Single in 1991 and topped charts worldwide, becoming a defining song for the band and a benchmark for electronic pop.

Further singles like "Policy of Truth" and "World in My Eyes" continued to showcase the album's remarkable depth and consistent quality. The album's chart performance was equally impressive, achieving significant success in the UK, across Europe, and particularly in the United States, where it became their first album to be certified platinum and subsequently triple platinum.

The success of *Violator* propelled Depeche Mode into the realm of stadium rock, a seemingly unlikely trajectory for a band rooted in electronic music. The accompanying "World Violation Tour" was a colossal undertaking, seeing them play to enormous crowds across North America and Europe.

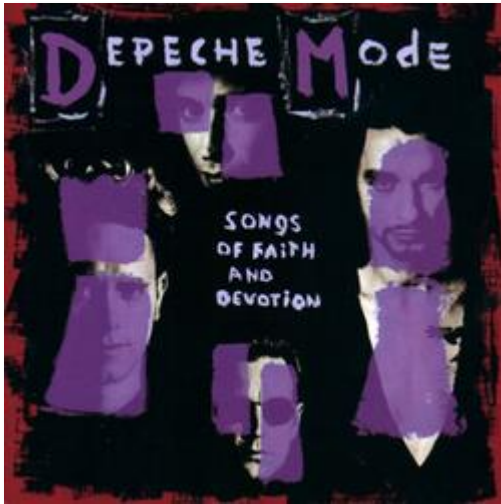
The pinnacle of this era was arguably their performance at the Dodger Stadium in Los Angeles in 1990, where they played to over 42,000 fans. The scale of these concerts solidified their reputation as a formidable live act, capable of commanding vast audiences with their intense stage presence and immersive soundscapes. Dave Gahan, in particular, blossomed into a compelling and charismatic frontman, his powerful baritone and theatrical movements becoming a focal point of their live shows.

This period also saw the band pushing their creative boundaries in terms of visual presentation. Anton Corbijn, the Dutch photographer and director, whose distinctive black-and-white aesthetic had already shaped their imagery throughout the late 1980s, became an integral part of their brand. His music videos for *Violator* singles, characterised by stark landscapes and powerful symbolism, perfectly complemented the album's dark sophistication and cemented Depeche Mode's visual identity.

The synthesis of their compelling music, Gahan's commanding stage presence, and Corbijn's iconic imagery created an irresistible package that resonated globally, firmly establishing Depeche Mode as one of the most innovative and successful British bands of their generation, with a devoted cult following that had now swelled into a mainstream phenomenon.

## EVOLUTION EVOLUTION EVOLUTION

The immense success of *Violator* and the subsequent "World Violation Tour" positioned Depeche Mode at the pinnacle of their global appeal, yet the years that followed would test the band's resilience and capacity for reinvention.



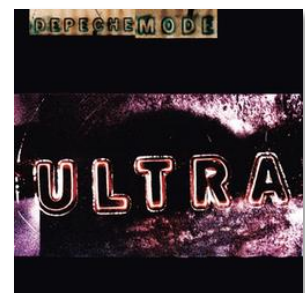
The early 1990s saw the release of *Songs of Faith and Devotion* (1993), an album that consciously moved away from their purely electronic roots, incorporating more live instrumentation, gospel influences, and a rawer, almost rock-orientated sound. This shift was largely driven by Dave Gahan's deepening fascination with rock music and his powerful, increasingly bluesy vocal performances. The album debuted at number one in both the UK and US charts, a testament to their unwavering popularity, and singles like "I Feel You" and "Walking in My Shoes" continued to showcase their evolving musical landscape.

However, the intensive "Devotional Tour" that followed proved to be incredibly taxing on the band members, particularly Dave Gahan, who was battling severe personal issues at the time. The immense pressure of global stardom, coupled with internal stresses, led to a period of considerable turmoil. This culminated in the departure of Alan Wilder from the band in 1995. Wilder's exit was a profound loss; his meticulous studio work and sophisticated

In 1996, Dave Gahan's heart stopped for 2 minutes over a drug overdose. This followed several near-death drug experiences in the 1990s.

arrangements had been instrumental in shaping Depeche Mode's signature sound since his arrival. His departure left Martin Gore and Andy Fletcher to navigate the band's future, a challenge compounded by the uncertainty surrounding Gahan's health and commitment.

Despite these significant setbacks, the remaining trio demonstrated remarkable resilience. Their first album as a three-piece, *Ultra* (1997), was a powerful statement of intent. Produced by Tim Simenon, the album managed to retain the essence of Depeche Mode's dark electronic grandeur while also incorporating elements of contemporary trip-hop and a renewed focus on atmosphere.



Tracks like "Barrel of a Gun" and "It's No Good" proved that the band could still craft compelling, chart-topping music without Wilder's direct involvement. *Ultra* debuted at number one in the UK and was critically acclaimed, proving their enduring creative vitality.

The subsequent decades have seen Depeche Mode continue to evolve and release consistently strong material. Albums such as *Exciter* (2001), *Playing the Angel* (2005),



*Sounds of the Universe* (2009), *Delta Machine* (2013), and *Spirit* (2017) have demonstrated their willingness to experiment with new sounds and production techniques, whilst always retaining their core identity defined by Gore's poignant songwriting and Gahan's distinctive vocals.

They have navigated shifting musical trends, personal challenges, and the complexities of maintaining a long-standing career with a fierce independence. Their live performances have remained legendary, selling out arenas and stadiums worldwide, a testament to the raw energy

and connection they maintain with their devoted fanbase. The band's ability to adapt, innovate, and endure, even after the loss of key members and through periods of internal strife, underscores their unique position in music history, showcasing a formidable resilience that few contemporary acts can match.

On 26 May 2022 Andy Fletcher died. The remaining band members, Dave Gahan and Martin Gore, said "we are shocked and filled with overwhelming sadness with the untimely passing of our dear friend, family member and bandmate Andy 'Fletch' Fletcher".

On 24 March 2023 the duo released the *Memento Mori* album, which writing had started for prior to Fletcher's death. The album climbed to number 2 in the UK and reached number 1 in nine European countries.

The album also featured three top 20 singles, including "Ghosts Again", which climbed to number 14 in the UK.

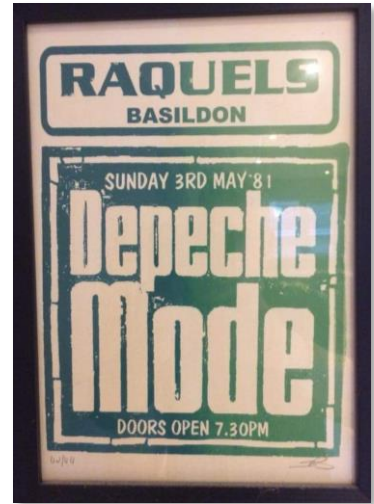


## SOUND SOUND SOUND

Depeche Mode's sound is an intricate tapestry, meticulously woven from a diverse palette of electronic textures, often underpinned by a profound sense of melancholic grandeur.

Their musical style is distinctive, having evolved dramatically from their initial synth-pop leanings to a more industrial, blues-infused, and atmospherically rich electronic rock that remains instantly recognisable. This evolution was not haphazard; it was a deliberate and often painstaking process of experimentation and refinement, influenced by various genres and driven by the individual talents within the band.

At their core, Depeche Mode are pioneers of electronic music. From their earliest days in Basildon, they embraced synthesisers as their primary instruments, eschewing traditional guitar-driven rock formations. This initial choice, made at a time when synthesisers were becoming more accessible, allowed them to carve out a unique niche. Their early sound, largely crafted by Vince Clarke, was characterised by bright, almost childlike melodies layered over simple, infectious rhythms. However, with Martin Gore assuming songwriting duties and, critically, the arrival of Alan Wilder, their approach to electronics became far more sophisticated.



Wilder introduced a rigorous, often perfectionist, approach to sound design and production, moving beyond simple synth melodies to incorporate complex sampling, industrial noises, and found sounds. This meticulous layering of electronic elements created a dense, textured soundscape that gave their music immense depth and sonic originality, particularly evident in albums such as *Black Celebration* and *Violator*.

While undeniably electronic, Depeche Mode's sound has also been heavily influenced by blues and gospel music, particularly from the *Songs of Faith and Devotion* era onwards. Dave Gahan's powerful baritone, which matured significantly over the years, began to adopt a grittier, more soulful quality, often compared to blues vocalists.

Martin Gore's songwriting, whilst rooted in European melancholia, often employed chord progressions and vocal melodies that resonated with gospel spirituals, adding a profound emotional weight to tracks like "Condemnation." This fusion of cold, synthetic sounds with warm, organic vocal performances and soulful arrangements became a hallmark of their mature work, distinguishing them sharply from many of their electronic contemporaries.

Lyricaly, Martin Gore's contributions are central to the Depeche Mode sound. His words frequently delve into themes of religion, sexuality, alienation, personal torment, and existential angst. These are often presented with a poetic ambiguity that allows for multiple interpretations, contributing to the band's intellectual appeal. Unlike many pop acts, their lyrics rarely shy away from uncomfortable truths, exploring the darker facets of the human condition with a remarkable honesty. This lyrical depth, often delivered with Gahan's



commanding vocal presence, provided a powerful counterpoint to the electronic backdrop, preventing their music from becoming merely superficial.

Furthermore, minimalism and repetition have been crucial elements of their style, particularly in their rhythmic structures. They often build tension through repetitive basslines and drum machine patterns, allowing subtle shifts and evolving atmospheric elements to drive the narrative of the song. This deliberate restraint, honed over decades, creates a powerful sense of momentum and emotional intensity, drawing the listener into their meticulously constructed sonic worlds.

In summary, the Depeche Mode sound is a masterful fusion of pioneering electronic experimentation, drawing on industrial textures and complex sampling, blended with the emotional resonance of blues and gospel. This is all underpinned by Martin Gore's introspective and often provocative lyrics, delivered by Dave Gahan's evolving and charismatic vocals. It is a sound that defied easy categorisation, allowing them to transcend genres and carve out a unique and enduring legacy in the annals of modern British music.



Basildon, Essex: An image from the 86>98 singles compilation album.

## LEGACY LEGACY LEGACY

Depeche Mode's enduring presence in the global music landscape, spanning over four decades, is a testament to a legacy that transcends mere commercial success. Their journey from niche electronic pioneers with a dedicated cult following to critically acclaimed artists capable of filling stadiums worldwide represents a unique trajectory in contemporary music history. Their impact can be felt across various facets of the industry, from inspiring countless musicians to influencing subcultures and challenging perceptions of electronic music.

One of their most significant contributions lies in elevating electronic music beyond its perceived limitations. In the early 1980s, synthesisers were often viewed with scepticism in rock circles, dismissed as cold or impersonal. Depeche Mode, through their consistent innovation and masterful use of technology, proved that electronic instruments could convey profound emotion, create vast sonic landscapes, and drive powerful live performances. They demonstrated that electronic music could be both intellectually stimulating and deeply resonant, opening doors for subsequent generations of electronic artists and broadening the mainstream acceptance of synthesiser-driven sounds. Their influence can be heard in various genres, from industrial and alternative rock to techno and pop.



Dave, Andy and Martin on Gloucester Park boating lake, Basildon

Beyond their sonic innovations, Depeche Mode cultivated an intensely devoted and loyal fanbase, a phenomenon that has only deepened with time. Their fans, often drawn by the band's introspective lyrics, dark aesthetic, and uncompromising artistic vision, form a global community that transcends geographical boundaries. This loyalty is evident in their consistently sold-out tours, album sales across generations, and the sheer passion expressed by their followers. The band's ability to maintain this fervent connection, even through periods of internal strife and evolving musical trends, speaks volumes about the authenticity of their art and the profound impact it has on individual listeners. Their concerts

are often described as near-religious experiences for their adherents, highlighting the deep emotional bond between the band and its audience.

Depeche Mode's influence also extends to fashion and visual aesthetics. Collaborations with artists like Anton Corbijn have created a distinct visual identity for the band, characterised by stark, often black-and-white imagery that perfectly complements their dark, brooding sound. This consistent visual branding has influenced countless other artists and has become an integral part of their overall artistic statement, contributing to their iconic status. Their style, blending gothic elements with industrial chic, has also had a notable impact on subcultures and popular fashion trends.

Furthermore, their unwavering artistic integrity stands as a significant part of their legacy. Despite achieving immense commercial success, Depeche Mode have largely resisted pressure to conform to fleeting trends, consistently prioritising creative evolution over commercial expediency. This commitment to their own artistic path, even when it meant exploring challenging themes or experimenting with new sounds, has earned them critical respect and cemented their status as true artists rather than mere pop commodities. Their catalogue is a testament to a band that never stopped pushing boundaries, challenging themselves, and refining their craft.

In conclusion, Depeche Mode's legacy is multifaceted: they are electronic music pioneers who legitimised the genre's emotional depth, cultivated one of the most passionate fanbases in music history, crafted an iconic visual identity, and maintained a rare degree of artistic integrity throughout their extensive career. From their humble beginnings in Basildon, they have not only sold millions of records but have also left an indelible mark on the fabric of popular music, demonstrating that true artistry, combined with relentless innovation, can achieve both cult reverence and mainstream acclaim for decades.

