

MUSIC

After 4 decades, Tears for Fears is still making music for a 'Mad World'

The duo behind 1980s hits like "Shout" has a new hit album and are hitting the road in May.

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By Randee Dawn

"Shout." "Everybody Wants to Rule the World." "Head Over Heels." If you grew up in the 1980s, Tears for Fears – the British duo of Roland Orzabal and Curt Smith – were inescapable.

But even if you didn't grow up in the 1980s, you've still probably heard them, because it seems like a tune from their 1982 album "The Hurting" has been about as inescapable as they once were: "Mad World."



— Curt Smith and Roland Orzabal, otherwise known as Tears for Fears. Frank Ockenfels

"'Mad World' has taken on a life of its own," Smith, 60, acknowledged to TODAY, noting that it's been included in movies ("Donnie Darko"), video games ("Gears of War") and covered by Adam Lambert on "American Idol," just for a start. "So many people have covered it, it's ridiculous. But that's the thing about older songs – they can take on new meaning."

New meaning is a good way to look at Tears for Fears' latest album, "The Tipping Point," the first original release in nearly 18 years. While the duo have gone through extended breakups, they came back together to tour in 2000, then released "Everybody Loves a Happy Ending" in 2004, ostensibly to put a period on the end of decades of playing together.

But it's been tough for Orzabal, who's also 60, and Smith to say goodbye: They've been playing as a team since they were 14 years old, and that's a lot of shared history. But a few years ago, events on an international and personal scale caused them to rethink whether they might try making fresh, original music again.

"Roland's wife (Caroline) had passed away, and I'd known her since I was 13," says Smith. (Caroline Orzabal had lived with depression and alcoholism.) "Then there was the beginning of the pandemic, and we'd been through the rise of the right wing worldwide, Brexit, Black Lives Matter, climate crisis – so we decided if we didn't have anything to write of substance, we didn't have any business writing at all."

That became their starting point. "Once you know what it is you're aiming for, the process becomes easier," he says.



Artwork by Cinta Vidal

Initially, though, their target wasn't clear and they allowed their muse to be dictated by "business people" about what might be a success. In the late 2010s, they had a whole album of material that didn't work for them, and bought it back from the record label to prevent it being released.

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Then they started over again.

Eventually, Smith and Orzabal found a group of songs that not only said what they wanted to say, but sounded like they had a purpose. "Tipping Point" should please longtime Tears for Fears fans with its lush production and clever lyrics. The band has always been fond of a perfect pop hook but also simultaneously unafraid to color outside the lines both sonically and emotionally.

That said, don't expect that there's some big reunion story between Orzabal and Smith that might make for a great climax in some biopic of the pair. They spent their teenage years and 20s as kids from Bath, U.K., who made it big with their first two albums (1983's "The Hurting" and 1985's "Songs from the Big Chair"), but success exacerbated their personality conflicts and money made it possible to – as Smith is unafraid to do – walk away. They released "The Seeds of Love" in 1989, then spent the rest of the century disconnected, the classic band lineup effectively over. (Orzabal continued to record as Tears for Fears without Smith for a time.)



— Smith and Orzabal in 1985. Michael Putland / Getty Images

"We're very different people," says Smith of his relationship with his music partner. "Even after 46 years of working together, I don't know how to describe Roland. He lives in the moment. I think he explained it well when we won the Ivor Novello Award last year: He described me as the brake to his accelerator, which is pretty much how it works."

Making it big in the 1980s also helped Smith clarify who he was, and he discovered he did not like being a big fish in the small pond of Bath.

"I was living in this huge house in my home town and I went through a divorce," he says. "All that money did not bring me happiness in any shape or form."

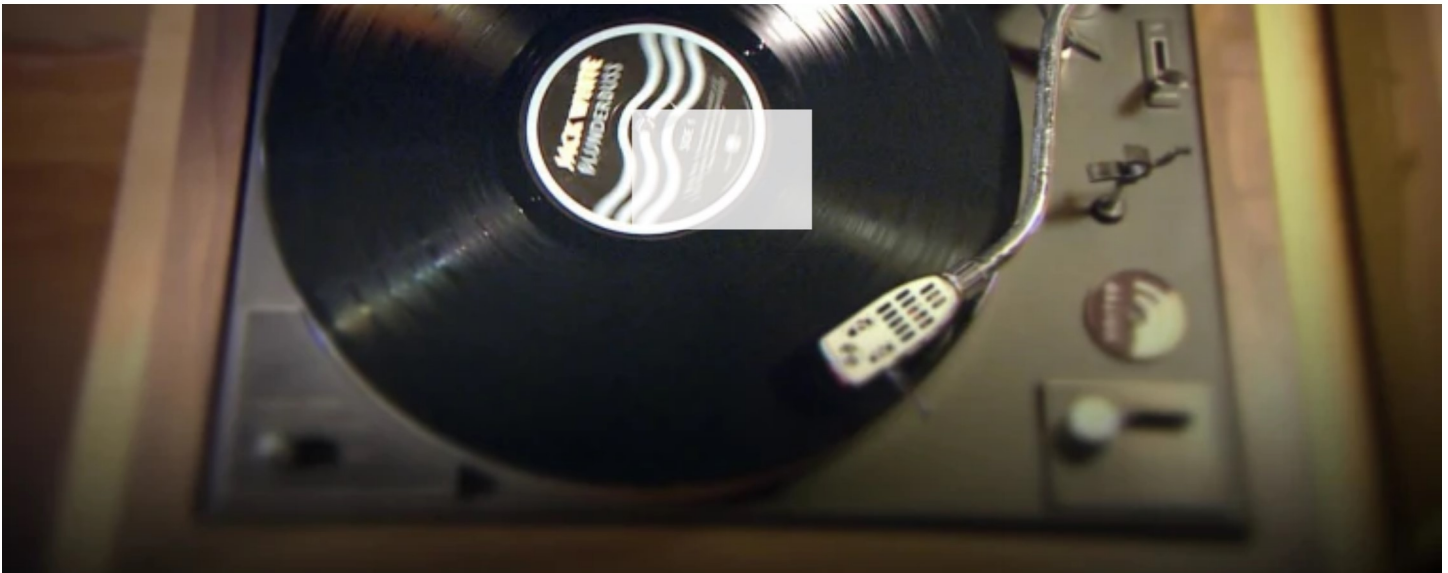
He relocated to New York and met his future second wife, Frances. They now live in Los Angeles and have two daughters together, Diva, 23, and Wilder, 21. Smith is also a naturalized U.S. citizen.

And during the pandemic, he went viral with a video of himself playing a classic Tears for Fears tune with Diva on guitar. What was it? "Mad World," of course. ("Donnie Darko" star Jake Gyllenhaal shared it on Instagram.)

And now, Smith and Orzabal are set to hit the road again in America and the U.K., with a tour that starts in late May and runs until September. Only this time, they finally have some fresh material to share.

"It's taken us 40 years to appreciate how we work together," says Smith. "We spent far too much time and energy over the years butting heads, when weirdly we're only trying to achieve the same thing. Once we get the balance right, it works fantastically. After all, you can't get very far with just a brake. It requires a driving force."

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ABOUT Randee Dawn (she/her) is an entertainment journalist and audio-based writer based in Brooklyn. In addition to writing for TODAY.com, Variety and The Los Angeles Times, she's an author whose debut novel, *Tune in Tomorrow*, about a reality TV show run by psychic creatures, will publish in 2022. She's also the co-author of *The Law & Order: SVU Unofficial Companion*. When not interviewing the stars or dabbling in speculative fiction, she dreams of the next place she can travel to, or cuddles her Westie.

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