

## Stream of Consciousness with Peter Murray

A conversation with Intelligent Pop's Everett Young

I recently had a telephone conversation with current top-ten dweller, fascinating songwriter, and Canadian, Peter Murray. I quickly learned he has a lot to say—and it's pretty much all interesting.

In fact, having a conversation with him is a full-bore, high-intensity stream-of-consciousness experience. I had a number of questions prepared, but during the "small talk" I usually make with an artist before the "formal" interview process begins, and before I was fully prepared to begin, Murray was already holding forth on his music, on jazz, on musical trends and more, and I found myself suddenly and furiously typing. My prepared questions were pretty much out the window within 30 seconds of saying "hello."

I started the conversation by simply mentioning that there are a lot of great Canadian songwriters in our top 20, including Murray. I suggested that American music trends might follow political trends, and that I hoped with an authoritarian, hardline-type figure in the White House (President Bush) and an unpopular "war" afoot in the middle east, American pop might soon enter a protest period, and I thought this might be a positive development. So buckle up and get ready to enter the highly exploratory (maybe a touch schizophrenic?) and fascinating mind of one of the most innovative writers we've ever encountered.

**Peter Murray:** Well, pop music goes through phases that are incredibly superficial and marketing driven, and then something comes along and shakes things up. I don't know what the next thing to shake things up is going to be. Since grunge died, there was the Britney spears thing. So far, we're not being shocked out of it. The music world is now scattered. It would be interesting to see if something can seize the hearts and minds of the people the way Nirvana did. I also don't know if intelligent pop—quote-unquote—has the potential to do that. It might just be too intelligent. I think stuff like Nirvana has a stronger visceral appeal.

I should say that, while I'm flattered to be considered a part of intelligent pop, I really hope that my music is also resonates on a more visceral level, I guess. I've always been a big rock fan, and the power of rock and roll is not such an intellectual thing. It's something in music that has always had a strong effect on me and is therefore a pretty important part of the music I make, certainly in terms of my influences. Some of those things coincide. I think a band like The Who was clearly a rock band, but also a pop band. Some refer to them as the first power pop band. When I think about Pete Townsend's writing—there aren't a lot of solos really, he's not really a lead player, he was more focused on chordal hooks—it was sort of interesting songwriting, so that sort of thoughtfulness puts it in that intelligent bracket, but still visceral.

**Everett Young:** I always think of power pop as a more well-defined genre. You have to have a whiny voice, and you have to sound like Cheap Trick.

**PM:** A lot of power pop to me sounds very self-conscious, consciously trying to be clever, a little smarmy, just sort of “hey, did you hear that line I just sang.” Trying too hard. That kind of bothers me. I really love intelligent music, but not self-consciously intelligent music. Trying to be cool just fails.

**EY:** Music can actually be good without being cool.

**PM:** Absolutely. It's better to not be cool and be comfortable with that. That's a fundamental thing about music in general, that people understand on a non-intellectual level, whether something is real or not. Either it feels real or it feels fake and contrived and dishonest really.

**EY:** Tell me about your background.

**PM:** A huge part of my musical background is as a freelance bass player. I spent a lot of time playing with other singer songwriters and when I started making my own music it was something very subconscious. I knew that it had to be totally real and totally me or else there was no point. That was really the main reason for any artist to do their thing is to honestly express their ideas and feelings and musical philosophy in music. I'd played in bands before, and I had a band called Surrender Dorothy. We had a major label deal, publishing deal and all that, we had a bit of a following in Germany. We did about seven tours over there, and that was a great experience.

That was originally my main goal musically, just to create a bit of a legacy as a bass player within a band, the way John Paul Jones did, or Paul McCartney—OK, his identity wasn't just bass—but John Entwistle. These are guys who created an identity for themselves on bass. I didn't want to be a session player, a chameleon who adapts to every situation. That was my goal at that time and I guess I had these ideas that maybe Surrender Dorothy was going to be this ongoing thing.

I did put a lot of heart and soul in to co-writing the material. I was probably the main musical force besides the lyrics and vocal melodies, and I developed a lot of songwriting chops through that experience. I guess that context was a significant influence on my writing. I left the band eventually. It wasn't doing it for me anymore. We were going in different directions. I wanted to have more control I wanted to try exploring what I had to say.

When I moved out on my own and bought a house, I entered —6 years ago—I haven't been a singer songwriter from the beginning, this is all the last 8 or 9 years—

**EY:** So how old are you?

**PM:** I'm almost 38. So I think I have absolutely no regrets about how I've ended up as a singer-songwriter. I'm a firm believer that an artist is the product, as any artist is, the product of all the experience he or she has had. I've done a lot of music in a lot of different contexts. I've played everything from jazz gigs to bar mitzvas to cover bands for years. I got to know quite intimately the vast canon of pop and jazz that have earned that position, largely by virtue of the fact that it's good material. Not all of it is—like, I really don't understand why "Brown-eyed Girl" or "Mustang Sally" is quite so gargantuan, why is it everyone requests that. I really don't understand that, but nonetheless I respect that.

I respect what resonates with people, although I can be very sarcastic and cynical about it, but I guess what makes me a pop artist is that I do like connecting with people and I like people to appreciate and respond to it. My father is a jazz pianist—not professionally—but he's good. And I learned what I know about jazz from him. I'm a pretty good bass player, a better bass player than a guitarist. I could have studied jazz and played jazz in Toronto, but I didn't find that musical experience as compelling, because it seemed like a big inside conversation: the audience is there to enjoy it on a more superficial level. You can only appreciate it on an aesthetic level. I think a lot of jazz fans just think it's cool. Maybe they honestly like the aesthetic but I can't believe that people who aren't musicians really have a serious understanding of what happens in jazz, and that's OK.

That sounded very cynical and critical! Really, I appreciate the fact that people have different motivations for liking music, including whether the singer is cute or not. To me I want to make a connection with people in a real, direct way and I realize that some people will probably like my music for superficial reasons.

**EY:** Like how cute you are?

**PM:** OK, I wasn't going to say it. The sex symbol thing, it's something I'm going to have to deal with. You can see the tongue in my cheek. But getting back to my point about music being real, I think that people can hear that, and I think that a lot of the response I've had to my record is from people feeling that. If they listen intently enough they'll hear it from the record. Of course, it kind of bothers me when people make too big a deal of "this music is honest."

**EY:** I agree. Of course, music must be honest. But it has to be interesting too. Honesty alone does not make music great. Your album is interesting, full of variety. No two songs are the same. Sometimes artists will get taken to task for that, though, told they "lack focus," or they're stylistically "too all over the map."

**PM:** I would get bored doing the same song over and over again. I have a lot more that I want to play. I enjoy a wide variety of music. Doing the same thing, that would bore me to tears, and it bores me when I hear other records like that. For example, the Beatles records that I admire the most tend to be the older records—you listen to the White Album, it's all over the map! Even Sgt. Pepper for that matter. A lot of great records have a healthy amount of variety to them. It takes a bit of self-confidence to not worry about that. I didn't worry because I was confident that my voice and my musical values, my general aesthetic would overpower any possibilities of the music being "too diverse."

**EY:** Our review compares you with Tears for Fears. Did we guess right? Are you a huge fan?

**PM:** I am familiar with Tears for Fears. I own two of their albums. I might even have a 12-inch. When *The Hurting* came out, to be honest, I was knocked out by it. It sounded incredibly fresh to me, like something I'd never heard. The combination of synth-poppy elements with real guitars, the writing was very intelligent and melodic and all those things that you and I both like. I listened to that record to death—that was back in high school. I remember having that one cassette with *The Hurting* on one side and Naked Eyes on the other. They were great writers. Their tunes were really strong too. I noticed yesterday, but maybe you know about it, TV Eyes—this is the new project from Roger Manning from Jellyfish. It sounds like 1985. A lot of that stuff back then had a high level of musical content. Like Howard Jones, if you could tolerate his lyrics.

Then their [Tears for Fears's] second record, and "Shout," was so overplayed, and although I liked it, I had to sort of get away from it. When *Seeds of Love* came out, I thought it was so extremely, shamelessly, Beatlesy, but really hard to not like. I enjoyed it but never bought it. I didn't really follow Roland Orzabal's career after that.

**EY:** Of course, you are huge Beatles fan.

**PM:** I was listening to the Beatles since the day I was born. My parents were more into jazz and classical, but they listened to the Beatles. We had *Sgt. Pepper* and *Abbey Road* when I was very, very young. *Magical Mystery Tour* and lots of other things as well. Donovan's greatest hits was a big record when I was a kid. Early musical memories. That stuff endured.

**EY:** You're self-produced, and you're great at it. But do you ever think of working with a producer? If so, who would be your dream producer?

**PM:** I've had thoughts of that obviously. There are producers I admire, and for different reasons. There are producers that are probably fairly obvious like John Brion—I really admire his work, especially what he did with [jazz pianist] Brad Meldau, a record called *Largo*. What I love about it was it was John Brion producing a jazz album, and he brought to it ideas that have never been heard on a jazz album. It came out sounding unlike jazz in a lot of ways. And not like fusion either. It was more like jazz with orchestrated, pop production ideas. Produced jazz! Sounds like an oxymoron, but it works.

So he's the obvious choice, but then maybe, musically, I live too close to John Brion. It might be cool to work with someone who's not so similar. I think he's phenomenal, though. I got to see him in Largo and it's really an unbelievable experience. He's one idea, but then there are producers who I like how their records sound, like maybe Rick Rubin. I like how punchy his sounds are. He's worked with so many great artists. That would be interesting.

But I also have quite a lot of confidence in my musical vision. I am producing some other artists and have a cool home studio. I'm keen to explore that. But I do recognize there are dangers to self-producing. I'm not resistant to the idea.

**EY:** If you were teaching songwriting lessons, what would you tell your students? What makes a great songwriter?

**PM:** One thing that I think is really important is understanding and accepting the fact that good things often take a lot of time. I think people really often underestimate how much time a good song takes to write. And we're in a culture where songs are written by a cute 20-year-old songwriter with a diary and a slick industry-bred producer/co-writer who is old and wealthy from publishing royalties. I know people like this! The management or the label sends the cute 20-year-old to said co-producer/co-writer and they sit down, put on some coffee, and go through the artist's notebook for lyric ideas and start programming a beat and throwing down a few chords and basically write a song in a span of a couple of hours.

I know that good songs *can* be written fast. It's been done. I'm sure the Beatles did some of their songs that way. But I think often musicians exaggerate that—"I wrote this in an afternoon." That happens, but overall, I think that spending time on a song ensures that the song will stand the test of time. Some of the songs on my record took about 2 years to write. "Skydiver Friends," for example. That doesn't mean I was working all the time. But it would sit on the backburner simmering away and occasionally an idea would come up.

I clearly remember being in the room I'm in right now and getting ready to go out and play a cover gig. Playing covers for drunk people. And I remember thinking, shit, I hope I have enough money for a beer. And I had enough change for a beer in my pocket. Maybe I already had the line, "Don't talk to them about change now and here....," and it just went together, like Reese's Peanut Butter Cups. Those moments—you can't necessarily expect them to come up in one sitting.

For me if my songwriting is brilliant a lot of that isn't so much brilliance, but it comes from a lot of thought over time. And it means that the song is really a culmination of thought about the topic of the song over the period of time that it took to write. Scientifically speaking, it kind of has to make it "heavier," or more meaningful. It's not going to be some piece of whimsical or impulsive fluff. It's a more serious statement. You're pooling together all of your thoughts and emotions on something that has endured over a period of time. That can be really powerful. You have to be able to live with the music for a long time. That's what ensures enduring value.

The songs that aren't really happening, they never get finished. I have songs that have been kicking around for years, and I still think about them. They're sort of on the backburner, not finished. Some I'm quite certain will be finished: there's something I keep thinking about, something that draws me back to them. I think if I'm continually thinking about a song, then when it's finished, I think listeners will keep thinking about them too. In an era of disposable culture, that's something that is maybe not as valued by the masses as it once was. But I can't help it. That's a value I grew up with and need to put into my music.

**EY:** As I said earlier, so much independent Canadian pop seems superior. What are we Americans doing wrong?

**PM:** I think that's a good question. What can I do with that? I think there are some fundamental cultural differences between the U.S. and Canada. The U.S. to me in many ways it's like a good friend—and I don't mean to say that in a goofy international-relations kind of cliché way—but you know how our friends are often quite different from us. They obviously have enough in common to be friends. It doesn't stop us from being friends.

You know, Americans for me tend to be very self-assured. I'm speaking extremely broadly, of course, but that's what we're talking about. Quite self-assured, outgoing, friendly, wanting to have friends, wanting to connect, which are all good traits and self-confidence is wonderful. And there are often good outcomes to that. The American music I like is very different in style to the music I like in other places. For example, it may surprise you that I love Van Halen.

**EY:** No surprise. They're fantastic.

**PM:** What I love is this unabashed enthusiasm and gregarious outgoing sort of friendliness. David Lee Roth is so rammed full of testosterone, but he's celebrating it. It's exuberant. That's something that Americans do very well. Canadian bands haven't come close to that.

On the other hand, I think Canadians tend to be quite self-effacing and relatively lacking in self-confidence and, especially coming from a place like Toronto, I'm actually grateful to come from Toronto because it's one of those cities... Toronto audiences are very quietly critical and you just don't get your ego stroked in this city. It's very humbling, and it has the effect of—if it doesn't kill you it makes you keep working. It also forces you to have self-confidence. If you don't have it, you're not going to get it from anybody else. You're not going to be told you're hot shit. It just doesn't happen. In many ways that's a terrible thing, but in many ways that's why there's such great music here, because musicians keep honing their craft.

One of the most important experiences for me was going to Germany and we got treated like rock stars. In Toronto we couldn't get arrested. We would go to Buffalo and opened for the band that had just won the "best band" award for the Buffalo music awards. They showed up in a limo. We were totally impressed. Then they hit the stage, and, sorry, but they were crap. They wouldn't have survived a Tuesday night at the Rivoli in Toronto. And so this band was clearly the victim of the big fish small pond scenario. They had their ego stroked so much they were convinced they were something really great. A lot of the best bands have had to struggle a little bit to be noticed. If it's too easy you stop working.

EY: And how did the Buffalo audience respond to their hometown heroes?

PM: They went wild. But Americans are so patriotic. They're probably better at supporting their own. In a way that's great, but maybe doesn't support their artists on an artistic level.

EY: I'm afraid many Americans go wild for mediocre things!

*Whether you're American or Canadian or Martian, you should check out this record. If you love music that hits you in the head and in the heart, you will certainly go wild for Peter Murray.*