

***Do What You Want, Be What You Are: The Daryl Hall and John Oates Story***

**Bonus Interview with Daryl Hall**

**This is, by far, the most comprehensive collection of Daryl Hall and John Oates material ever compiled in one place.**

**Daryl Hall:** Listening to it, I really did get an overview — the best I've ever had, actually. It really provided some insights.

**In the past, your career has been split up by record companies — the Atlantic years, the RCA years, and the Arista years — but this box set suggests it's not so neatly divided as that.**

**DH:** I'm seeing it for the first time in a different way. In some ways, you can divide it up like that, but it doesn't tell the whole story. What I'm noticing is that there's the pure Philadelphia years, the New York years, and there's sort of the New York/California years. Hearing it regionally like that — and the influences those places and times had on the music — is more significant than the labels. For the first time in a long time, I went back and listened to all that '70s music, and I'm seeing us as these guys who came out of Philadelphia, influenced by the people around them there, like Gamble and Huff. And then we went to New York, where we came under the tutelage of Arif Mardin and all those musicians. It's both the players as well as the actual sounds where we were. Then, I can really hear where we took this Philly thing to California, and that surprised me, because I never realized we had this weird hybrid — like Steve Lukather playing guitar — mixing and matching the two sensibilities.

**There were times when you guys were completely out of touch with then-contemporary pop-rock, for instance, with John's bluegrass, country sensibility.**

**DH:** From ground zero, that was our very first cross-genre. John had sort of a soul band, The Masters, with his sister. But at the same time, he was hanging out at the Philly Folk Festival listening to Hedy West, Doc Watson, and Dave Van Ronk. We were freshmen at college. I was listening to these things for the first time, because I was totally Philly doo-wop street soul. In music college, my mind was being expanded anyway, but this was something brand-new for me. I was also influenced a lot by the classical composers I was being introduced to at school. That was the very first hybridization. At Temple, I was a music student and John was a journalism major, and then we eventually became roommates.

**There was a brawl at the Adelphia Ballroom in West Philadelphia one night when The Temptones and The Masters were scheduled to play, which was when you first met in a freight elevator.**

**DH:** There was a bunch of high school fraternities on hand, which were really just gangs. The Five Stairsteps and Howard Tate were also on the bill, and that was pretty much the show. The fight broke out when Howard Tate came on, and the whole thing just fell

apart. So we split, sort of introducing ourselves along the way, finding out we both went to Temple. And then we reconnected shortly after that. I'm not sure even how.

**In the midst of the hippie counterculture, here were a couple of guys more steeped in R&B, doo-wop, and soul music than rock.**

**DH:** When I started school, all my friends were wearing sharkskin pants and had their hair all combed up, with Italian knits and all that stuff. And a year later, we were all wearing bell-bottoms, sandals, and letting our hair grow. For a while, I kind of felt a little schizophrenic, because I wasn't really into the Grateful Dead or Jefferson Airplane. I like Sam & Dave. That was sort of the bond John and I had, but a lot of people around us in Philly also shared that. It wasn't uncommon. We were hippies who happened to like R&B.

**From the beginning, there was always a bi-racial aspect to what you did, joining black and white music culture together.**

**DH:** That was always the sound of Philadelphia, as well as the people. It was integrated sharing of music. It had to do with the school systems and the music departments in those schools. There were tensions, sure. But it wasn't a split between cultures the way it turned out in the '70s, when we left the city.

**When you signed to Atlantic in 1972, your musical sensibility reflected New York at the time.**

**DH:** We were exposed to the genius of Arif Mardin, our first mentor. I treated him as if he were a professor. I soaked up knowledge from him, as he shared his musical experiences and great gift with guys that were just starting out — like us. I can't say enough about him. He changed our lives. I learned a lot about arranging, producing, and all the things I know now from Arif, as well as Gamble and Huff.

**On your debut, *Whole Oats*, there was the traditional soul of *Fall in Philadelphia*, but also the folk and classical influences on *Lilly (Are You Happy)*.**

**DH:** We didn't really have a settled identity. We were just guys trying to make an album, and we had written all these songs. I was just listening to a demo of *Waterwheel*, which was very European. The song was influenced by the classical composer Franz Schubert, whom I studied in music school. Players like [drummer] Bernard Purdie, [bassist] Gordon Edwards, and [pianist] Richard Tee made those really Atlantic-sounding records, which allowed something like *She's Gone* to happen. Our guitarist, Christopher Bond, was very Beatles-oriented, too, but I didn't like that as much. It was just another step in taking these disparate sounds and trying to mix them together.

***Abandoned Luncheonette* was the beginning of a true collaboration between you and John, rather than bringing in your individual songs.**

**DH:** *She's Gone* was a pure collaboration, where our ideas were fully integrated. You couldn't tell where one stopped and the other started. He had this chorus, which I changed and put the groove to. And then lyrically, we just pooled our experiences at the moment, with an unusual triple-modulation, going from A-flat to C, which was kinda strange — a weird idea we had.

**Did you know when you'd written a hit?**

**DH:** I don't know any artist who says they can just sit down and write a hit. It's impossible because there are so many factors involved — everything from the business of music, which is corrupt and bizarre, to the taste of people and the times. I know when I've written a great song, which luckily, has happened a few times for me. Things can sound like a hit, but that doesn't necessarily mean it is a hit.

**War Babies, with Todd Rundgren producing, represented a real stylistic shift, kind of like *Along the Red Ledge* or *Sacred Songs* — your solo album with Robert Fripp, an exploration of harder-edged, more experimental rock styles.**

**DH:** Neither one of us have ever really aspired to be rock stars or easily understood commercial entities. The irony is people have labeled us that, but we are actually the opposite. One of the artist's jobs is to startle people, shake their brains up. And the other thing is to follow his or her own musical blips. Do what you want, be what you are. Do what matters to you, whether it's commercially acceptable or not. I've always had a tenuous and unusual relationship with the business end, with selling this stuff. My job is to just do what moves me, which hopefully shakes people up, interests them, and touches them emotionally.

**The first RCA album, *Daryl Hall & John Oates*, known as the Silver Album, represents a milestone, with yet another hit in *Sara Smile*. This represents the start of your so-called California period.**

**DH:** Yes, right. On the *No Goodbyes* album, the last for Atlantic, *It's Uncanny* and *Love You Like a Brother* were two R&B songs we did with Arif after working with Todd. That was sort of our after-shock experience, sort of returning to our friends. It was a bit of reaction to what we had lost after stepping out of the box on *War Babies*. We needed a palate-cleansing, and I think the songs hold up. We still play *It's Uncanny* in our set to this day, and it's one of everybody's favorite songs. It got us ready to do the Silver Album. When I listen to that album now, I hear Daryl and John going to California, with Chris Bond's influences, some of which I hate, like *Grounds for Separation*. On the other hand, you have this really cool Philly stuff with California players, with guys like [drummer] Jim Gordon and [bassist] Leland Sklar. *Alone Too Long*, *Sara Smile*, *Out of Me*, *Out of You...* At the time, we were searching our souls to get that Philly thing back in the music. I can really hear that now.

**Where did you see Hall & Oates in the mid-'70s, smack in between disco on the one hand and punk on the other? It feels like you're just beginning to hit your sweet spot and connect with an audience.**

**DH:** It was a very fertile period because we had a foot in both camps. We loved *Disco Inferno* and *Ring My Bell*, that sort of stuff. But at the same time, I was commuting between California and New York and getting these two worlds. I was hanging out at loft parties where the Ramones and Television were playing. And I was also spending time in England, hearing that whole thing and being friends with Robert Fripp and Peter Gabriel. It was all over the place, and we were trying to find Hall & Oates' place in the midst of all that. You can really hear that in an album like *Along the Red Ledge*. We were just casting our musical gaze all over the place. I was being influenced by these various things that were really affecting me, trying to find the sweet spot there. *I Don't Wanna Lose You*, from *Along the Red Ledge*, is a tribute to our Philly roots.

**You worked with David Foster on *Along the Red Ledge*.**

**DH:** That was interesting because he was just starting out at the time — a really young kid. I think he was 22, but he had very, very strong opinions about what he liked, and they weren't always what we liked. We had some head-banging. I had a lot of respect for his abilities, but they weren't always the right decisions for what John and I wanted to do. I can hear his influences, especially on *Time's Up (Alone Tonight)*. David and I wrote that together and finally got what he wanted out of me — a song Earth, Wind & Fire could cut. And that was really where he went after that.

**From this mid-'70s era, *Sara Smile* and *Rich Girl* are two classic Daryl Hall and John Oates songs.**

**DH:** Those are probably my two favorite songs, period. And for two different reasons. *Sara Smile* encapsulated my soul and my way of thinking about emotions better than any song I've ever written. It's concise. It's moving. It never stops growing. I still feel as strongly now performing it as the first time I ever played it. *Rich Girl* has such a unique subject. And, in some ways, it's more relevant now than it was when I wrote it. It describes a mindset that a lot of people now are starting to see — the way the world has changed, and what it's evolved into. I think that song has more lyrical relevance now than it did in 1976. It's about shallow hubris, stupidity, and privilege. It works for both sexes.

**It's ironic that two of your most idiosyncratic albums, *Along the Red Ledge* and *X-Static*, directly precede what turns out to be your most commercially successful period, which started with *Voices*.**

**DH:** As professional and talented as they are, we didn't feel a musical kinship with the California musicians. We wanted to get back to a little more regional feel. Living in New York, we wanted to get back to that East Coast thing. The main thing was that we wanted to produce ourselves, which we did for the first time on *Voices*. We had a lot of frustrating experiences, with Arif being the exception to that rule. We had been working

with a series of very opinionated people who were used to dictating their ideas to people who don't necessarily have them, and that didn't work out very well because I have very strong ideas. So, we just did it. Our greatest successes have always come when we just do things on our own.

**With *Kiss on My List*, you begin a string of hit singles that put you squarely at the center of the pop-rock universe — which lasted through 1985 — with performances on *We Are the World* and Live Aid that summer.**

**DH:** We were more focused, doing things locally, producing ourselves, and using our own band on the recordings. We were getting across more of what we intended when we wrote the songs. It was no more or less creative than we'd been. It's always more interesting when the whole world is watching, listening, and buying what you're creating. That changes things. It's an advantage but also a restriction, like riding a wild horse. You can either ride it, or it can trample you, or you can try to drag it along. There was a lot of scrutiny. We were trying to work in the world of pop music. That was a time when we could make some money. For some reason, we had the world's ears, and we said, "OK, let's run with it." At the same time, we didn't compromise in any way. We weren't trying to write commercial songs. It was, to quote the album by Nick Lowe, *Pure Pop for Now People*. And I think that best describes our mindset at the time. It was a very pop time.

**MTV certainly had a great deal to do with popularizing Hall & Oates. Was it a good or bad thing in retrospect?**

**DH:** I wish that MTV had never existed. In many ways, we're trapped in that period. MTV made people think more about the stupid hairstyle I had than the music I was playing. Not that I take myself seriously or anything, but it trivializes two guys who were just trying to make good music. And that was diluted. The eye conquered the ear.

**How do you account for that incredible streak in the early-to-mid '80s?**

**DH:** Whatever we were doing was suddenly in sync with what people wanted to hear. It's as simple as that. It was a confluence, and when it happens, it just happens. You can't force it to happen. It kind of has a life of its own. People were just digging what we were doing.

**1985 was arguably your commercial pinnacle, with appearances on *We Are the World* and Live Aid, as well as playing with David Ruffin and Eddie Kendricks at the Apollo.**

**DH:** Standing onstage at the Apollo Theater with guys I'd idolized since I was 17 years old represented the completion of the circle for me. I remember looking at John and wondering where we go from here, but realizing something was done, something was completed. And whatever we do is the beginning of something else. When I made the *Three Hearts in the Happy Ending Machine* album in 1986, that was the beginning of a creative separation between me and John. In some ways, that has altered our creative

relationship since then. We remain best of friends and we still create together, but not in the same way we did before that.

**It must be gratifying to you and John over this last decade to see the number of newer bands who cite you as influences.**

**DH:** I've always been a believer in the continuum of music. Nobody does anything out of nowhere. Artists are always influenced by what came before them. I'm glad we're part of that. I'm still running the bases for real. I'm still in the trenches. I'm still feeling as passionate today about my music as I did when I was 17. That hasn't changed one tiny bit. The light bulb is still going off full blast. I'm excited about doing more things with John Oates. I'm excited about music in general.

**How do you feel about the career achievement awards you've received from the Songwriters Hall of Fame and NARM?**

**DH:** I understand journalism. Once an idea is thrown out there, most writers tend to flock to it and bat it around. There always has to be a goat, someone to pick on. Most of my contemporaries were influenced by the blues and rock-and-roll, not soul or doo-wop, like I was. In order to justify their own canon, they can't possibly lionize me. I exist in an alternative universe that doesn't have any relevance today. Kids now don't have those same prejudices or perceptions. They look at me as who I am.

**You've played with some incredible musicians over the years.**

**DH:** It's something nobody talks about. We don't exist on our own. It's the people we've worked with: Jana Allen, Sara Allen, T-Bone Wolk, Charlie DeChant, G.E. Smith, Mickey Curry, Jerry Marotta. Listening to this music, I realized what a great sax player Charlie DeChant is. He's been with us since 1975. People know about him. His sax solos are a unifying thing in Hall & Oates' music. Sara Allen is as important in our songwriting collaborations, as is her sister Jana, in some ways, as John. I wrote almost as many songs with Sara and Jana, both separately and together, as I have with John. They were there, they were contributing ideas as well as melodies.

**How has the Internet influenced your relationship with Hall & Oates fans?**

**DH:** I'm at my best when you leave me alone to do what it is I do. Don't try to influence me or tell me what to do. That's when I flourish. The Internet has taken away much of the influence of the gatekeepers. It's offered a more populist, more direct way of communicating with people and I feel it's more attuned to the way I think and the way I perceive things.

**Does listening to this box set make any clearer what Daryl Hall and John Oates' musical legacy is?**

**DH:** It's an example of a very unique kind of musicality that was brought into the 20th and early 21st century. We don't sound like anybody else. We're totally unique, on our

own. The musicality staggers me sometimes. It's almost like I'm listening to somebody else. The diversity is really, really extraordinary for pop music. It's not three chords and the blues. There are so many amazing elements of music from all cultures coming together and forming this unique mix. I'm very proud of it.

**You've taken black musical forms — much like the Beatles or the Stones — and put them through your unique filter, absorbing and refracting them in your own way.**

**DH:** American music's vitality is about taking that cultural diversity and building on it — the way Thom Bell was influenced by Burt Bacharach, I was influenced by Thom Bell. It goes around, back and forth and keeps spreading. It's this Euro-Afro thing that's been going on since the Crusades, if you want to get historical about it. And it continues to mix, match, and evolve. And Hall & Oates is an example of that melting pot.

**Is this the beginning of yet another phase in the amazing career of Daryl Hall and John Oates?**

**DH:** As long as John and I stand on a stage together, there is the creative possibility of doing something unique. But there's also the two of us as individual artists, which can't be discounted. We're two people, not one person. I feel as vital as ever. There will be a Daryl Hall box set in the future. This isn't the gold watch. I'm still motivated. This is a band of musicians. This is real music that is unlike any other. It's distinct, unusual. It doesn't fit into any category but all categories. And it's very passionate. That's one thing you can't deny.

**Can some 16-year-old out there still experience their own version of your success story in the music business?**

**DH:** I don't know if the same dream can be duplicated. The arc of our career up to now has pretty much paralleled the arc of the music business. Every art form has its golden age, as we all know. And I think from 1945 to 1990 was pretty much that. There was a combination of caring en masse about music, and musicians being able to do something and have it accepted by large numbers of people, with a real impact. Right now, we're in a period of transition. That world has crashed. The dream of being Elvis, Michael Jackson, or the Stones — you can't do that anymore. The most you can hope for is getting a lot of hits on the Internet. I think things always move in cycles and swing back around. Things will start to coalesce and attract interest, but it will never be what it was.

**Do you miss being in that kind of fishbowl that comes with popular success?**

**DH:** Every artist has to go through that fishbowl period. It's necessary. You can't have *Live From Daryl's House* without having '80 to '85. Some artists thrive in that scenario, and others, like me, prefer to work outside the media glare and scrutiny. It's a whirlwind. I had my fun. I certainly don't miss it in any way. If I wanted that, I would've sustained it, but that was not a tradeoff I was willing to make.