

Phila PA Chronicles

Sharing memories of people, places and events that left their mark on the Philadelphia region in the 20th century

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Half of Music's Top Duo: John Oates Can Go For That

As I've already shared, Daryl Hall and John Oates are my all-time favorite musicians. One of the most enjoyable days of my life was when my husband and I went backstage for a behind-the-scenes experience and met the duo.

To many who don't know better, it probably seems like John is always in Daryl's shadow. Yet the more you know about Oates, the better you understand that this talented musician is an all-around nice guy who is very comfortable in his own skin and secure about his musical accomplishments.



One of Oates' solo albums that marked a return to his folk and blues roots

Where did John grow up?

John spent his childhood in North Wales, a small town in central Montgomery County. He attended North Penn High School and joined the wrestling team, winning several championships. After graduating in 1966, John then headed off to Temple University, where he studied journalism.

How did John get his start in music?

Oates has said that he first took to the stage when he was 4 years old, performing in a talent show in Atlantic City. By the time he was 5, he was playing the guitar. When he was in sixth grade, he and two friends formed a band, which practiced in his garage. On the cusp of high school, he joined a band called the Avalons, which later became known as the Soul Sound Continentals. The group managed to get gigs nearly every weekend, playing fraternity parties and a teenage night club in Doylestown. Though the Continentals played a lot of Motown, John also spent time strumming folk music. During college, he jammed with some guitar masters who helped school him in rhythm and blues.

What inspired Oates to be a musician?

Oates saw Bill Haley & the Comets perform live during a family trip to Willow Grove Park in 1955. It wasn't so much Haley belting out his big hit "Rock Around the Clock" that wowed little Johnny Oates, but rather the Comets' stand-up bassist. *[More details from Dangerous Dances]* Oates has been so dedicated to pursuing his passion that he has never earned money from anything other than music.



Oates performing in 2009

Did his parents approve of his career choice?

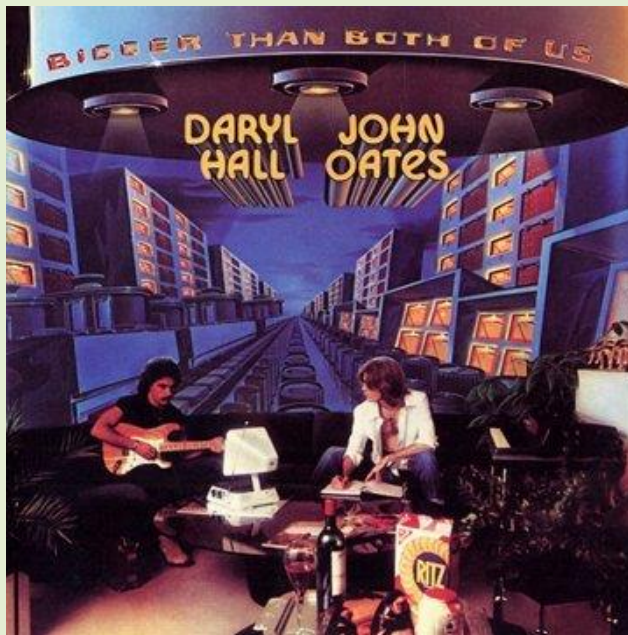
According to John, "Nobody in my family was particularly musical, but by the time I was four or five they knew I had a natural talent. My parents were very supportive and helped buy my equipment." His parents first sent John for accordion lessons because an accordion teacher lived down the street, but John didn't like the heavy instrument. When his father bought him a \$10 guitar at a pawnshop, though, John was hooked.

How did John and Daryl decide to become a duo?

In 1970, after graduating from college and backpacking around Europe for a few months, John returned to Philly and ended up moving in with Daryl and his wife. John told an interviewer: "Our concept was: 'Well, you're a songwriter and I'm a songwriter, let's get together and play our songs. You'll accompany me, I'll accompany you, and we'll do it very honest and straightforward. We won't have to deal with band members, and all this other crap, we'll just go out and play.'" And that's how it all started. In December 1970, they debuted at a small Philadelphia club called Hecate's Circle.

What does Oates think about Hall being the frontman?

Oates once told an interviewer, "I always used the Zen expression, 'You can't have a sunset without a horizon.' In that regard, Daryl is the sunset and I'm the horizon. It would be artificial and uncomfortable for me to try to step into that frontman 'look at me' role. I'm not going to try to be something I'm not. That's part of the reason the chemistry of Hall and Oates worked so well."



Hall and Oates labored during the 1970s to build a musical career that would soon be bigger than both of them

Which comes first in Oates' songwriting—lyrics or music?

John has said that songs can start as words, music riffs or as a title. He told an interviewer, “The best songs come in a spontaneous, almost magical way, where you just start writing, and the next thing you know it just happens.” John says that the classic “She’s Gone” is an example of a spontaneously written song, which he crafted collaboratively with Daryl.

How successful are Hall and Oates?

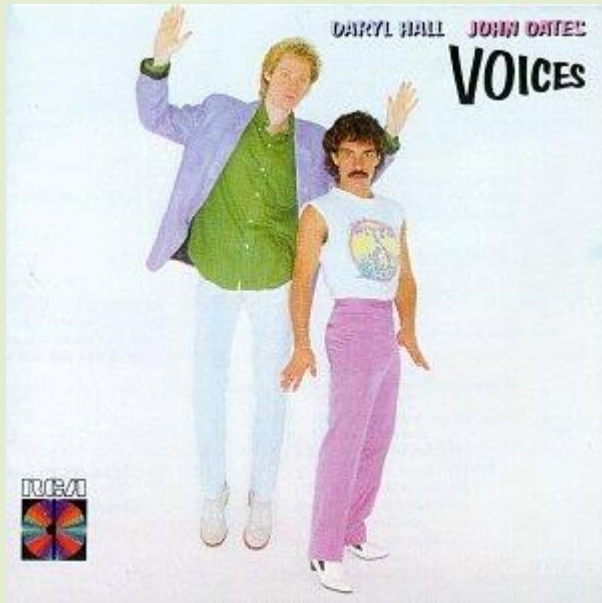
Oates’ musical partnership with Hall yielded six number hits—“I Can’t Go For That (No Can Do),” “Rich Girl”, “Kiss on My List,” “Private Eyes,” “Maneater” and “Out of Touch.” H&O can also claim five additional Top 10 singles, 80 million in album sales, and the title of number-one selling duo in music history.

How does Oates describe his relationship with Daryl?

Unlike many rock groups and bands, John’s partnership with Daryl hasn’t been marked by messy public squabbles and break-ups. John has said, “It’s like having a brother. You don’t have to be with your brother 24 hours a day...but we also know each other so well and we have our commonalities.”

What is Oates doing now?

After producing three solo albums in recent years, Oates recently embarked on a new approach to music in the digital age—*A Good Road to Follow*, which will see him release singles, including collaborations with Hot Chelle Rae and Vince Gill, on a monthly basis. Oates lives in Colorado with his wife and teenage son on a ranch that’s home to rescued emus, llamas and alpacas.



Voices, released in 1980, started Hall and Oates' rise to their greatest fame

Will Hall and Oates ever write songs together again?

Like Daryl, right now it seems John likes to create music formed by a committee of one. Creating music is very personal, and it must be hard to always do that as a collaborative effort, at times compromising when you really would have preferred doing things your own way. Oates doesn't rule out making new music again with Hall (though I wouldn't hold my breath for it to happen any time soon), and he appears to have great respect for their work as a duo: "We love playing together. What we do together is something special that you just can't duplicate. I don't care what Daryl does on his own and I don't care what I do on my own—it will never be like what we do together."

Phila PA Chronicles, published by Joanne C. McHugh, is a walk down memory lane to revisit the people, landmarks and happenings in the Delaware Valley during the 20th century. Its name was inspired by the pieces of hand-addressed mail that Philadelphia residents would receive from senders who didn't want to be bothered with writing out the city's lengthy name.