

affirmation

Fingers spread wide, eyes swimming with tears, a young female fan stands before Darren Hayes begging for a hug. “I’m so sorry,” says her idol, inching backwards. “But I can’t. I really can’t.”

It’s one of many awkward moments in the documentary *Too Close For Comfort*, a warts-and-all peek at the former Savage Garden singer’s first-ever solo tour, in 2002. Featuring everything from shots of hysterical fans to tour bus shenanigans and Hayes’s take on the Savage Garden split, the DVD offers an almost anthropological examination of this thing we call Celebrity. And given its candid, funny, sometimes painful honesty, it’s no surprise that it’s taken Hayes four years to release it.

“I know what it’s like to idolise someone,” the 34-year-old star says in his semi-confessional voiceover. “I stood outside Michael Jackson’s hotel as a kid. I met Stevie Nicks and can still remember how great she smelled. I know the little things fans expect. The autographs. The photographs. The hugs.”

He knows, too, about projection and transference, the means by which said idol represents everything from best friend to therapist to lover. In the same way as albums by, say, Kate Bush, Peter Gabriel and Nicks’s band Fleetwood Mac spoke directly to the adolescent Hayes in his Brisbane bedroom, so, too, does his music – melodic electro-pop and romantic ballads with clever, hummable lyrics – connect with a, well, rather impressionable demographic.

“He means so much to us,” a pair of flushed Scandinavian girls gush before his concert, a posse of teenagers squealing “Darren!” as they jump around behind them. “He understands us. He knows how we feel.”

In an aesthetic take on art/life, the documentary’s offstage footage comes in black-and-white. Onstage is full-blown colour. Lit by a single spotlight, a blond-haired Hayes unzips his brown leather jacket, strikes a pose from behind dark glasses. “Where I grew up the rent was cheap but we always had enough to eat,”

He won the adulation of millions, though fame never erased his own insecurities. Now former Savage Garden frontman Darren Hayes is happy to face the world, flaws and all.

Story Jane Cornwell

he sings in his flawless voice. “I could be good enough if the worse got rough / and the days became endless and harder than tough ...”

Offstage, Hayes hunches over a vaporiser, worries about his throat. “I sound like Boz Scaggs,” he panics. His voiceover – added in wiser, calmer hindsight – offers that even when there wasn’t a problem, he’d find one. There was the time he imagined he had throat cancer, for example, and even had a biopsy. “I am not a diva!” he jokes, slamming doors, telling off waitresses, getting his assistant to massage his neck. Celebrity is a curious beast, he muses off camera. When it self-destructs, which it usually does, it’s a fall from grace designed to make others feel better. Until then, one is public property. Which means autographs and photographs – but not, after catching innumerable viruses from snuffing fans, hugs.

“DON’T WORRY, I’VE GOT ANTISEPTIC WIPES,” Hayes jokes when I wonder if it’s okay to shake hands. We’re at the famed Mayfair studios in London’s chi-chi Primrose Hill, an enclave next to Regent’s Park filled with pastel-coloured houses, expensive boutiques and such yoga-going names as Sadie Frost, Chris Martin, Gwyneth Paltrow. The studio’s locale down an unobtrusive alleyway belies the talent that passes through its doors; the walls of the downstairs reception area are lined with awards for albums by a who’s who of rock royalty: Björk, Elvis Costello, Madonna, Robbie Williams.

Hayes, in baggy jeans, trainers and a grey T-shirt

with an image of trailing stardust on the front, is working on his third solo album in an upstairs room, aided by his longtime collaborator and sometime producer Robert Conley. “You’ll be all right, Rob, while we do this?” Hayes asks Conley, a handsome, dark-haired American sitting behind a mixing desk. We head up six stairs to a mezzanine floor, where Hayes plonks himself down on a sofa.

This, of course, is a very different Darren Hayes to the slightly neurotic, slightly wired pop star of *Too Close For Comfort*. He might not be as popular now but he’s happier, more relaxed, more comfortable in his skin. After two very different solo albums, 2002’s formulaic *Spin* and 2004’s brazenly experimental *The Tension and the Spark*, he has parted ways with his record label, Columbia, after ten years and 24 million album sales together. His forthcoming, as-yet-untitled, as-yet-unsigned double album is, he smiles, shaping up to be the best thing he’s ever done.

Indeed, these days Hayes has plenty to be content about. There’s the house he’s been renovating not too far from where we are now, a project he started after relocating to London from San Francisco a couple of years ago. There’s his four-year-old English cocker spaniel, Wally, a doe-eyed, floppy-eared creature that receives numerous mentions on Hayes’s website, www.darrenhayes.com (“I’d bring him here but he’s very insecure. Even the slightest disturbance to his routine makes him wig out”). Then there’s the not insubstantial fact that Hayes recently came out as gay. Not with any big fanfare, mind you: he simply married his boyfriend of two years, Richard Cullen, in a civil partnership ceremony on June 19 and, a month or so later, let his fans know via the internet. “I rarely make any comments on my private life,” he wrote. “But I can honestly say that this was the happiest day of my life.”

The chunky silver ring on his left hand is testament to his sanguine state, his reward for a period of therapy-aided self-scrutiny that got him liking himself – really liking himself – for the first ►



musicians.

time. "I was always struggling between wanting to please others and doing what was best for me," he says, eyes twinkling. "I think coming out, or maybe just being older, has completely removed any notion that I have to be perfect."

"People in the public eye are expected to be flawless, but you know what?" He sighs, shifts on the sofa. "My flaws are what drove me to become an artist in the first place. It's really great to finally be able to say that."

The *Too Close for Comfort* DVD, released this week, is his way of closing the book on his people-pleasing self. "At the time I thought I was making a nice PR piece," offers Hayes, who cites Alek Keshishian's groundbreaking 1991 rockumentary *In Bed with Madonna* as one of his favourite films (Keshishian is now a friend). "*In Bed With Madonna; Tantrums and Tiaras* [Elton John's 1997 warts-and-all] ... I look back and realise how brave those films were. It's important to show people who you actually are." Even if you're not that person anymore.

To balance things out, next month Hayes is releasing *A Big Night In*, a DVD that captures his acclaimed live shows at the Sydney Opera House in July this year. "I wanted both of these projects released, especially now that I'm between record deals" – he is being wooed by several labels – "and whether or not the people that manage me think it's a good idea," says Hayes. "The Sydney Opera House thing is me four years later: married, going on tour, with this amazing mentorship with [set designer and longtime U2/REM/David Bowie collaborator] Willie Williams. This year has been about me making some important decisions about my career. Releasing these films lets me move on."

A Big Night In won rave reviews in both Europe and Australia. An interactive live concert experience, it cherry-picked from performance art, mixed media, reality television and stand-up comedy to poke a finger in the guts of celebrity. "A spectacle that debunks the mystique of a rock gig. Simple but brilliant," gushed London's *Evening Standard*. In a concept workshopped with Williams, Hayes brought the backstage onstage. There, at tables, were assistants, friends, hangers-on. A bartender served cocktails. His stylist did some ironing. Roadies lugged equipment and crew clambered up lighting rigs. Hayes changed costumes, silhouetted behind a screen. Robert Conley was there with his computers and cables, loops and samples. And so, too, were members of the audience, fans-turned-celebrities for the evening.

"People texted a call centre if they wanted to come onstage. I interviewed contestants, gave two people a meal and prizes and sang [his 2004 hit single] *Popular* to them. At the end of the show, their faces came up on a big screen." Hayes flashes a smile. "It was my way of poking fun at the disposable nature of celebrity and this insatiable need we have to be famous. In many ways the show was incidental."

There is, nonetheless, a pointed moment when Hayes reassures his audience that despite the entourage and equipment, if his mouth is moving he is genuinely singing. "It's so ironic that we can live in a society where an artist like Britney [Spears] can get up and essentially do a live aerobics show and lip-synch and we're okay with that."

When the computers crashed, albeit temporarily,



Married men ... Hayes says the day he wed partner Richard Cullen (above right) in June was "the happiest day of my life".

during the Sydney concert he was forced to put his mouth where his, er, mouth was. "I stood up and said, 'Well, if all else fails, sing a hit'. And I went over to the keyboard and sang [the Savage Garden smash] *I Knew I Loved You*, a cappella. It was the greatest moment on the tour." And proof, in this prurient age, that while anyone can become a celebrity, very few of us can cut it as stars.

"Afterwards, Willie's right-hand man told me that I'd overcome what could have been a catastrophe. I think, well, okay, I'm 35 next year. I don't have abs of steel or a number one [hit]. But what I do have is what performers have always had since vaudeville – a respect for the stage and for the process."

Hayes is still insecure. But even with his penchant for navel-gazing, it's a self-doubt that manages to be funny, poignant and thoroughly endearing. When he says "I think I'm really average-looking", he really means it, ignoring the fact that his kind, open face – all big green eyes and full ruby lips – and way-above-average physique has graced a zillion bedroom walls, been the stuff of a zillion fantasies. It's partly why he has never felt like a sex object, why he reckons his coming out failed to devastate his female fanbase in the way that, say, the coming out of Stephen Gately of Irish boy-band Westlife did. Throughout his pop career Hayes has viewed himself as best friend and sometime therapist to his ardent following – but never, ever, as lover.

"Well, okay, I'm not stupid. I'm aware that there is a level of disappointment for some female fans who didn't realise I was gay, just because the fantasy

of 'Ooh, maybe you could end up with this guy' is gone. But in so many ways a huge chunk of me is still available, because I was always so giving of myself emotionally." He pauses, smiles. "Honestly, if I've had anything negative it's been very sweet. Things like, 'So maybe we better stop looking for a guy like you as, um, you're not straight'. People have gone out of their way to be supportive. I'm so much more grateful to them because I know they're there for the right reasons."

HE NEVER WANTED TO BE A SEX SYMBOL, ANYWAY.

The kid who listened to Madonna and Michael and Stevie, who read books by C.S. Lewis and collected – as he still does – *Star Wars* memorabilia viewed performing as another means of escape. The youngest child of merchant seaman Robert and nurse Judy, Darren grew up in Logan City on Brisbane's south-western outskirts with his brother Peter and sister Tracey (who now runs his fan club). His parents struggled to make ends meet, almost went bankrupt. For a while they lived in a caravan park, not least because of his father's alcoholism, an albatross that Hayes – like the rest of his family – ignored for years.

Though Robert Hayes has long since beaten the illness, his son only went public about it in 2004. "I went to him and I said, 'Dad, I've written this album [*The Tension and the Spark*] all about sadness and I want the media to think I'm sincere, but I can't talk to them about my private life," he says. "Dad was a real gentleman about it. He is my hero and he knows that. But it was hard for the others. I remember sitting on the loo at my sister's house and she had a stack ▶

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musicians.

of those *New Ideas* and [other] weekly women's mags; I was flicking through one and suddenly saw this headline, 'Darren Hayes: My Tortured Childhood'. I hadn't even said those words!"

He clears his throat. "I looked at the situation from space and saw that my brother is a dad who has to drop his kids off at school, how someone in the playground might go, 'I read what your brother said about your childhood'. But I don't regret it. It was something that had been swept under the carpet and clearly f..ked us up and none of us were talking about it. Now we can all look each other in the eye."

Hayes was a smart, sensitive child. The sort of kid who cried at sad songs, put on performances for his mother in their lounge room. The sort who was, inevitably, ripe for bullying. He got badly picked on in his first two years at Mabel Park State High School, Slacks Creek, in between appearing in school plays and singing in school concerts.

"I was overweight, had bad teeth and, according to my peer group, I was obviously a faggot," he says. "It was brutal. I never grew up with any illusions about who I was." And all of it – the fraught home life, the vicious classmates, the unadulterated talent – has combined to make him a star.

After high school he enrolled in a teaching course at QUT, where he met his eventual wife, Colby Taylor. At her urging, he dropped out to pursue a music career, in 1993 answering an ad for a singer in Brisbane street magazine *Time Off*. Hayes auditioned for keyboardist/guitarist Daniel Jones, another Logan local, and was soon fronting a covers band, Red Edge. When the group fell apart a year later, Hayes and Jones formed Savage Garden – which they named after the world as described by the vampire Lestat in the eponymous Anne Rice novel. Hayes sang, Jones provided instrumental backing. The duo's songs – most of them about love – thrust them into pop's stratosphere.

For five years in the 1990s Savage Garden dominated charts, hearts and airwaves. "Daniel was the good-looking one, I was the interesting one," says Hayes, whose curiously androgynous look was part Joan Jett, part Robert Smith from The Cure. "My image was carefully constructed. None of it was about masculinity or femininity, it was about having a mask to protect me from rejection."

Hayes and Taylor, who wed after Taylor graduated from QUT in the mid-'90s, split after three years. Neither rejected the other, says Hayes: "I'm proud that we loved each other on a level that was beyond the physical. She was my best friend. She pushed me into getting into a band. She is why I met Daniel."

Who, by the way, he isn't overly pleased with. "I was f..ked off," Hayes claims in *Too Close For Comfort* when pressed on the split. Savage Garden had produced two hit albums and half-a-dozen hit singles before their parting in 2001 – which, contrary to rumours, Hayes says was not at his instigation. (At the time, Jones was widely quoted as saying he was the last to hear the news.) Still, both are better men as a result: never a fan of the limelight, Jones is happily married (to Kathleen de Leon Jones of hit children's TV show *Hi-5*), a new father and enjoying success with his Sydney-based record label.

And Hayes? Initially, he took the baton and ran, releasing *Spin* and then wishing he hadn't ("I was so scared, so desperate to please"). *The Tension and*



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The way they were ... Daniel Jones (left) and Hayes in 2000, a year before Savage Garden came apart at the seams.

the Spark was his kneejerk reaction, a kind of musical transcript of his therapy sessions – and a critically acclaimed flop.

One day, years before Savage Garden broke up, he had realised he was gay. Just like that. "It was a philosophical, intellectual realisation. Before that I'd actually thought that everybody felt the way I did. I was very naive about sexuality and, of course, I married really young. I think I'm probably the first person to have ever come out without kissing a boy. I'm fiercely moral, so I basically went, 'Everyone, I've got to let you know, I've just worked something out.'"

Once he realised it, he never denied it. But he never volunteered it, either, despite the media's often desperate attempts to make him do so. "I was trying to be a gentleman," shrugs Hayes, who admits to feeling lonely in gay-friendly San Francisco, and to a few unfulfilling relationships. By the time he met Cullen, an animator, theatre director and film lecturer (and graphic designer – he did the cover of Hayes's 2005 hit single *So Beautiful*), he'd almost given up. "I'd told friends that that was fine, that I was blessed to have so many other things in my life, and then he came along. I have no problem in saying that he levels me, that he is a really beautiful and calming human being. We made a conscious decision not to live our relationship in the public eye. He's the person behind the scenes but he is absolutely my equal." Cullen works from home, he adds. "So when I get back from here, he's there with Wally. It's like 'Whoo-hoo! Kids! I'm home!'"

Hayes is doing very nicely. Even his hair is back to its natural colour, a sort of sandy brown, which might even be his biggest statement of all: "My

identity struggles were never about my sexuality, they were about liking myself." He walks around Primrose Hill and elsewhere without being photographed or stopped for an autograph, which suits him just fine. He can even hold his own at a dinner table with Madonna.

"She was chatting away and asking questions. Everyone turned in and listened and the minute she finished talking to me they turned away again." He shakes his head and laughs. "Ironic, isn't it, that the person who should have had the most attitude was actually the nicest?"

This is hardly the consensus on Madonna (Boy George recently called her "vile, hideous and horrible"). The anecdote is, perhaps, more a reflection on the effect Hayes has on those around him. The tables have turned on the people-pleaser who, having successfully deconstructed the notion of celebrity, has reassembled it again to his liking.

"I want to make a body of work that is worth something," he says, eyes flashing. "I want to play the Royal Albert Hall one day, regardless of whether I have a hit on the radio."

Downstairs at the mixing desk, Robert Conley coughs softly by way of reminder. Hayes stands and heads back into the studio, where track listings for his next album are written in busy black text on a board on a wall. "Time for some serious work!" he says melodramatically, producing, as if from nowhere, a green *Star Wars* light sabre and waving it about.

It's very funny. I stand there laughing, reluctant to leave. "Now give me a hug," says Darren Hayes, wrapping me in a big one. ■

A Big Night In is released by Roadshow on December 6.