

Song Exploder
Tears for Fears - Everybody Wants to Rule the World
Episode 292

Hrishikesh: You're listening to Song Exploder, where musicians take apart their songs and piece by piece tell the story of how they were made. I'm Hrishikesh Hirway.

This episode contains explicit language.

Tears for Fears is a duo formed in 1981 in Bath, England, by Roland Orzabal and Curt Smith. They've sold over 30 million albums, starting with their first, *The Hurting*, which went to number one in the UK. But it was their second album, *Songs from the Big Chair*, that made them international stars. It came out in 1985, and had huge singles like "Shout" and "Head Over Heels." But their biggest hit is "Everybody Wants to Rule The World." It won Best Single at the BRIT Awards in 1986, and it's been streamed over 2 billion times. So, I talked to the two of them about how they, along with their producer Chris Hughes, and keyboard player Ian Stanley, made a song that would help define the sound of the 80s.

("Everybody Wants to Rule the World" by Tears for Fears)

(Vocals: "Acting on your best behaviour / Turn your back on Mother Nature / Everybody wants to rule the world")

Roland: I am Roland Orzabal.

Curt: And I am Curt Smith.

Hrishikesh: Before we get into the song, I was wondering if you two could tell the story of how you first met and started a band.

Curt: Well, we first met at the door of my apartment flat in Bath.

Roland: Snow Hill, yep.

Curt: In Snow Hill, which is a council estate, so I guess in America you call them the projects. And I was, I was grounded for getting in a fight.

Hrishikesh: How old were you?

Curt: 14, maybe?

Roland: 14, something like.

Curt: 14, I think. Roland came with a mutual friend. He was at a different school than I was, in, in Bath.

Roland: When I met Curt, I thought, well, he, as he said, he was grounded. And I thought, "Who the hell is this hooligan?"

Hrishikesh: (chuckles)

Roland: You know, so I was a little bit wary of him, while at the same time kind of fascinated. Same as now, really.

HH & Curt: (laugh)

Roland: And, uh, I was in a, kind of, really bad heavy metal band. And I was, wanted to be sort of Jimmy Page. I couldn't, I would, never saw myself as a singer. And with Curt, I remember being in another, a different apartment, and he was singing along to "Last Days of May," Blue Öyster Cult. And he was unashamed. He was into the music. And he wore his heart on his sleeve. I thought, you know, it was obvious to me Curt should become the lead singer—

Hrishikesh: Hmm.

Roland: — of our band. So, uh, yeah, that's how we first started the musical relationship.

Curt: It was at that point in time that sort of opposites attract. I definitely was a troublemaker, he was you know, good at school and straight A's and all that kind of stuff. Um, but there was some mutual attraction.

Hrishikesh: When you two first started, was that band called Tears For Fears?

Curt: No.

Roland: No, no, no, no. We don't really want to talk about the, the names of the bands that we were in. (chuckles)

Hrishikesh: (laughs)

Curt: They were pretty bad names. (chuckles)

Roland: Yeah, they were pretty bad. And so, best left—

Hrishikesh: (laughs) Sure.

Roland: –to posterity.

Curt: Um, and then we also came at a time when, you know, we were, I guess we were 18 then. We'd moved away from the sort of hard rock stuff, listening to, we were getting into production. So we're listening to Peter Gabriel and bands that actually really made quite gloriously produced records.

Roland: Yeah.

Curt: And, uh, suddenly we were like, that's the kind of thing we want to be doing.

Hrishikesh: Hmm.

Curt: Or aiming for. We want to aim to be that good.

Hrishikesh: I think it's an interesting part of the band dynamic to bring up. Because it's not enough just to, really, be good together musically, or even, you know, get along well – it's also really important to have a similar level of ambition.

Roland: Well, the, here's the point about getting on really well. 'Cause I would argue, or I would suggest, that if you get on really well, that's not a good thing.

That there has to be an element of tension. There has to be fundamentally a different approach and disagreement at the heart of it. Now, you may learn over decades, which we have, to completely get on, but fundamentally, there has to be the grit in the oyster around which the pearl is formed.

Curt: You know, without question, we have learned to deal with each other over the years, and it has become easier for us, without question, but we have, musically, very different tastes. Where Tears for Fears comes from is the middle ground between what we like individually.

Hrishikesh: As you were getting ready to work on this song, what was going on in your lives, as a band?

Roland: Well we'd already been successful.

Curt: Successful. Yeah.

Roland: Probably beyond our wildest dreams. With the first album, The Hurting, we had three top five singles in Britain. We were in the teen magazines. We were on the same Top of the Pops, I believe, as Culture Club in those days. But while this was all going on, we have this terrible sort of perfectionist slash progressive instinct.

Curt: The record company were desperate for us to follow up what was a very successful album. But we were more concerned about doing something that's maybe different.

Roland: So we were already at this house in Bath, the big house owned by Ian Stanley, and we were experimenting. We often experimented doing B sides. No one cared, okay, and they were great fun. So we experimented, we did this song, very quickly, called "The Way You Are." And now, that should have been a B side.

But the record company said to us, "No, well, this is your next single". It was a kind of strange song, not written from the heart. And it only got to number 24. So we're like, "Whoa, what's going on?"

Curt: And "The Way You Are," you know, for all its faults and it, and it does, cause it's really bad, I think, but uh, it did teach us that that's not good enough. And so it was sort of back to writing the songs, more than anything else.

Roland: Maybe it's time to focus more on the songwriting.

Hrishikesh: Mm-hmm.

Roland: So following that, we recorded a song called "Mothers Talk," and that became a bigger hit than "The Way You Are." So after "Mothers Talk," relative success, I was then given a month off to write the rest of the album. And I was mucking about with all kinds of things.

There was a song by Simple Minds called "Waterfront," with its bass part. "*Ba bom, ba bom, ba bom, ba bom, ba bom...*" Incessant. So I just put that on the bass drum.

(kick drum)

Curt: The Linn drum machine had just come out.

Roland: There was a song called "Throwing Away The Key," by a soul duo called Linx, and it had this very, very strange hi hat going "*T t t t t t t t t t t...*"

(add hi hats)

It was square against the, what we call the shuffled beat.

(add snare)

So I put that all in, and put in a cabasa to play the other beats to the hi hat,

(add shaker)

And I was playing on the acoustic guitar.

(instrumental bridge - add acoustic guitar)

I tuned the E string down to a D, and there were just two chords.

And the chorus was, "Everybody wants to go to war."

Hrishikesh: Hmm.

Roland: And I didn't feel very good about that. This is at a time when, obviously, Russia and America still had the nuclear threat. They still do, things haven't changed.

Curt: It was the height of the Cold War back then. It was Reagan era.

Roland: And so, I wasn't sure about the song. I had the chords, I had the climb. "*Da da da da da da da da, Everybody wants to go to war.*" Hmm, I didn't like it.

My wife at the time, Caroline, said "No, it's really good." I was like, "Really? Okay." So, I took in a bunch of songs into the studio. And I played them to Curt and Chris Hughes and Ian Stanley. And Chris Hughes producing.

But "Everybody Wants to Rule the World" was never finished. It just had, it didn't have a middle eight, or anything like that.

Hrishikesh: Curt, do you remember hearing that unfinished version?

Curt: Yeah, well the feel of it was great. And I think that was the hard part of doing "Everybody," was to make it into something more than just a track that felt great. 'Cause your first feeling is, you know, this is a wonderful driving song. But there are times when you're doing a project where you kind of may like a song, but it doesn't fit into what you're doing. And we were trying to do things of more depth, and something bigger than that. Or we want a bigger track, which ended up being "Shout," you know, like a big-sounding track.

So once we had "Shout," and once we had "Head Over Heels," which is kind of bombastic, it wasn't until then that it fit in, where we needed that breath of fresh air.

HH: Were you looking for a way to try and include the song? Like, after you had

“Head Over Heels,” and you had “Shout,” did you say, “Oh, now I know, now we can fit this song in?”

Roland: Well, no, it– what, what it was, you know,

Curt: Well, we kept, we kept playing–

Roland: I don't think either of us were very keen on that song.

Curt: No.

Roland: Probably because of the title. “Everybody Wants to Go to War.” What the hell? You know, it's not very nice.

Hrishikesh: Mm-hmm.

Roland: It's not very positive.

And Dave Bates, our A&R man at um, Phonogram, kept going on about America. We didn't care!

Hrishikesh: Going on about America in what way?

Curt: *The Hurting* was successful everywhere in the world, pretty much apart from America.

Hrishikesh: Ah.

Curt: I mean, it had minor success in America. So he, he, he was constantly– because his whole thing was making the band bigger.

Roland: Well, it was his job.

Curt: Whereas we –yeah, that was his job– I mean, we actually didn't care that much. We were sort of happy with where we were.

Hrishikesh: And so, did his comments play into how you were thinking about the “Everybody Wants to Go to War” song?

Roland: Well, as I said, it was bugging me and, and lyrics do, do bug me. This is where they're *incredibly* important, especially for titles. You get a great title, it's half the battle, really. Good beat, good title, okay. The rest is simple. It just was one of those things that popped into my head, you know?

Well, this guy is telling us what to do. He wants us to break America. He wants to rule the world.

Hrishikesh: (chuckles)

Roland: It's personal now.

Curt: And that flows off the tongue. You know, "Everybody wants to go to war" does not,

Roland: (laughs) No.

Hrishikesh: (laughs)

Curt: –flow off the tongue.

(acoustic guitar stem)

When it became "Everybody wants to rule the world," suddenly it was like, *that* sings well.

(Vocals: "Everybody wants to rule the world")

Hrishikesh: My conversation with Tears for Fears continues after this.

Roland: Chris Hughes, our producer, um, went to the same school as Dave Bates, the A&R man. And he also was confident about the song. So, he had us, every day, at the end of the recording session, every day we would all sit together and we would play through the song. And that was a first.

Hrishikesh: And so did this song feel different from the others that you were working on?

Roland: Well, recording can be a little bit stressful. There would be a lot of discussions, arguments. When we finally came to play "Everybody Wants to Rule the World" at the end of the day, it was a relief and a release. So that's the atmosphere. You have to realize that music should be fun.

Hrishikesh: (laughs)

Roland: And it kind of,

Curt: (disagreeing noise)

Roland: (laughs) when it is, when it is fun, it's a lot easier. We used to get bogged down in so much detail. And suddenly we were playing. So you'd hit the drum machine,

(drum machine)

And it really didn't matter what you played.

(add synth chords)

Curt: Because it's so open, every part has to be really, not necessarily catchy, but something about it that draws you in, and they all work against each other rhythmically. So it took a long time to find all the parts where you're like, "Oh yeah, that, that sounds great."

(add synth melody)

Hrishikesh: What would Chris do? Just, would he play along with you, or was he just sort of taking notes?

Roland: He'd play some bass notes, yeah.

(add bassline)

It was wonderful. And it was a contrast to how we worked. But that's how the song was finished, it's all the little missing bits, like that crazy guitar intro.

(intro guitar)

Curt: So, it was a question of finding those bits, and each bit had to do its little part.

It's interesting to listen to it, because it took so long, the keyboard bit at the very beginning, to give the intro, "do-do-do-do," but that took a long time til that came along.

You know, Roland's incredibly angular, weird, chordal guitar solo in the middle.

(middle guitar solo)

Hrishikesh: You said there wasn't a bridge or a middle eight originally, so how did that eventually come about?

Roland: Ian Stanley, our keyboard player. It's so funny because a lot of things never dawned on me.

You know, Chris would say, "Oh, we need a middle eight." And Ian goes, okay, well try these chords.

("Everybody Wants to Rule the World" by TEARS FOR FEARS - bridge electric guitar & bass)

And they are, to be honest with you, if you analyze them, stock chords. They're pretty straightforward, G, D, A. But sometimes when obvious things are presented to you from other people, they seem more exotic.

(Vocals: "There's a room where the light won't find you / Holding hands while the walls come tumbling down / When they do, I'll be right behind you")

So Curt and I were introduced to a book called Primal Scream by Arthur Janov. And, coming from sort of, I guess, broken homes, utterly bought into this theory: they fuck you up, your mom and dad. That kind of theory. It was perfect for us to see the child as a kind of blank slate with no real soul, personality, and all the bad things that happened to him or her from the, the womb onwards would create this personality. The pain, and all this kind of stuff that needed to be, through primal therapy, exorcised. If you think about the lyric "There's a room where the light won't find you / Holding hands while the walls come tumbling down." It's really a reference to the primal scream in the padded room where you are alone with the therapist and can pour your heart out.

(Duo vocals: "There's a room where the light won't find you")

That is the two of us. Yeah.

Curt: And I'm the one that goes up.

Roland: Curt goes up and I go down.

(Vocals: "Holding hands while the walls come tumbling down")

And a lot of the time, recording is tough. A lot of the time recording is stressful, and everyone's getting on each other's nerves because of the stress.

Hrishikesh: Was there anything that stressed you out, or any parts that you didn't like that actually made their way into the final recording?

Roland: For me, yeah. And it comes to the second verse and then there's this sound that goes: "duh-duh-duh, duh-duh-duh-duh, duh-duh, duh-duh-duh..."

(synth chords)

And it just used to drive me mad 'cause it was never enough. I, I never thought that that sound was enough. But we stuck with it.

Curt: Rhythmically what it does is great. It's not the best sound.

Roland: No.

Hrishikesh: Can you tell me about this other guitar solo?

(ending guitar solo)

ROLAND: Yeah, Neil Taylor played with us in 1983's *In My Mind's Eye* tour. So, he came in to play the, the solo at the end of "Everybody Wants to Rule the World." And it was, it was two takes.

Curt: Yep.

Roland: The guy's world class.

Hrishikesh: What made you want to bring in somebody from outside the band for that moment?

Roland: Well, he'd been playing with us.

Curt: Yeah, he'd been playing with us. Um, we loved his guitar playing. Because it has a style. I mean, he sounds like him, you know. I mean it's hard to find those people that actually have a distinct style of their own.

(ending guitar solo)

It's incredibly melodic.

(ending guitar solo cont.)

Roland: The complete opposite to my first rhythm guitar solo.

Curt: And then we did actually finish and mix stuff in Germany. We went off to Germany at the end, a place called Union Studios in Munich, which is actually where we finished "Everybody Wants to Rule the World."

Hrishikesh: Oh, what besides mixing were you finishing at that point?

Roland: Well, the, you know, I had (chuckles) one night to come up with the lyric, because again, I don't like, I was very slow with lyrics back then. Incredibly slow. So, I had one night to, to finish the lyrics, and the first verse was, "It's my own design. It's my own remorse." And Curt went in to sing.

("Everybody Wants to Rule the World" by TEARS FOR FEARS - verse 2)

(Vocals: "It's my own design / It's my own remorse")

And everyone's going, including Curt, "Hmm, maybe it should start with, 'Welcome to your life.'"

Hrishikesh: Was that a lyric that had already been written?

Roland: That was the second verse.

Curt: The verses got switched.

(Vocals: "Welcome to your life")

Hrishikesh: I can't imagine. So you're about to go mix the album...

Roland: Mm-hmm.

Curt: We haven't finished the lyric or the,

Roland: No.

Hrishikesh: Or the vocals.

Curt: Or done the vocals, yeah.

Hrishikesh: But you knew that that song was going to be on the album.

Curt: Yeah.

Roland: Yeah.

Hrishikesh: I can't imagine having so much of the song still be unfinished, and going to mix.

Roland: I don't know, it's funny because Chris Hughes, the producer, was always totally confident. He never needed, "Oh, it's gotta be finished before we go. Oh, I've got to hear the lyric before I go." No, he knew fundamentally that it was right.

Hrishikesh: So Curt, how long did it take for you to feel comfortable, that you could be familiar enough with the lyrics and the melody to say, "Yeah, I'm ready to record this"?

Roland: Well, he was reading off the page. Moaning my handwriting.

Hrishikesh: You didn't think, "Oh, I need three weeks—"

Roland: (laughs)

Curt: No. No.

Hrishikesh: "—with this song before I go to put it on tape?"

Curt: No, I'm not, I'm not that singer. No, I mean you get it pretty quickly or you don't. I mean, I think the thing is, if it has an overall emotion, then it becomes pretty simple. And, and, you know, with the title and the opening line then being what it was, it became more of a kind of, a bit more of a joyous song, even though it was not really joyous, lyrically.

(Vocals: "So glad we've almost made it / So sad they had to fade it")

Curt: There's a lyric in it, "So sad they had to fade it," which was, you know, directly from Dave Bates's influence. Because we had "Shout" as a single and he was adamant we had to shave— how many seconds off?

Roland: "Shout" was eight minutes long.

Curt: Yeah.

Roland: We knew that was long for a single. And he wanted to edit it down to three and a half or five minutes and, and we said no, absolutely. And so in the end, he said, "All right, well, I'm just going to take three seconds off." So he took three seconds off. And it was, yeah, it was Dave fading "Shout" three seconds early.

Hrishikesh: As your A&R guy,

Roland: Yeah.

Hrishikesh: When you were working on this song and writing those lyrics, did he know that that's what you were writing about?

Roland: No.

Curt: At the time, no.

Roland: No. But he does now.

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

Roland: But he's a great guy. You know, he's,

Curt: No, we had definitely,

Roland: Wouldn't be anywhere without him.

Curt: No, without question.

(synth melody)

Hrishikesh: Were you already thinking about singles the way the label had been thinking about singles? Like were you—

Curt: We were, yeah. We had disagreements about that. (chuckles) Well, 'cause "Shout" was released as the first single everywhere else in the world.

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

Curt: Apart from America. And America, you know, decided they wanted to release "Everybody Wants To Rule The World" first, and we disagreed. On this occasion --which is very rare-- we were wrong.

Roland: (laughs)

Curt: (laughs) And they seemed to be correct.

Hrishikesh: Was there a moment where it felt like you realized that this song was going to change your life?

(synth chords)

Roland: We were actually in Toronto. We were, we were on tour. We were playing multiple nights at Massey Hall. And I remember, sort of, having early mornings, seven o'clock in the morning. I had a headache. You know, migraine or something like that. And I think Curt was asleep.

Curt: I was.

Roland: Our manager called me and, in jubilant tones, announced: "Congratulations, you're number one in America!"

(add cabasa)

And I was like, well, I've got a migraine and right now I don't really care. Because of the workload, that's what it was.

(add drums)

Curt: Because we were on tour and it all became so huge in America so quickly, the workload was unbelievable. I remember it as a, not a particularly enjoyable time at all.

Hrishikesh: Did your feelings for the song change over time?

Roland: My response to it now, every time I hear it on the radio, I just think, wow, that's amazing. Absolutely amazing.

Curt: Well, and playing it live is a joy, you know, it's, because we used to open with the song. To use it as the first song on the set. And you'd have a, say, arena full of people that are just sitting there kind of waiting and anticipating what you're going to play.

And then the first "do do do do..."

("Everybody Wants to Rule the World" by TEARS FOR FEARS - intro instrumental)

And the guitar part comes in and, you know, it's a few notes of music. It's all it is. Changes the mood of up to 100,000 people. And that's the power of music that never ceases to astound me.

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Everybody Wants To Rule The World," by Tears For Fears, in its entirety.

("Everybody Wants to Rule the World" by TEARS FOR FEARS)

To learn more, visit songexploder.net. You'll find links to buy or stream "Everybody Wants To Rule The World," and you can watch the music video.

This episode was produced by me, Mary Dolan, Craig Eley, and Kathleen Smith, with production assistance from Tiger Biskup. The episode artwork is by Carlos Lerma, and I made the show's theme music and logo.

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I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. Thanks for listening.