

Truly Madly Gay

For years, the lead singer of the band Savage Garden wasn't just in the closet, he was in denial. Now the international pop star is remarried (this time to a man) and staging his musical comeback. **Darren Hayes** is finally ready to talk **BY MICHAEL GILTZ**

GROOMING BY MATT BAINE; STYLING BY HINTAN FITZGERALD AND PAUL LEWIS; PHOTOGRAPHIC ASSISTANTS: LOUISE SMITH AND DANIEL USMORE; T-SHIRT BY COMME DES GARÇONS; CARDIGAN BY DRIES VAN NOTEN

Almost everyone seems to have known pop star Darren Hayes was gay before he did. “It’s weird, because I can say to you that at the age of 11, I was [thinking], *Dear God, please don’t make me gay*,” says Hayes. “But those words never came out of my mouth. And if they didn’t come out of my mouth, they weren’t real.”

What was real was a lifetime of self-denial. Hayes left that scared little boy behind, married his best friend, became one half of the massively successful Australian duo Savage Garden, enjoyed hit records and sold-out shows, and then—and only then—finally admitted that his lifelong attraction to men and intense crushes actually meant something.

Hayes turns 35 on May 8, celebrates the first anniversary of his marriage to animator and director Richard Cullen on June 19, and releases his third solo album, *This Delicate Thing We’ve Made*, in August on Powdered Sugar, his own independent record label.

The 25-track double CD set, inspired in part by Kate Bush’s masterpiece *Hounds of Love*, dives into his childhood, teen years, struggles with his sexuality, loneliness,

and the joys of making a real relationship work. In other words, it has *dodgy* written all over it.

Despite a relatively mild media profile, Savage Garden was once more than legit, selling over 23 million albums around the world in the late 1990s, thanks primarily to two monster hits that Hayes affectionately calls “wedding songs.”

“Truly Madly Deeply” and “I Knew I Loved You” spent a combined 247 weeks on the adult contemporary charts. “I Knew” topped the AC charts for 17 weeks; each song set a record for its length of time on the charts.

Chuck Taylor, a senior correspondent for *Billboard* and a longtime Hayes supporter, says the time is ripe for a comeback.

“I think his voice is so recognizable, and those two songs...for two years they didn’t leave the airwaves,” says Taylor.

Like Carole King’s *Tapestry* and David Gray’s *White Ladder*, *This Delicate Thing We’ve Made* has the feel of something made for the sheer love of it, without any consideration for radio play or fitting into formats or pleasing a major label. And the result is music that’s stirringly universal and joyful, even if the memories they stir up for Hayes are sometimes sad.

“I remember the first person who called me gay in Australia,” says Hayes, sitting on a couch in his living room with his dog Waldo at his feet. “I would have been 11 and these two new boys came to school and one of them just didn’t like me. The other kid’s name was Steven, and I had a massive crush on him and Steven thought I was the bee’s knees, and the other guy just thought, *Can’t you see he’s a faggot?* Of course, I had no idea. I thought everyone wanted to be Wonder Woman.”

So even though his family wasn’t religious, Hayes prayed to God that he wouldn’t turn out to be gay and then locked all those thoughts away.

“First of all, it took me a long time to even accept that I was gay,” says Hayes. “And then it took me a long time to be happy that I was gay. There were two phases—a whole phase of denial, just thinking, *I’m sure that everybody thought Dirk Benedict was attractive*.”

“But that was as a child. I literally filed that into the back of my mind as something you don’t talk about. And because I’m an emotional person and because I’m a romantic, I really did fall in love with girls.”

One girl in particular—Colby Taylor, who became Hayes’s wife—circled an ►

ad for a band looking for a lead singer. And that led to Daniel Jones, the other principal of Savage Garden.

The cover band they initially performed in broke up, leading the two to form their own duo, named after a passage from Anne Rice's novel *The Vampire Lestat*. In 1997, Hayes married Colby, and Savage Garden's first single, "I Want You," hit the charts, becoming the best-selling single in Australia that year and a top 5 U.S. hit.

It was then that Leonie Messer—Hayes's publicist and/or manager for about a decade and still his best friend—asked the question Hayes had refused to ask himself.

"She sat me down in her office and she said, 'Are you gay?' I was like, 'Are you gay? I'm married!' She said, 'Are you gay?' I said, 'OK, first of all, I'm offended by that accusation. But what makes you say that?'"

"She said, 'Because every time [a certain employee] walks into the room, you blush.' And I had the most massive crush on this man. It was extreme. It was so Sybil in that I had literally compartmentalized my sexuality, all right? My secret feelings for men were in this drawer in my head. And I never shared them with anybody. Including myself. I'd never touched a boy. I'd never kissed a boy. I'd never said *anything*. I'm 23, 24 years of age. We're successful, number 1's in America, and I'm now traveling around the world, and these crushes on men are getting more and more intense," says Hayes.

Daniel Jones—"one of the straightest guys you'll ever meet," Hayes says—even opened the door. "I remember Daniel giving me that wonderful permission conversation. You know, 'If you were gay, that would be OK.'"

So Hayes told his wife and family he was struggling with this, and they went to a Christian counselor (sessions were free and anonymous) for a year. Keep in mind, this is the same time Savage Garden is in the midst of becoming one of the most successful bands in the world. Finally, Hayes took a different step.

"We agreed to separate," he says. "The idea was 'Go to New York and see if you can be gay.' [Colby's] reasoning at the time was 'I don't think you are, but I love you, and you need to do this.' So it was awful. It's like that moment in a bad relationship movie where they take a break, and you know breaks always mean the end. But I think both of us hoped, thought, we'll be together. I was just

about to come home when I met someone and I had a relationship. I remember calling her up and saying, 'I think I'm gay.' And that was the end."

Or, rather, the beginning. Hayes's first boyfriend was sweet and beautiful. "But it was never going to work," Hayes says. "I was running away from Australia, fame, a marriage, all that stuff. But it was beautiful. It was such a caring, sweet, and great way to be gay. I sort of had a crash course in it, really."

He came out to Jones in 1997 and his other bandmates in 1998. "When I came out, I came out to everybody I knew. I remember running down [the aisle of] a Boeing 747 telling the whole band, 'Guess what? I'm gay. I'm gay! I'm gay!'"

Hayes never worried about being recognized when hitting the bars or going out on dates. He never got burned publicly, even though he was dating men in New York and later in San Francisco.

"I was throwing myself at the wrong men," he says. "I dated a succession of men who were my father. I just dated these emotionally abusive, overpowering, gruff men who took care of me from a parental sense, in a stern kind of sense, but were not emotional, were never demonstrative."

For reasons they rarely discuss, Savage Garden broke up after two albums. Hayes's marriage was over, his love life was lackluster, and his first solo album—2002's *Spin*—made little impression.

In 2004 he dove into darker waters with *The Tension and the Spark*, a quiet, sad record that obliquely tackled his struggles with being gay as well as a childhood overshadowed by his father's physical abuse of his mother. Hayes's brother, Peter, like his father, is still hurt that the singer went public with these revelations.

Hayes insists that by this point everyone at his record label, Columbia, knew he was gay and it was never a problem.

"You hear these horror stories, but they were actually really beautiful to me," he says. "When I came out, Donny [then-label head Don Ienner] just changed from shaking my hand to kissing me on the cheek when he met me."

At the time, Hayes wasn't completely comfortable with being gay, and he was also coming out about his painful childhood. "I believe Darren had a lot of demons at work," says *Billboard's* Taylor, "from his childhood all the way through the time he became a public figure. I think

coming out was the least of his concerns. He had to make peace with a lot of issues inside himself."

Yet dealing with his sexuality wasn't about to take a backseat.

Hayes was promoting *The Tension and the Spark* on a TV show in the United Kingdom called *Popworld*, known for bringing on celebrities and treating them rudely. "It's like Perez Hilton on TV," Hayes explains.

"So this guy on camera says, 'So you're obviously gay; why didn't you ever come out?'" Hayes says. "The cameras are rolling. I just went, 'Oh, you want to talk about my sex life? I'm really happy to talk about my sex life. I'm more of a top. And I really, really like the missionary position. In fact, would you like me to show you how I fuck?' I was so aggressive. I was like Madonna on *David Letterman* when she was swearing. The producers were like, 'Cut! Cut! Cut!' I just sat there really defiantly. Everyone said, 'We're really, really sorry.' I was icy; I was just icy."

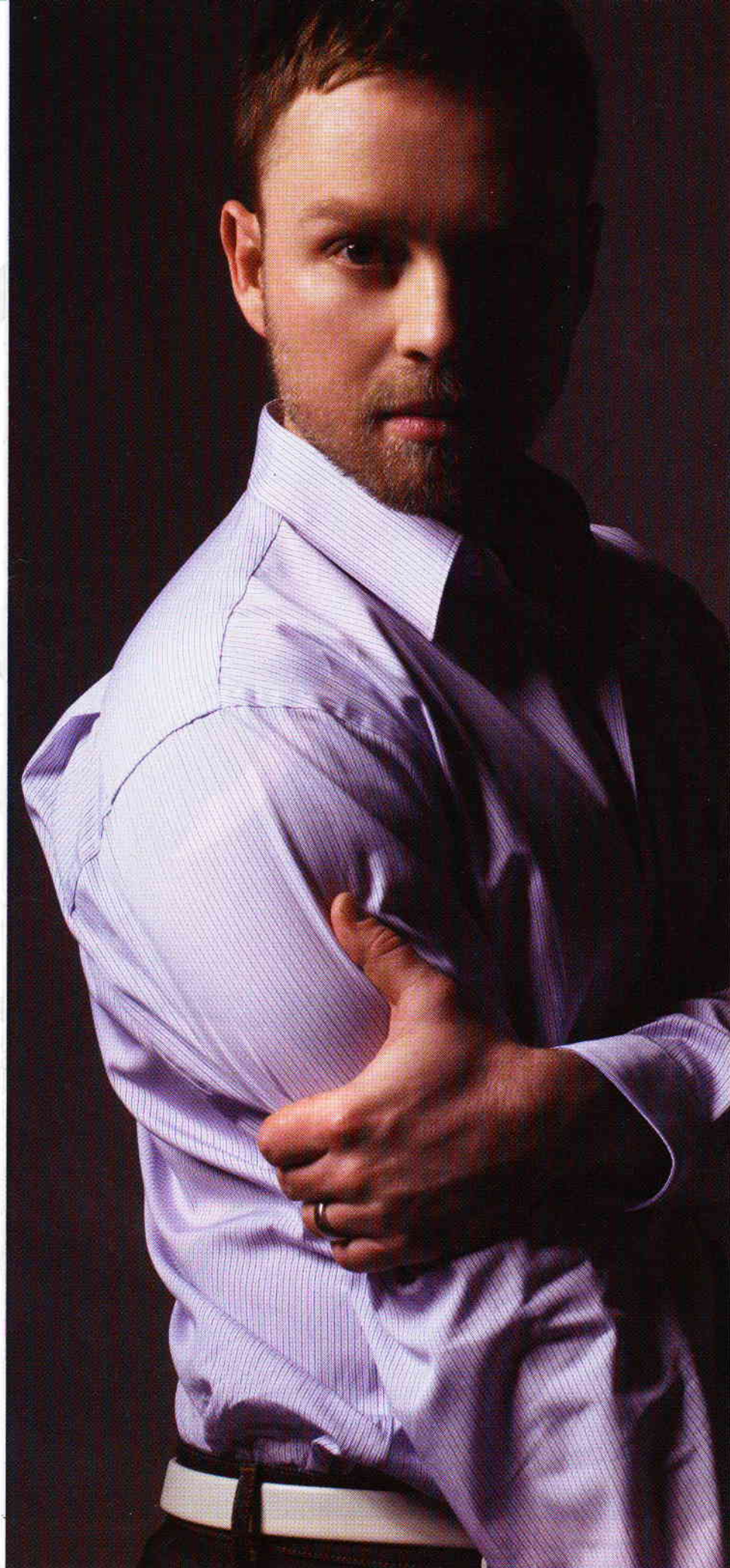
"When the interview [was over] I just said to the journalist, who was an openly gay man [cohost Simon Amstell], 'That was really uncool. Everybody who knows me knows that I'm gay. It's no secret that I'm gay. I just don't promote it in my work. And that was really fucking uncool.'"

"And I got up and I left. I got into the [car] and I slumped down into my seat and I just...broke down. That was the moment where I just thought, *OK, this is a problem now. This has become a problem.* And I felt so powerless. And I thought, *I have nothing to be ashamed of.* It was at that point that I went, *I'm going to come out. I need to come out.*"

And Hayes did finally come out officially last July, quietly, modestly, on his Web site, telling his fans that he had married his boyfriend of two years after entering a civil partnership, the marriage-like union for gay couples in the United Kingdom.

"We got married in this back garden," says Hayes. "It was a construction site at the time. We were in a circle holding hands and I was holding Richard's hand and my mom was there and my sister was there and it was so lovely. I can't stress how important it is to my view of liking myself to be able to be legitimized. You can say it's just a bit of paper, but it's so much more than that. To be able to stand up in front of your community, the people that you respect and love, and become valid in society's eyes, it is like this safety

T-SHIRT AND BELT BY COME DIES BARCONS; BUTTON-DOWN SHIRT BY FRED PERRY; JEANS BY A&C



net in your relationship. Thank God I fell in love with a Brit and I'm in a country where I can be respected."

Now his music is poised to receive more respect than ever before too. One song on *This Delicate Thing We've Made* has already been released to clubs under a pseudonym. Hayes has been performing tiny, intimate club dates around the world to reach out to his fan base and sow excitement for the new album. Cullen and others are working on a dozen or so animated shorts that will serve as music videos and be spread via the Web. Hayes will license the music to films and TV and even ads—any way to get the music out.

He's proud he waited to come out when he was happy about it and not in the midst of promoting a book or CD or other project.

"In a lot of ways, there was a feeling that I didn't feel authentic," says Hayes. "There was this adoration that I received, but there was always this trapdoor underneath it where I would think, *Would these people love me even, even if I was gay?* Which is a really horrible thing to think about yourself—to feel that you're fraudulent. Even though I never lied about it. And I'm so, so glad that I didn't."

Going public with his sexuality when he was "unsuccessful in gay relationships" was admittedly unappealing, says Hayes: "Hey, watch me fail at love! Please document this!" Now he's ready to document the happiest stage of his life.

"You know what I'm really proud of? There's not just sadness [on this album]. There's joy, like the song 'Casey,' for example. It's about my sister. There's a line where I say, 'She's coming to get me, she's coming to rescue me.' That was the relationship that I had with her."

As for the track "How to Build a Time Machine," Hayes says, "It's just a tool for me to say, if I could go back, I would bring some joy forward. I lost a bit of that for a while there in my life. I think Richard helped me find that again. The idea of waking up and being excited about your day? I haven't felt that for so long.

"It's as simple as having one part of my life solid. If this record doesn't work, I will survive. I have a life and it's OK. Talking about your childhood and being gay, it's really hard to do if the only person you have to console yourself is yourself." ■

Giltz is a regular contributor to several periodicals, including the New York Daily News.