

On looking inward to create your best work



Musician and songwriter Roland Orzabal (Tears for Fears) discusses respecting your form, tapping into your soul, and how to keep a longtime collaboration fruitful.

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As told to J. Bennett, 3180 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Process](#), [Beginnings](#), [Collaboration](#).

Do you have an overall artistic philosophy?

I do, and my answer is no. Because I flit about from doing things that are more superficial and pop to things that are more original and deep and meaningful to me—more personal. In terms of writing, I've written two books, believe it or not—one is yet to come out. One is romantic comedy—first person, present tense, very easy to write. The other one is historical, multi-character, past tense. So what I'm saying is that you have to respect the form and treat them like individuals.

Imagine having four children that are completely different. You don't have the same parental philosophy for them—that's the way I look at it. I think your level of critique is probably higher for a work that is more challenging and complex. Just as if you had a child who was a high achiever, you're going to put more pressure on them. As opposed to the child who's kind of happy go lucky and finding his way in the world, has tons of friends, and this incredible social life. He's always going to be happy, so you just leave him alone.

You've been writing songs for decades now. What inspired you to start?

When I was a kid, before my parents split up, they ran an entertainment agency out of our council house estate in Leigh Park, Hampshire, south of England. Although my parents' relationship was very strained and very turbulent, including domestic violence, sometimes the atmosphere in the house was more akin to a circus. My mum trained strippers, so the women that came around were either training to be strippers or were already professional. The guys that came around—apart from the odd clown, bodybuilder, muscle mover, or magician—were mainly singer/songwriters that sounded like Johnny Cash or Elvis. There was a multi-harmony group as well.

My earliest memories were of my father making reel-to-reel tapes specifically to get these guys work. He would listen to the song, say, "good take," or "bad take, do it again," very much like a producer. I was enamored and inspired by these men, really, who weren't like my father. They weren't scary, violent and critical, but they were desperately trying to express themselves and make a living.

When did you write your first song?

I wrote my first song at age seven. I understood the structure of a song just from listening to the radio because it's not really rocket science, is it? The three-minute single: Verse, chorus, verse, chorus, verse, chorus, bridge, middle eight, and chorus out. So I sang my first song to the kids on the estate, and they loved it. So

that was nice. And then I sang it to my parents, and they immediately thought that I'd stolen it from the radio.

At age nine, I picked up the guitar. I didn't care about learning the guitar—all I cared about was providing a backdrop of chords so that I could write a song. I then always wrote songs. They weren't very good, obviously, at nine years old—I'm trying to sound like Johnny Cash on two chords. But I took it from there, really. I've always written songs, but I didn't really get serious until I had my first record contract at age 18. I was starting to churn them out then, but—again—it was pretty meager pop music, way behind the trend, trying to play catch up.

You're talking about your band Graduate, which also included your future Tears For Fears bandmate Curt Smith. How crucial do you think Graduate was to your musical development? Do you think it was a necessary step towards Tears for Fears?

I do. It was something like an apprenticeship, but it wasn't really, because Graduate started as a duo. It was myself and my good friend John Baker. I taught him to play acoustic guitar, alongside a couple of other kids at school, because I was more advanced. We formed like a folk duo. We started off doing Simon and Garfunkel, hence the name Graduate. We used to play in a hairdresser's on a Saturday, which was quite strange, but I enjoyed it. John and I got on like a house on fire, and still do.

We then started to look for a record contract, but we were way out of line with the current pop music trend, of course. So we sort of tried to jump on the bandwagon really quickly. Wrote a whole bunch of songs which sounded more akin to what was in the charts. Lo and behold, we ended up with a record contract and even ended up with a radio hit in Spain. We went across to Spain and we stayed in a hotel with girls camped outside. I wrote the song, so I had this six weeks of radio play on Radio One and got my first publishing check. Now, I was unemployed, and I came from absolutely no money. So all of a sudden, when this check for £3,000 turns up, I'm like, "Whoa. Whoa. This is crazy." But it wasn't to be.

How did the transition to Tears For Fears happen?

I got Curt involved in Graduate. He was originally a lead singer for another band I was in, which was more of a heavy metal outfit. So he came in as the bass player. Curt and I, we were council house kids, broken homes, and we also had both embraced the books by Arthur Janov: *The Primal Scream*, *Primal Man: The New Consciousness*, *Prisoners of Pain*. So we were on a different philosophical path to the rest of the guys in Graduate. We also were...how can I put it? A little bit sensitive. So when it came to Graduate touring and lugging our own equipment, even though it was only two weeks in Germany, it broke us. We thought, "Well, we don't want to do this. We don't want to work hard. We could stay in a studio and make records in the comfort of a big sofa."

At the time, the music scene was changing again, as it does. All of a sudden, there were duos popping up. Gary Numan was at number one with "Are 'Friends' Electric?" All the two-tone mod stuff was starting to seem really old and out of date. You had Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark, Soft Cell, Blancmange, Depeche Mode, Human League—this was a radical shift. But, besides my experience of songwriting, I'd played in an orchestra. Awful trumpet, pretty terrible timpani. I'd sung in a choir. I'd read music. All of a sudden, to have these synthesizers and make trumpets sounds on them, it was just unbelievable. Really unbelievable. So the combination of the technology at our disposal—drum machines, synthesizers—plus Janov's theories and philosophy, that was the birth of Tears for Fears.

Did the connection between music and Janov's psychotherapy writings seem obvious to you? Or did it feel like new territory to a certain extent?

Not really, because there were some pointers there already. The music scene had changed. Different artists were expressing different things around that time. You're always going to get acts that come along and party like it's the end of the world as we know it. But there are other people that indulge in their own melancholia. People like Joy Division, with "Love Will Tear Us Apart." That song was so powerful. Plus, of course, the story behind it made you really think about the depth of what you were willing to communicate.

So in many ways, it was becoming legitimate to really talk about what was going on inside you, because it's

important. I found that this was a turning point for me—a tipping point, you might say—and all of a sudden my songs just became way better. If you look at the songs on the *Graduate* album, which are pretty bad, compared a song like “Mad World,” it’s like a different writer. It’s a different person. It’s coming from a different part of you. It’s coming from your soul. And once you tap into your soul, you are literally tapping into this huge, huge ocean of possibilities. And at that point, you cannot even claim it as your own. At that point, it is a kind of universal force. Do you know what I mean?

You’re channelling.

Exactly, and that’s what I always felt when I wrote those songs that came out of nowhere—that I was channeling.

You’ve been making music with Curt since you were both teenagers. How would you describe your creative relationship?

It’s changed over the years, quite dramatically. Once I started tapping into this more insecure part of myself, the more introverted part of myself, Curt was an absolute rock in terms of his confidence, his arrogance, and he took over as the figurehead—especially in England. It was coincidence—or maybe not—that the songs that I didn’t want to sing or couldn’t sing very well, he could. And those are the songs that became the singles. So at that point in time, I was really very much indulging myself and being a backroom boy. Even though I was in the pictures with him, I was more into the sounds of the records.

The other thing that separated Curt and I from the other guys in *Graduate* was the fact that we were the guys sitting behind the sound desk beating up the engineer or the producer. His opinion has always been vital, and he gets behind what we’re doing. And God bless him, even after *Big Chair*, when we were huge around the world, and I was going off into the wilderness looking for a different style of music, he supported me at every turn. The record company didn’t, and they all thought we were going mad. But Curt did.

With *Seeds of Love* he was co-producer. He was with me every day deciding on the guitar sounds, the drum sounds, and the songs. Nowadays, he’s become this kind of audiophile. He will take stuff home and he’ll come back the next day and say, “It didn’t sound right.” So we work on it some more. In many ways on the new album, *The Tipping Point*, he’s more of an executive producer, if you see what I’m saying. It’s like having an A&R man in your recording studio. He’s the guy with the overview.

You’ve made plenty of albums without Curt as well. How would you characterize the difference between the collaborative nature of working with him in that special relationship verses having more autonomy and control in doing your own thing?

The thing with making records, it’s generally a team effort. So, for instance, when Curt and I went our separate ways at the beginning of the ’90s—again, coincidence or maybe not coincidence—this guy called Alan Griffiths, who had played guitar with us on the *Big Chair* tour and was quite known in the Bristol music scene, approached me and asked if I fancied writing together. I was thinking, “Why would I do that? I’ve never sat down to write with anyone else. I’ve had their input, and I’ve had songs finished by people, but I’ve never sat down to write with anyone.” But I did it. He brought along his keyboard and it was a completely different chemistry.

To expand from Al and I, we got Tim Palmer and Mark O’Donoghue so then it was a team of four. And we were so cohesive, so on the same page, that I no longer needed to be the control freak that I was in the ’80s. Because I was awful. I was pretty bad—live and making records. But I could leave the recording studio with Al, Tim and Mark, come back at the end of the day, and they would have done incredible things. Now that, for me, was immense. It was amazing, and you end up trusting them. Al was so creative and critical at the same time. Tim Palmer is just a remarkable producer-engineer. Before that, I was a bit of a control freak nightmare.

You’ve said that you felt *The Hurting* was the only real Tears For Fears album because you went off script with *Songs from the Big Chair*, and then made some political statements in *The Seeds of Love*. Can you talk about that a little bit?

Now and again, people will ask, "What makes a Tears For Fears record?" Curt's got his own answer—nowadays he says, "Whatever Roland and I agree on." He's right, but if you trace it back to the birth of Tears For Fears, we had the Janov stuff. It would be impossible to do it any better than we did it in *The Hurting*, as far as sewing all his theories and ideas into a pop record. Now, once we'd done that, I think what happened was there was a shift, and this is probably a shift from adolescence to adulthood.

When most people realize they're on their own as adults, they think, "I'd better do something now." But when you are adolescent, when you're first breaking away from your parents, you are confronting the demons of the family. These are the family ghosts. These are family skeletons in the closet. Now, depending on what your makeup is, you're either someone who skates the thin ice on the surface of life or you're someone who is destined and fated by the nature of your makeup to go down into the dungeons and fight the dragon and find the gold. I was one of those guys. I was the one who had to try and work out what the hell has been going on with my family. And I did that. But once you grow older, you gain confidence, you move away from that dark period and you become more socially aware.

So, Big Chair is a great bridge because you've got the songs like "Shout," which is kind of like a cheesy reference back to the primal scream, but it's also just a song about protest—and it has been used that way many, many times since. Then you've got "Woman in Chains," which was about my mother and my father and the domestic abuse. It's also a comment about women, feminism, et cetera, et cetera. With "Sowing the Seeds of Love," I was reading *Marxism for Dummies*. I was reading the history of the common man because I'm from a council estate, getting really pissed off and growing up under Thatcher and hating every minute of it. So in many, many ways, *The Hurting* was the true Tears for Fears album and after that we just grew up.

You've finished work on *The Tipping Point*, the first Tears For Fears album in 17 years. Tell me a little bit about the process, creatively and personally, of getting back to that place where this was able to happen.

It wasn't easy. That seems to be the nature of the dynamic of Tears For Fears. Even if you go back to *The Hurting*, most people would have cracked that album out in a month or two but, no, we were destined to spend all day in a recording studio until two o'clock in the morning arguing over the hi-hat parts to the point where Curt would be sobbing privately in the toilet. We did one easy album, which was *Everybody Loves a Happy Ending*, and it sounds it as well. It doesn't have that pain and torture of our greater works.

With this album, we didn't really know what to start with. I have what I call musical Tourette's, so I can come up with all kinds of ideas. I'm not inhibited. I'm not self-conscious. I'm quite happy to make a fool of myself. We went through all these different periods of working with different people, getting a song here and a song there. Between that and my musical Tourette's, it left Curt behind and secretly he hated it. So we had this album which he didn't like, and I liked five tracks a lot.

We had a crisis meeting, and he wasn't sure whether he wanted to carry on. And that's fair enough, because we're not spring chickens anymore and we don't need the money. So I said, "Okay, let's do this: I'll come around your house with an acoustic guitar. We'll sit down, and we'll play around like we did when we were kids." I brought my iPhone to record it, and Curt started playing this riff and we were off. We had a song. I took it away back to England and then lockdown started, the pandemic started. The Black Lives Matter protests, all these kinds of things. All of a sudden, we were in a completely different environment and world, and we had a ton of things to sing about.

When we got together at the end of 2020 in LA, we'd come full circle. We were spoilt for choice in terms of material, but it was the new songs that absolutely defined the album. And as I said, Curt's not easy to please nowadays—he's really not. We're both curmudgeonly. And so, when Curt turned around and says, "This is great," I knew it really was.

I think many artists that are three or four decades into their careers struggle to create material that has the same kind of spark or energy as their earlier work. Was that something that you were worried about at all?

No, because we weren't going to do it if we didn't achieve it. We weren't signed to a record company at the time.

We weren't under any pressure to put out any material, other than the pressure from the fans. I do feel for bands from our era—and even bands that have been way, way more successful—when they put out stuff and it doesn't resonate. Even though it's competent. It's professional, but it's not resonating. You can kind of take it or leave it.

I almost want to sit down with those artists and say, "Look, do this, or try that, but don't just do a record that sounds *okay*." And it's not just that. It's a struggle to get all our songs in on a live set—the ones we like. So if we're going to start playing new songs live, they better be bloody good. They've got to stand up next to "Everybody Wants to Rule the World" and "Shout" and "Mad World." That was our measuring stick.

Roland Orzabal Recommends:

Cosmos and Psyche by Richard Tarnas. A groundbreaking and intensely researched book on the correlation between the cycles of the outer planets and world events.

A holiday in the Scottish Highlands, one of the most beautiful areas in the world.

Under the Skin, podcast with Russell Brand.

David Attenborough's *Witness Statement: A Life On Our Planet*.

The Fell, a gut-wrenching novel by Richard Jenkins.

Name

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Vocation

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Frank W. Ockenfels III