

**Songs From *The Big Chair* at 40**  
**By Charlie Desjardins**

There's a distinctive sound in Tears For Fears' 1985 synthpop masterpiece, *Songs From The Big Chair*, that I haven't quite been able to put my finger on. This worldwide smash hit is spacious yet tight, catchy yet elusive, menacing yet beautiful. It's catchier than any pop music released in the past decade and is respected purely for that catchiness.

It simply sounds like no other.

In 1983, two years prior, vocalist/guitarist Roland Orzabal and vocalist/bassist Curt Smith, along with keyboardist Ian Stanley and drummer Manny Elias, faced criticism for their music being just the opposite. Their debut album, *The Hurting*, was a monumental odyssey about the unresolved psychological traumas of the band members' childhoods. This release occurred in a UK music scene dominated by bands like Duran Duran and Culture Club. As a result, Tears For Fears, like many other groups, flirting with the dark wave genre, found themselves categorized with mood-centric bands—what I like to call “mood minions,” such as Joy Division. Although Orzabal and Smith acknowledged the similarities of the darkness, introversion, and strangeness, they later expressed their uncertainty about these comparisons.



NME's scathing review of *The Hurting*, 1983

“The thing that set us out from the crowd, I think,” Orzabal told *The Quietus* in 2013, “was that we were quite happy to take on slightly more semi-intellectual concepts, you know, and try and turn them into hits. We were young, weren't we? And relatively handsome! In chunky knitwear!”

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It was that fearless intelligence that led Tears For Fears to ask the tough questions on *The Hurting*—questions like “What if we made music that aspires to silence but can’t help but scream?” and “What if “Mad World” becomes better known as a shitty piano ballad in twenty years?” These hit-making instincts would later guide them on their next album, *Songs From The Big Chair*. From the get-go, it’s clear that the band took the criticism<sup>1</sup> to heart and set out to record the largest version of their songs possible, drowning their debut’s neuroticism in pounding drums and wailing synths.

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Hell, even the album cover looks like a smug middle finger. *Handsome men in chunky knitwear!*

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Nowhere is this sharpened blend of cool dissatisfaction and energy more apparent than in the militant album opener “Shout,” a tune that quickly (and confidently) establishes something *The Hurting* never could: an element of cruel seduction.

“Shout, shout, let it all out / These are the things I can do without...”

But “Shout” doesn’t do without much, and its mammoth glory is the sound of a band embracing the sleekest production techniques of its time while looking forward to an apocalyptic future of its own design. Suddenly, Tears For Fears weren’t just guys with keyboards but genuine proprietors of ass-blasting dance glory, and they made sure to blow it out to a nearly unbearable size, adding in sick guitar riffs for good measure. It’s an absolutely exhilarating achievement, but judging by its lasting popularity, you probably realized that long ago.

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Of course, one cannot mention the word “achievement” without also mentioning the biggest hit from *Songs From The Big Chair*, “Everybody Wants to Rule the World.” This song is one of those rare, perfect tracks, that many would agree defines its generation—and perhaps even every generation. I’ve heard it so many times by now that, much like the album itself, I find it difficult to articulate its magic. Is it in that shuffling drumbeat, those lush synths, or perhaps that rich guitar sound? Or could it be the ambiguous lyrics about war? Ultimately, it doesn’t really matter. By the time you come to a conclusion, you may find yourself completely captivated, mindlessly singing that catchy refrain over and over and over and over and over...

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Yet, it’s the album tracks (half of which were released as singles) that make *Songs From The Big Chair* such a monumental achievement. Take “The Working Hour,” for instance—a seven-minute piece of grandiose brightness (*how refreshing!*) featuring soaring vocals from Orzabal. Then there’s “Mothers Talk,” a post-“Everybody Wants to Rule the World” victory lap that steers the album into a string-and-drum wonderland. Lastly, “I Believe,” stands out as the album’s most unexpected detour, showcasing a sultry jazzy piano exercise with a subtle saxophone sound that likely gave Sting a few wet dreams.

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<sup>1</sup> The album’s title is also a reference to this backlash, taking its name from a 1976 film called *Sybil* about a woman with multiple personality disorder. “She’d been tortured incredibly by her mother as a child,” Smith told Melody Maker in 1985. “And the only place she felt safe, the only time she could really be herself, was when she was sitting in her analyst’s chair. She felt safe, comfortable and wasn’t using her different faces as a defense. It’s kind of an ‘up yours’ to the English music press who really fucked us up for a while.”

"I think the album had a lot more depth than a lot of those other albums of that time," Smith [said](#) in 2020. "And albums of more depth tend to stick around longer."

For such a deep-cut album, *Songs From The Big Chair* still [contains](#) a wealth of hidden treasures. [With each subsequent listen, these hidden gems](#) stick out just as [much](#) as their more popular hits. Occasionally, if we're lucky, they [even intersect with](#) the pop [tracks](#), like "Broken," a balls-to-the-walls groover, and "Listen," the album's hazy, largely [instrumental closer](#), which lead [into](#) and out of "Head Over Heels," respectively.

Like Talking Heads' "This Must Be the Place," "Head Over Heels," my absolute favorite song off the album, finds Orzabal and Smith in previously unexplored waters, talking of [love](#), [touch](#), and all the [sentiments that](#) soft-hearted guys like them previously [approached with cool detachment](#). [However, that characteristic smug chilliness still seeps through, making it](#) a lasting romantic anthem for the usually unromantic (see: the song's [music video](#), which is unsurprisingly set in a library, [as well as its usage](#) in *Donnie Darko*, which is probably your least favorite person's favorite movie).

"I wanted to be [with you alone](#)," Orzabal sings in the song's opening verse. "And talk about the weather."

*Better hit the books, Roland. It appears women aren't your strong suit.*

[Forty](#) years later, I find myself entranced with *Songs From The Big Chair* in a way that defies [any sense of](#) lethargy. It's that sound [again](#)—that unmistakable, undefinable sound—[that's far slicker than any New Order album, far more foreboding than Pet Shop Boys, and far more sincere than Simple Minds \(whose hit "Don't You \(Forget About Me\)" was released the same year\). It's not as horned-up as INXS and it's not as sterile as OMD. It beats Wham! to death with a wooden bat and smears its guts on the wall. Could it be that Tears For Fears created a sound so innovative that we're still trying to understand it today?](#)

Yes. I really do think so.

[Even](#) Tears For Fears [struggled to figure it out](#). [Their next album, 1989's solid The Seeds of Love, ballooned past £1 million in production costs, but didn't feature a single as immediately captivating as anything from Songs From The Big Chair. At this point, Elias and Stanley had left the band, and Orzabal and Smith were heading toward an oft-acrimonious creative divorce,](#)

Perhaps it was Tears for Fears' reformation and [resurgence](#) in the [twenty-first](#) century that [contributed to the lasting cultural impact of Songs From The Big Chair. This influence can be seen from the numerous covers by various artists—from Weezer to Lorde, it seems every musician has tackled "Everybody Wants to Rule the World." The album frequently appears on decade-end and all-time album lists, and I even have their sticker on the back of my laptop. When two guys from Bath, now in their mid-60s, attract more monthly listeners on Spotify in](#)

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2025 than Troye Sivan, Daft Punk, and Paramore, you know they've struck a chord. That chord is a jangly, resonant, maximalist sound, bound to gain even more layers by the time I finish this sentence.

*Songs From The Big Chair* is a timeless '80s classic, plain and simple. You probably already love it, so find the biggest speaker you can and let 'er rip.

"All for freedom and for pleasure," Curt Smith sings in "Everybody Wants to Rule the World."  
"Nothing ever lasts forever."

Thankfully, good music does.

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