

# On channeling your emotions in art



Musician Tom Warrior on being confronted by your past work, coping with writer's block, and learning from a master.

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As told to J. Bennett, 3299 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Art](#), [Creative anxiety](#), [Collaboration](#), [Multi-tasking](#), [Beginnings](#).

**You've been involved in at least three highly revered metal bands over the course of your career: Hellhammer, Celtic Frost, and Triptykon. How has your artistic approach evolved over the years?**

I don't think the basic approach has changed much from my early days. What has really changed is the experience I've gathered. I've been a musician for 38 years now, which is a staggering number for me, and if you had told the young Tom that he will be a musician for so many years, he wouldn't have believed you. But it is as it is, and of course unless you're a completely closed person you gather experience on every level during such a time in the music industry and the music scene—ranging from working with other people and trying to establish creative bridges with other people, to technical studio experience and routine as a player. And that's really the area where it's changed. My personal approach, my attempts to convert some of my emotions into music and lyrics, I think I'm still handling them pretty much the same as I did in Hellhammer.

**When you started Hellhammer in the early '80s in Switzerland, you were quite isolated from the rest of the heavy metal world. What do you see as the advantages and disadvantages of that situation?**

The disadvantages were definitely that we had to figure everything out on our own. Mind you, that was long before the internet, in a country that at the time didn't have much of a music scene. It was a very small scene, and the biggest band at the time in Switzerland was Krokus. After that, nothing came for quite a long time. Then you would have some bands that played a tiny handful of clubs that existed in our country. Whereas at the time, in the United States, or in England, there were countless bands that a young musician could have maybe met or talked to, because there were countless clubs where these bands would have played, and there was a chance that you could actually be in touch with them.

In Switzerland, there were really no peers or people to look up to. There was not really a club scene to go to every night to meet somebody, or at least see how bands act on stage, how they do their things, what equipment they have, and what the crew is doing. We had to figure everything out on our own, and in the beginning, there were hardly any metal magazines, either. We had *Kerrang!*, which was the only magazine we could get, and even then only with a lot of difficulties. We had to mail money to England to get it. It wasn't at the newsstands, so we were left to our own devices.

We had *Kerrang!* magazine and the back of the vinyl albums that we owned. We looked through all the credits on the back of the albums to gain any hint of how bands were doing it. What kind of crew do they have? Do they have management? How does this work? Are there any photos that show them in the studio? We were left looking for scraps, and that was a distinct disadvantage. We had to figure out everything ourselves, therefore we were much slower than bands that we met later on once we had a career.

The advantage of all of this is astonishingly the same. Being left to our own devices left us with no other way than to be original. We had to come up with our own stuff, because we couldn't go to a club and copy what we saw. We had to develop our own style. Initially, of course, we were young, and we could hardly play. We didn't have any experience, we weren't professional. Initially it was very difficult to do that. But later on, we realized being forced to create our own identity and our own music was an advantage in an ocean of bands that sounded similar. We sounded different and initially didn't know why, but this is the reason: because we were isolated.

**There was a time, years ago, when you were dismissive of the music you made with Hellhammer. Do you see it now as a necessary step in the process of getting to where you are today?**

I got a lot of criticism for daring to critically self-analyze our early work. I was probably the person from Hellhammer that had the most public exposure, but I know that Steve Warrior, who formed Hellhammer, and Martin [Ain], who replaced Steve Warrior, were equally as critical at the time. It's a complex topic and I'll try to summarize it quickly.

Number one, for us Hellhammer wasn't like it was for the fans. It wasn't just like a band that you listen to and either like it or don't like it. Hellhammer arose directly from a very difficult youth that I had. And Steve Warrior came out of an equally difficult situation. Hellhammer was our sanctuary, our harbor. But at the same time, later, when we formed Celtic Frost, we began to have the semblance of a career. Looking back to Hellhammer wasn't just looking back musically. It always reminded me of my youth. And that was a very difficult thing for me. I wasn't really able to address a lot of issues that I hadn't psychologically worked through from my youth until I became 40. Before that, I was shunning dealing with some of the skeletons of my youth.

One of the results was that, whenever I heard Hellhammer, I couldn't see it abstractly as a band. I think Martin and Steve Warrior, they'll have the same ghosts in their closets. Nowadays, ever since I turned 40 and I started this long overdue process, it's a million times easier, and I can look at Hellhammer as a musical entity, and I'm very proud of that. And my youth is my youth-whatever. I now see Hellhammer as the stepping stone away from this.

The second problem was with a couple of lyrics we wrote in... I'm tempted to say "youthful naivety." But on the other hand, I've started to self-analyze myself in the last 15 years, [and] I also discovered traces of a hatred for my mother in some of these lyrics. My mother, who bestowed this kind of youth on me, and me being totally helpless at the time... I think some of that hatred manifested itself in some very radical lyrics. And later on, I found these lyrics extremely unfortunate, but my name is on there and I have to defend them. I have to stand behind them, even though if I had seen [them written by] another band, I would be extremely critical. This is not an easy thing to live with. So for me, Hellhammer is a very different animal than for most other people, but I have found my peace with it.

**I know your collaboration with Martin Ain in both Hellhammer and Celtic Frost was often fraught with difficulties, but what was it like when it was going well? In what ways did you complement each other's ideas?**

In my opinion, something extraordinary, something truly special... that's not an easy thing to create. Otherwise everybody would do it. The difficulties were part of the creative process. Yes, sometimes we had a fiery disagreement, but we always came to a common conclusion at the end. We almost always managed to turn disagreements or different approaches into something totally creative. As a matter of fact, at the very last meeting I had with Martin, two weeks before he died, we talked about exactly that. We were reminiscing on how we managed to turn a million conflicts into music, into art, into creativity. Yes, we had negative moments and sometimes they annoyed us to no end. Sometimes we also had exactly the same ideas, and it was much easier to realize them. But the entire process has such an importance in my heart that I know I will never, ever find anybody like Martin again. Celtic Frost in that state was something truly unique. And I can be very glad that I was granted to have at least the years with Martin that I had. Difficulties or not, it was all worth it and it all had a purpose.

**I know you experienced some personal difficulties during the writing process for the last Triptykon record, *Melana Chasmata*. What kind of effect do you think those difficulties had on the writing process itself, or your creative process in general?**

The correct answer would be, "I'm professional enough to not let this influence my music." I've been doing this long enough, and I know what it means to be professional. But the reality is, I draw my music from my emotions, and if my emotions are plunged into darkness, you will of course hear it in the music. It becomes increasingly difficult to be a leader in the studio, which my band sometimes expects from me. On the other hand, this is basically my [release] valve, and if I didn't have it, I would have no idea what would have happened to me. If I had to bottle this up and actually act all professional without allowing my emotions to somewhere boil over, I don't know what would happen.

As with so many things in life, it's a complex thing to explain. I had enormous difficulties finding the frame of mind to finish the second Triptykon album. On the other hand, when I read some of the lyrics nowadays, I'm not praising myself, but I look at the lyrics and I think they are really real. None of this is contrived. I would never rate my own music—I'm not that pretentious—but I look at the lyrics, and at least I know they're real. The emotions there are not written so I can get some sad gothic fans or whatever. The lyrics are a hundred percent real, and the darkness of the music is also not contrived. It's a hundred percent real. So, in an artistic manner, absurdly, it's a very fruitful thing. When he was still alive, H.R. Giger once told me the same thing: That most of his art arose from suffering. And of course it's not a perfect process, but what are you gonna do? There's other options—either be frustrated your entire life because you bottle it up, or be an alcoholic or resort to drugs—or try to make something creative out of this, you know?

**You were Giger's personal assistant for many years. Having access to a master like that must have been invaluable. What did you learn about the creative process from him?**

I'm a speck of dust compared to Giger, who in my eyes was a genius. He was a genius to me on the level of Hieronymus Bosch, for example. It would be utterly preposterous if a little speck of dust like me would say I learned this and that from Giger. I watched him and was deeply fascinated by him, but he had genius in his blood, and I don't. I'm just a normal being struggling with every song I write, because it's difficult to write good material. It's very difficult, even though I've been doing this for decades.

But I was once in Giger's kitchen, and he had an idea for something, I can't remember what it was, just some tiny little thing, and he took a napkin and proceeded to sketch on it with a pen. Watching this, I had this enlightening moment, realizing that you could see it in the way he guided his pen. Just by doing this completely ridiculous sketch about this furniture or something like that, you could see this man is handling his pen completely differently than any other human being I've ever seen. It was just his style. It's very difficult to explain, but it was obvious that he had a different gift than all of us. You cannot learn this. I watched him in awe, you could say that. But it would be so pretentious to say I learned this and that from him. I learned that I am not a genius. But I knew that beforehand. I knew that already for a while.

**Did he have any attitudes or outlooks about art or about life that inspired you?**

Well, there were certain things that we felt similarly about—for example, that Switzerland creates artists who are not conforming to the norm, and that it treats them very harshly, which is something Giger lamented about often. Not in a whiny way, but he was just very observant, and he felt that Switzerland—and he loved his home country so much—very often ignored him, even though he made his best efforts to be accepted here. And that's something that I could actually relate to in my own tiny way. It was over things like that where we bonded. Or I would be at his house, and I would say something in a discussion, and Giger would, to my complete surprise, say, "Thank you for saying that. I feel the same." And to me, of course... Giger was also a father figure to me, so to get approval from a person I looked up to so much was of course extraordinary for me. But these are basically ordinary things. Giger had a gift that is unmatched. I'm the last person to match him.

**Going back to the period before *Melana Chasmata*, you also mentioned that you had severe writer's block during that time. How did you cope with that?**

Just by not giving up, I guess. It was extremely difficult. Oh god, I'm hesitant to think what this interview's gonna look like... I don't wanna seem like the guy who's always doing difficult things. But yes, I had writer's block. It was massive. And I came out of the recording session for *Melana Chasmata* thinking this was the most

difficult album I've ever done in my entire life. And I had already thought that after Celtic Frost's *Monotheist* and after the first Triptykon album. But now I find myself in a situation where I'm working on the third Triptykon album, and I have exactly the same feeling. So maybe I'm just psychologically sick. I don't know.

On one hand, there are people in my life that have said I'm too extreme, too radical, too determined in my procedures. On the other hand, sometimes I think maybe I allow for too many emotions. But without emotions, I cannot write music, so it's kind of a contradiction. But allowing emotions and living an active life, an active emotional life, also in my social life, sometimes brings with it enormous difficulties for the creative process. I have in recent months learned to channel [some] of these things much more quickly than I did when I worked on the second Triptykon album. For example, the lyrics that I've written recently for my Niryth project are basically my private psychotherapy, so I hope I'm learning to manage these things.

**If it helps put you at ease about the interview, I'm asking these questions because we want this site to be a resource for artists. Any insights you have into problems like writer's block might be helpful for others.**

Writer's block is one of the worst things that can befall you. Especially if you've risen to the level where you're a professional musician and you have commitments and contracts and this and that. But even without that, writer's block is hell, and there's really no simple solution. Actually, just recently, a bassist from Switzerland that I know asked me for a method [of] how to get out of writer's block. But there really isn't one. It's very difficult. And the only thing I can say is try to channel whatever it is that stops you. Mostly it's depression. Try to channel this into your work musically or lyrically, even though that is very difficult sometimes.

Or, another thing that I've found in my recent years is that it also can help if you do a couple different projects on the side. That's not to say that you should abandon the original projects. But when I did the Niryth project, it really infused a lot of completely different inspiration into me and shook the writer's block away, because it [involves] different people and completely different challenges. It had quite an energizing, revitalizing effect on me, so maybe this would also work for other people, to maybe spend some time away from your main project. Try something utterly different and then let the experience of that work into your main project again. Let them feed off each other.

Sometimes I even listen to my own music, to some of the things that I'm proud of, the music that I think, "Yeah, okay, that stands the test of time." And then I think, "How the hell did I have the ideas for this?" I cannot remember how this came to me. And that's a scary thing, because I'm expected to write more of this by everybody. By my band members, by my audience, my management. Everybody expects me to have this secret prescription of how to do this. And sometimes I listen to things that I did and I think, how the hell did I have this idea? Where did it come from? I have no idea. And that's a scary prospect.

**What about going over old lyrics you've written? Does that ever help in terms of looking for themes you'd like to explore further—or things you'd like to avoid?**

Of course. We've talked a lot about the negative aspects now. Of course, it's sometimes also an extreme joy to rediscover old material. Because almost every song has a story attached to it, or a personal moment attached to it. Or rehearsals that were fun with a fantastic lineup, or fantastic recording sessions, or you were in a city that inspired you. Or you come across some lyrics that you wrote 30 years ago that you didn't even remember, and then you read them and think, "Wow, for a young know-nothing at the time, for a half amateur, these lyrics are quite alright."

Or you have to smile because you discover a lot of youthful testosterone and naiveté in your lyrics, and it reminds you of a different time in your life. So it's an interesting process. Sometimes it's sad, sometimes it's totally inspiring and happy. It's a very mixed bag.

But I really don't sit at home listening to my old albums thinking, "Hey, that's a cool song." The thing is, we play live, and we very often change our live set to keep it interesting. And then I will have to go home and actually listen to it because some of the songs I recorded 35 years ago. I certainly don't have every detail in

my head anymore, so I have to go and listen to my back catalog whether I like to or not. And I have to listen to it in detail, because I have to re-learn it in detail and then perform it—lyrics and music. So there's no way around it, even though I don't do this privately for my enjoyment. I am confronted by my own work, whether I want to be or not.

#### **Essential Tom Warrior**

Celtic Frost - Morbid Tales

Celtic Frost - To Mega Therion

Celtic Frost - Emperor's Return

Triptykon - Eparistera Daimones

Hellhammer - Apocalyptic Raids

#### Name

Tom Warrior

#### Vocation

Musician

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