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The Telegraph Magazine

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— — — — —
'We look like
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— — — — —
AT HOME WITH

GARY
NUMAN

In the early '80s he was the king of synth-pop, until his career took a nosedive and he plunged into near-obscure. Everything changed when he met his wife Gemma, a former fan who helped him navigate his Asperger's and revitalise his career. Now 63, and living in a Gothic castle in LA, Gary Numan talks to Helena de Bertodano about facelifts, family and fame, second time around

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SAMI DRASIN





A grey turreted castle looms high above the trees on a quiet residential road in Sherwood Forest, north Los Angeles. ‘Warning: Protected By Gargoyles’ reads the sign by the front gates, and a 20ft bronze dragon sits in the driveway. Inside, swords and armour line the flagstone hallway and the sun streams through the stained-glass windows. The baronial style is interspersed with rock touches: leopard throws, skulls and bones, and Marilyn Monroe memorabilia. Between two studded shields is a photograph of a couple on their wedding day. The bride has bright-red hair and a red brocade bodice and the groom a matching waistcoat. It was 28 August 1997, the day that rock star Gary Numan married one of his biggest fans, Gemma O’Neill.

Now 63, Numan is a far cry from the robotic young man with the singular voice who sang ‘I’ve no one to love’ in his epochal number-one hit from 1979, *Are ‘Friends’ Electric?* – the precursor to *Cars*, with its futuristic synth-pop sound. He had three number-one albums, then in April 1981 – at the grand old age of 23 – he retired from live performing, giving three final concerts at Wembley Arena.

‘It was too much too soon for somebody too ill-equipped to deal with it,’ he says today. ‘It was like being run over by a bulldozer.’ Though, like many rock retirements, his turned out to be short-lived, and a year later he was back on the road.

Now, 40 years on, and having sold over 10 million records, he’s planning to return to Wembley next spring as part of a UK tour. ‘I haven’t been at that level since 1981,’ he says. Meanwhile, his new album *Intruder* (his 19th solo record), released next month, is predicted to reach at least the top three.

Widely derided for years, Numan is now revered as the godfather of electronic music, cited by everyone from Lady Gaga to Nine Inch Nails as an influence. Prince went so far as to call him a genius.

Gemma, 53, is the key to Numan, and he credits her with the extraordinary resurgence of his career, having written himself off as ‘dead and buried’. Her hair is jet-black, like Numan’s, with white-blonde stripes at the front. But otherwise she is remarkably unchanged from that wedding photograph. She always accompanies him on tour, his daughters less now because of school. ‘Whatever happens, they’ve got to be at Wembley..’

To understand Numan, you first have to know Gemma. She is, as her husband points out later, ‘horrendously crude’. And he adores her. Within five minutes of meeting her, she is telling me – in graphic detail – about the problems they had conceiving a child. After seven IVF attempts, they finally had Raven, now 17. Then they

naturally conceived Persia, 16, and Echo, 14.

All three daughters are very creative: Raven and Persia sing on *Intruder*, an album that springs from a poem about climate change written by Echo. ‘And Gemma did all the clothing and make-up. So it’s a real family affair.’ In typically apocalyptic, Numanesque terms, *Intruder* – by turns ominous and hauntingly beautiful – explores the idea of Earth fighting back against the devastation wrought by human beings. In one song, *The Gift*, Numan suggests that Earth has deployed coronavirus to shake off humans. ‘If the Earth could speak, what would it say?’

Persia, who accompanied her father on

else. ‘Mum, I think I need to get some tights,’ she frets. ‘No you don’t,’ says Gemma decisively, adjusting the décolletage of her own dress, styled on Marilyn Monroe’s from her 1953 film *Niagara*.

In this company, Numan himself looks almost conventional, in his ripped jeans, grey T-shirt and black biker boots. ‘We all look cooler than you,’ says Echo to her father, who happily agrees. ‘We look like the Addams family,’ he points out, humming the theme song as they pose for photos. And like the Addams family, the more time you spend with them, the more you realise that – despite their kookiness – they are



Above Numan performing at Wembley Arena in 1981. **Below** On *Top of the Pops* in 1980

his last tour, singing *My Name Is Ruin*, was recently signed by Select Models and Echo has been approached to model, too. ‘We support it but we’re also very protective,’ says Numan. ‘We took advice to make sure it was done properly. Persia is also about to sign a publishing contract as a songwriter.’ Persia and Raven work on songs together. ‘I want them to be happy first and foremost,’ he says.

‘I would love it if they end up as a girl group,’ he adds, only half-joking. ‘Echo would be the main keyboard player, Raven has taught herself guitar. Both Raven and Persia sing brilliantly.’ But he worries too: ‘You have to be extraordinarily tough mentally.’

When I arrive, Gemma is yelling over the intercom at Raven to get downstairs for the photo shoot. Raven is yelling back, her hairdryer blasting in the background. ‘Bit spicy aren’t we?’ teases Echo, who is ready and waiting with Persia, both looking suitably gothic after raiding their parents’ wardrobes.

‘I can’t believe I ever wore those trousers,’ says Gemma, appraising Echo’s outfit. Then she catches sight of Persia’s hands. ‘OH MY GOD, you’ve got all of my rings on, you absolute beotch.’ Raven eventually appears – wearing a black jacket and little



more functional than most families. ‘[My daughters] are my whole reason for being here now,’ says Numan. ‘I love them to bits.’

Numan and Gemma have been together for nearly 30 years and are inseparable. ‘I miss her when she goes out to the shops,’ says Numan, ‘and that’s just half an hour. I’m hanging out through the door because I feel empty.’

Gemma has saved him, he feels, from himself: helping him to navigate his Asperger’s, as well as helping him to salvage his career, which had hit rock bottom when they started dating in 1992. ‘I was massively



Above Numan with (from left) Echo, Gemma, Raven and Persia. **Below** On stage at Wembley in 1981



in debt, I didn't have a record label. I was still releasing albums, but no one was buying them.' Gemma told Numan that the reason he was failing was because 'I had systematically removed myself from my records and had stopped sounding like Gary Numan.'

Born Gary Webb, in Hammersmith, west London, his father Tony was a coach driver at Heathrow and his mother Beryl, a dressmaker. An only child, his parents later took in his baby cousin John, whose father had died, when Numan was seven years old. They brought him up as their own and ended up adopting him.

'I thought he was the best thing ever,' says Numan, who is still very close to his 'brother', who was an airline captain and is now a musician. Expelled from two schools for unruliness, Numan was diagnosed with Asperger's at 14, and social interaction

can still be difficult for him. 'If a package comes to the door, I run away and Gemma answers it.' He had no qualifications, but a fascination with hi-tech gadgets, which led to music. His parents supported his ambition to be a rock star, buying him an electric guitar. 'They made me feel as if anything was possible.'

In 1977, aged 18, he joined a punk band called the Lasers, renaming it Tubeway Army, and later came up with the surname Numan after finding Neumann Kitchen Appliances in the *Yellow Pages*. But he was so nervous about performing live that he would throw up before going on stage. His father, who was managing him, told him he had to find a way to deal with his nerves – or change career. 'So I created a persona I could hide behind. I would switch Gary Numan on. Gemma says I walk differently when I'm being Gary Numan.'

'More tight-bummed and upright,' says Gemma. 'Not a show-off swagger, I think it was a bit of a cover-up.'

'It was all a cover-up,' agrees Numan.

After his shock retirement, he became a stunt pilot, flew around the world, then spent decades trying to scramble back up

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the charts, blowing his money on tours with extravagant stage sets and lighting shows. 'It was madness,' sighs Numan.

The photo shoot finished, we sit in the garden, their four dogs – including a mastiff and a St Bernard – bounding round our legs. They also have seven cats and a tortoise. The two older daughters make themselves scarce, and Echo occasionally appears, showing her father a video of herself playing the piano. 'That's brilliant,' enthuses Numan, putting his arm around her. Later Gemma brings out chips, baked beans and mushy peas. 'I just eat s—t,' explains Numan. 'I don't eat any greens whatsoever. Virtually no fruit. I don't drink water.'

They rarely touch alcohol. 'I turn into a massive lesbian when I drink,' explains Gemma. Numan laughs: 'I turn into a lesbian as well.'

What about exercise? They look momentarily baffled. 'We used to go cycling round the park,' offers Gemma, eventually. 'And I cut my body off,' she adds, referring to the plastic surgery they both embrace. 'I do push-ups,' remembers Numan. 'I do 150 a day.'

'He grew some proper pecs,' says Gemma proudly. 'He's going for a facelift tomorrow.'

'My face sags and I look miserable,' explains Numan, who has also undergone hair transplants. 'I'm kicking and screaming against age as much as I can: I don't want to be old, I don't want to die, I'm terrified of all of it... Sometimes Gemma goes to sleep early and I look at her and I get frightened about what's to come, what our end will be.'

At such times, he reads to distract himself. 'I read on the phone because I'm not allowed a bedside light.' 'No light, no noise,' agrees Gemma. 'And she has this weird pillow contraction that she actually climbs into at night,' says Numan. 'So if you fancy a cuddle in the middle of the night, you have to climb Everest to get there. So that doesn't happen.'

Gemma takes the plastic surgery further. She details everything she has had done, from nose job to arm sculpting to body lift. 'It's all about you isn't it?' teases Numan as she shows me graphic pictures on her phone.

She does it, she says, 'because I'm ugly'. 'You're not ugly,' says Numan in the tone of someone who has said this to her many times before.

Brought up in Sidcup, Gemma was a Numanoid, a fan from the age of 11. When asked during a careers talk at school what job she wanted, she replied, 'I won't need a job. I'm going to marry Gary Numan.'

She went to all his gigs. 'I absolutely loved him and one day he fancied me back.' Numan takes over: 'One tour I noticed she hadn't been to any gigs. And then she



Clockwise from above Numan and Gemma in 1995; their wedding day in 1997; the couple today

turned up at one, but left crying when I was singing *Time To Die*.'

Later he heard that her mother had just passed away, and found her number in his fan club. By then Gemma was 24, working as a technical officer for British Telecom: he rang her but she didn't believe it was him. Eventually he convinced her to spend the day with him.

'She turned up with no make-up because she said she wanted me to see her as horrible as she thought she was.' 'I thought that would be the end of it,' says Gemma. They married in 1997 and settled in East Sussex

'We're absolutely made for each other. Everything that I'm not, she is'

before moving to California in 2012 – partly, says Numan, because 'I had a bit of a midlife crisis and [wanted] to live somewhere where we could enjoy life more, not sitting indoors looking at puddles filling up'.

Numan has managed himself since 2015. 'I like being in charge of what's going on,' he says, and he has enjoyed his recent success far more than his early fame. 'You appreciate it more when you've had to fight for it than when it just seemed to fall at my feet. When my last album [*Savage*] got to number two, all those years just poured out and I cried like a baby.' He is now on an even keel financially, too: 'Worries about money have plagued me for most of my life, but for the past five years or so, money's not been a problem.'

So unassuming is Numan that there are no obvious signs of his success in their house. It is only when Gemma takes me behind a secret bookcase door that I see the

gold records and the awards. 'He doesn't like them to be on show,' she explains.

Outside their bedroom is a giant wooden crucifix and an old Bible. Numan is an avowed atheist, so I ask Gemma if the decor is tongue in cheek. 'Not for me,' she says, stroking the cross. 'I'm no practising Catholic, but I love the prettiness of it, the sexiness of it.'

She shows me their bedroom. The four-poster bed is half-made with tapered candles in a line at the foot. On Numan's bedside table is a glass jar of love notes from Echo, books about aviation and space travel, and a placard that reads: 'If you live to be a hundred, I want to be a hundred minus one day, so I never have to live without you.'

Oh, and a gun – except it doesn't look like a normal gun. 'It's a Taser,' explains Gemma. 'Gary has it out at night just in case.' They have five Tasers positioned around the house, as well as security cameras and alarms on every door. 'It's the biggest house in the area so you feel slightly like a glowing beacon in the dark,' says Numan, who in the early days of his career received death threats. His father once found a petrol bomb under his car and his mother was placed under police protection when a plot to kidnap her emerged.

From the start he was a controversial figure, inspiring both a passionate following and extreme vitriol. He was pilloried for his wooden stage presence and awkward demeanour – fair enough, says Numan. 'I look at old TV interviews of me now, and I seem really uncomfortable and a bit stand-offish.' Gemma interjects: 'You just see someone who's got social difficulties.'

He is incurably self-effacing. I ask him how it felt to have Prince call him a genius. 'Trent is a genius,' says Numan, referring to Trent Reznor of Nine Inch Nails, who is a



Numan with his mother Beryl and his father Tony

close friend. Later he explains why he can't really absorb the praise. 'I feel one step removed from it. When I wake up in the morning, I don't look in the mirror and think, "Look at you, you legend." And I don't walk into the studio thinking, "Everything I do today is going to be amazing because I'm a genius apparently." I'm riddled with self-doubt. My confidence is fragile at best.'

**'I'm riddled with self-doubt.
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Showing me the small garden studio where he writes his music, he says he firmly believes that his lack of formal musical training is the making of him. 'It gives you a freedom,' he says, playing a few notes on the keyboard. 'I don't know what a chord is. Has it stopped me writing songs? No. Has it stopped me being number one? No. It hasn't stopped me doing anything.'

Below Numan and his daughter Persia performing in Manchester in 2018



He thinks his Asperger's has been useful in terms of his career – as many of the knocks and criticisms have rolled off him. 'It's an absolute gift. It makes me resilient.'

The lyrics for most of his albums usually spring from short stories he has written. 'I steal the ideas, put them into records and then never go back to the story.' One day he would like to focus more on writing. 'I see the latter part of my life being beyond music. I would love to transition into writing.'

Daily life, Numan insists, is relatively normal. 'We have fairly quiet evenings. We just watch s—t telly... Gemma loves horror films, I don't. I sit there, but I make sure I'm busy on my phone when the scary bit comes on.'

They bicker away affectionately – Gemma gives him a hard time for not wrapping any presents he buys her. 'Never satisfied,' sighs Numan. 'You get so much stuff.'

On Hallowe'en they ramp it up a bit, with *Exorcist* music belting out of the house and machines pumping out smoke: 'We have smoke swirling around the dragon and little girl robots driving around saying weird s—t. I dress up like somebody from *The Purge* with an axe and I walk around going [he puts on a menacing voice], "All right?"'

When Gemma goes inside to cook dinner, Numan elaborates on their relationship. 'We're absolutely made for each other. Everything that I'm not, she is. Which is most things, really. I don't bring much to the table at all.' He thinks: 'I'm quite punctual – so I bring that. And I can write songs.'

They are a refreshing pair. For all the artifice – the fake castle, the make-up, the facelifts, the costumes – they are unusually open, apparently without a filter. They veer from laughter to tears within seconds, the latter surfacing when they fret about their daughters and the way the pandemic is affecting them. 'There's a sense of frustration in them that this vital part of their lives is slipping by,' says Numan. 'They want to be out flirting and seeing the world, not hanging out indoors with Mum and Dad.' In terms of parenting, Gemma is chief. 'I'm the last resort,' says Numan. 'I'm getting Dad!' shouts Gemma, quoting their daughters.

These days Numan still can't quite believe that he is no longer a target of abuse. For years all he heard were insults. 'It was almost constant. But I've been around for so long now that I think I've become an institution. I'm quite proud of what I've become in my 60s.'

So does he still think of himself as two people: Gary Webb and Gary Numan? 'I don't, actually,' he says, as if the thought has only just struck him. 'The need to have a character to hide behind has completely vanished.'

Intruder will be released on 21 May