

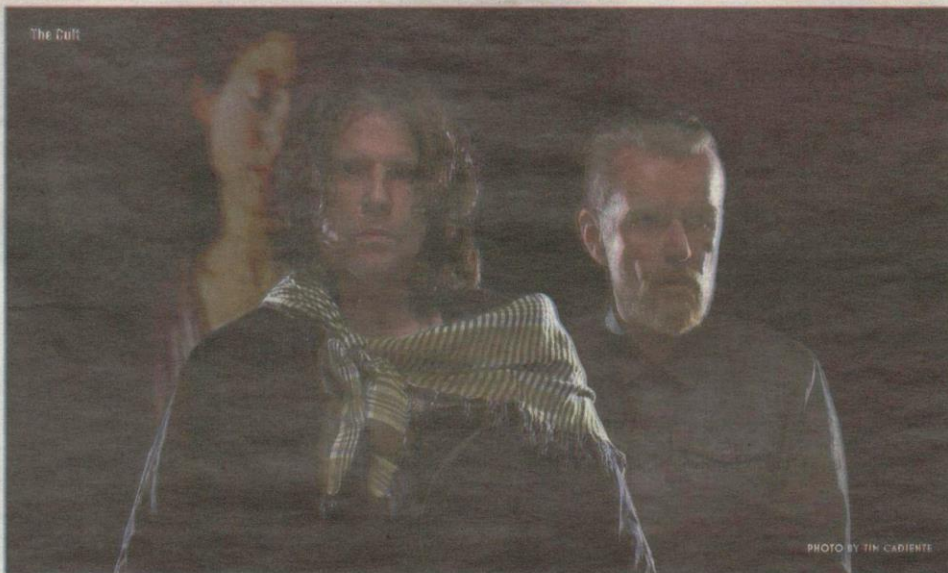
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MUSIC

THE CULT OF THE FUTURE

Despite forming in 1983, the forward-looking British rockers aren't resting on their laurels

BY BRETT CALLWOOD



The Cult

PHOTO BY TIN CADENTE

On Saturday, British rockers The Cult will transform the magnificent Greek Theatre into A Sonic Temple, an epic event that simultaneously celebrates the 30th anniversary of that groundbreaking '89 album (the band's fourth). It also recalls frontman Ian Astbury's Gathering of the Tribes, the alt festival that paved the way for Lollapalooza.

This time, Astbury has handpicked Prayers, Zola Jesus and VOWWS to join The Cult, but the night really will be all about the *Sonic Temple* album — the album that many fans consider the band's best. The Cult will be performing it almost (but not quite) in its entirety, though Astbury admits to us during a phone interview that he hasn't spent much time revisiting it.

"To be honest, I haven't until it kind of

came upon us through [our label] Beggars Banquet," he says. "They're reissuing the album this year, so we thought it was an opportunity to embrace the entire DNA of The Cult, with *Sonic Temple* being an entry point. It's probably our best known record, but definitely was of its time. I always think of things more in the live context. I'm not really an archaeologist. I don't sit around going through the broken pottery, trying to discern what our intention was at the time and all that kind of thing. In many ways, it doesn't really serve the present moment. I mean, I can pick up some, go back and hear them — the live stuff is actually more informative than the actual record because the record is constructed in the studio and once it was done, it was done."

That will make complete sense to anyone familiar with The Cult. Astbury and guitarist

Billy Duffy in particular have always been keen to keep moving forward, while happily accepting that their past is there for the fans to enjoy — they don't shy away from it.

"I never listened to [*Sonic Temple*] after we made the record really, except for maybe lyric references or something," Astbury says. "But the intention with this was to set a new chapter for The Cult, as we now have 10 studio albums. In many ways we've achieved these incredible milestones, career milestones, which again wasn't the intention of getting the band together. It was never to be around for 40 years. To me, it was always the next thing. Still is really. I know it's a bit of a cliché with a lot of artists: 'You don't understand — what I'm doing now is the most important work I've ever done.' I truly believe the best

work is ahead of us and you're always striving to do something better. To outdo what you did in the past."

Astbury says that his inspiration in that regard, his north star if you will, was always David Bowie, though other names such as Bob Dylan, Neil Young and Iggy Pop come up too — artists who were never content to rest on the glories of their pasts, instead striving to create something new and exciting. Even when they failed in the eyes and ears of their fans, they did so valiantly — striving for artistic virility. And it doesn't stop. The Cult still plays over 50 shows a year, always looking to release new material.

"We're long overdue," Astbury says. "We do have some stuff we've been working on but it's yet to see the light of day. You can't get up and put on the same clothes you wore when you were 24, and try to recreate the mindset. To

me at least, probably more so with individual artists than bands, they've produced some of their best work in their later years. Iggy Pop is one of the artists Billy and I bonded over. We opened for him in '87 and he appears on *Sonic Temple*, guest vocals on 'New York City.'"

All of that said, even Astbury has to accept that *Sonic Temple* is a special album — one that he describes as a watershed for the band. At the time that it was recorded, the singer's father was sick with cancer, and it felt like friends were dropping like flies. It was a tough time, but they looked to Bowie again, and realized they had to do something new and special. That's what they did, never afraid to get out of their comfort zones.

"Being a rock & roll band in the broadest sense of the word, we hit on every genre you could possibly put a guitar on," he says. "I think we've even hinted at country somewhere. Blues, post-punk, psychedelic, acid rock, borderline metal in places, but definitely hip-hop was an underlying theme in the DNA, working with Def Jam and being around Beastie Boys, LL Cool J and Run DMC — that was quite an influential period as well. It all gets wound into the narrative of the band."

The whole evening at the Greek promises to be a special event, and Astbury is excited to see those three other bands.

"There's something in the water right now," he says. "Prayers are a two-piece, VOWWS are a two-piece. It's very much 'do it yourself.' The ethos is very much like post-punk in that sense. The subject material is far more romantic, ethereal, cinematic, darker, scratching beyond the belly of the dystopian dragon that's flying around. That's a more comfortable place for me. I don't really have a desire to try to compete with the top 200 on *Billboard*. We never have. That's hurt us in some ways. There were definitely times when it could have been an easier path by just saying yes. Sometimes you've got to say no."

In fact, The Cult said "no" to two of the songs on the album — "Soldier Blue" and "Medicine Train" (the latter a bonus track anyway) — because they felt that they didn't fit into the set, even when that set is geared around the album. "We listened through them and those songs really were part of a moment, and that moment is gone," Astbury says. "I guess they didn't age as well as some of the songs. We didn't feel like the sentiment fit into the set very well. But we haven't played 'Soul Asylum' in 30 years and it sounds really fresh. The stage goes black, we play *Sonic Temple* straight out of the gate, and then we go into songs from *Beyond Good and Evil*, the eponymous record, of course *Electric* [and] *Low* — we wanted to choose songs that had a direct lineage to *Sonic Temple*."

The Cult plays with Prayers, Zola Jesus and VOWWS at 6:30 p.m. on Saturday, June 15 at the Greek Theatre.