



A Musical Rebirth

<< TALKING SHOP WITH JOHN OATES | BY RISA FELDMAN >>

*“She’s gone, she’s gone
Oh, why
I better learn how to face it”*

...

*“Sara, smile
Oh, won’t you smile awhile for me, Sara?”*

...

*“Ohhhh, here she comes
Watch out, boy, she’ll chew you up
Ohhhh, here she comes
She’s a maneater”*

If you grew up in the '70s, '80s, or '90s, there is no doubt you know at least one, if not all of these verses. With over eighty million records sold, it's no wonder the most successful duo in rock history, Hall and Oates, is still headlining tours and selling out venues after forty-five years.

I recently had the opportunity to interview John Oates and was thoroughly impressed by his graciousness. He was incredibly genuine. It was refreshing to see that someone who has given hundreds of interviews over the course of forty-five years still takes his time to thoughtfully answer each question. Even more importantly, he made me feel as if he was hearing each question for the first time with every response.





I started out by asking Oates about the most recent North American Hall & Oates tour, which takes the duo to fourteen cities (with Tears For Fears opening) and brings them back to Aspen to perform during Labor Day weekend.

Risa Feldman: Do you and Darryl still rehearse before going on tour, even though you have played together for fifty years?

John Oates: In the last few years when we played venues, we didn't rehearse, because we played the same show we had been playing for a while. However, for this tour we decided to revamp the show—added some deeper tracks, rearranged the order and some arrangements—so this time around we have a little different approach, so we needed to rehearse. It's been fun, and it gave us a kick in the butt to rethink some of the older songs.

RF: Speaking of older songs, I got the scoop on a few of their hits. Did you know ...

- The song “Rich Girl” was originally “Rich Guy.” After a year, they didn't like the way it flowed, so it was changed to “Rich Girl.”
- Surprisingly, “Maneater,” which was originally written as a reggae song, is not about a woman. The “she” in “Maneater” refers to New York City.
- “She's Gone” was written together by Hall and Oates, each going through their own heartache.

JO: Darryl was going thru a divorce, and I had just been stood up on New Year's Eve. It was the best thing for me that it never happened!

RF: “She's Gone” is my favorite. The instant I hear that first note and recognize it, this warm feeling fills my soul. Everyone who hears it shares the same sense of anticipation knowing what's to come—it's pretty amazing. What is that? How does it have the same effect on so many?

JO: Thank you, and I know what you mean. The magic you hear in that recording is the combination of a lot of really talented, creative people, all pulling together for the same purpose. What I mean by that is the great producer Arif Mardin had a sense of how to surround the song Darryl and I wrote with the right players. Great studio musicians, who were some of the best in the world, and great recording engineers who could capture the perfect sounds plus this amazing string arrangement Arif wrote. It is the sum total of these incredible people, pointing in the same direction. That is why you have magic.

RF: It's the magic in their twenty-one albums (seven albums that went multi-platinum or platinum, and six albums going gold) that led Hall and Oates to be inducted into both the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Songwriters Hall of Fame. I asked Oates if one meant more than the other.

JO: The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame is more spectacular and more impressive to the public since they get to see it on TV. It's a big event with a lot of publicity,





and that's really important, since it puts you in the place of the stratus of rock and roll legends. However, the Songwriters Hall of Fame was equally if not more important, because it added Darryl and I into this incredible pantheon of great American songwriters that goes back to the beginning. Back to George Gershwin, Cole Porter, and the earliest writers of American pop music. So, if we hadn't written the songs we wrote, we wouldn't have gotten into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

RF: Oates recently published an autobiography, *Change of Seasons*, and he hopes that the takeaway for those who read the memoir is that he's so much more than just "one half of a legendary pop duo."

RF: What made you decide to write a memoir at this time in your life?

JO: I had done a series of interviews with a fellow Philadelphian, Chris Epting. Chris seemed to get me in a lot of ways. I mentioned to him that I kept journals from the 1970s and 1980s, and that I chronicled basically everything that happened in my earliest days of my partnership with Darryl. He was fascinated with that and asked if he could see some of them.

I made copies, and after he read them, he was just so gung ho. Chris said, "Man, you gotta write a book, and these journal entries are the beginning of it. We'll use it as a timeline."

RF: So you agreed to share your journal entries? Now that takes courage. You've given a gift to your fans—a real flashback into your past. The fact it's not from memory only, but through so many journal entries, makes it so real and raw. We see a part of you we haven't known before.

JO: Exactly. A lot of what I put in *Change of Seasons* has to do with my earlier days before I ever met Darryl Hall. It's not just the music I made and what influenced me, but what it took to put it all together. Not many people know about that part.

RF: It was that part that played an integral role in creating the person Oates is. He told me that he was a musician for twelve years before meeting Darryl Hall. The music he made in childhood and as a teenager really formed who he is at his core. Now, after seven solo albums and having written a book, he has tapped back into the earliest influences that made him who he is as a musician, and that's where he is coming from today.

JO: It's been a long life of twists and turns and a lot of side detours, and that's what I want to get across in the book.

RF: You have lived in quite a few cities. I'm curious when you think of home, which city pops into your head?

JO: New York City, Philly, Aspen, and Nashville—all of them. In fact, the dedication page of *Change of Seasons* goes out to all my hometowns. Each one was critical in making me the person I am. Moving to all of these places changed me in a very profound way. Moving from NYC to Pennsylvania with my family as a little kid—had we not done that, I never would have met Darryl. Moving from the little town of North Wales, Pennsylvania, to Philadelphia got me into the professional music business. Moving to Colorado saved my life in the late '80s, and moving to Nashville has given me a rebirth musically in the modern era. So, each one has truly molded me in some way.



RF: I know exactly what you mean. Can you tell me about the symbol on your guitars, a circle with an arrow through it? What's the story behind that?

JO: Well, a few years ago I began a project called *Good Road to Follow* (a series of digital singles bundled into a triple EP package of fifteen songs). I realized that not only travel but music has taken me on an amazing journey in my life and really pointed the direction for me to go. I had discovered an old hobo sign that was a circle with an arrow and compass points. In the old days, back in the Depression and Dust Bowl era, when hobos were riding rails and traveling the country, they had all these secret signs they posted or carved in the dirt to give information to other travelers on where it was safe to go or where they could get a free meal. I sort of adopted that sign for myself and for *Good Road to Follow*, and it's been sort of my mantra.

RF: What a cool story. I love that—definitely the perfect symbol. OK, if you could play with any musician or band, past or present, who would your top three be?

JO: That's easy. Chuck Berry, Doc Watson, Mississippi John Hurt, and Curtis Mayfield. Oops, that's four.

RF: That's OK, I'll let it slide. When you listen to music, who do you listen to, and do you listen to the radio?

JO: My ear is to the ground when it comes to music. I'm always listening for new songwriters, new music, seeing styles of production. I listen analytically. To be honest, I don't listen to a lot of other music because I want to keep whatever my musical direction is pure. I don't want to be influenced by others, so I mainly listen to podcasts.

RF: That makes a lot of sense. OK, last question: What would you call this time in your life? Just so you know, whatever you come up with, I plan to use it as the title of this article, if it's OK with you.

JO: Hmm, OK, sure. Well, for me personally, I'd call this my musical rebirth.

RF: Tell me why—and I love that for a title.

JO: Because what's going on with Darryl and me. The success and the excitement that is going on with what we do together is just something I could never have imagined would be happening in 2017. At the same time, my move to Nashville has given me a new life of musical inspiration that I also could have never imagined would have happened. So, the combination of those two things makes it a very powerful time in my life. ♦

Hall and Oates will be playing at the Jazz Aspen Snowmass Labor Day Experience on Sept. 1 at 8 p.m. in Snowmass Town Park. Tickets are available at jazzaspensnowmass.org.

