

Richard Hawley



Singer/songwriter Richard Hawley talks for the first time about his experience of growing up with a cleft lip and palate and how it has influenced his music. This very personal account is taken from a conversation with Rosanna Preston (Chief Executive)

I am the product of my background, the son and grandson of hard core steel workers who gave me strength. Forget New or Old Labour, I'm Jurassic Labour! when people cared about each other and community. I grew up in a close community but in a rough part of Sheffield and that makes you hard. When I went to school I would get into fights every day. Kids pick on anyone that's different and I had the whole package; small, "specy four eyes" and cleft lip and palate, it was written all over my face.

Support now is great but there was nothing then, we were on our own. I coped because I had a family who were very strong and gave me positive reassurance that I have worth. They told me that I was as good as if not better than any other person. Without the support of my parents I think I

would have grown up quite emotionally crippled. I've also been really lucky to have really great and loyal friends like Steve Mackay (bass player for Pulp) who I've known since I was 4.

I've never discussed this before so it's quite difficult but my family was incredibly supportive, they were keen to make sure I was as happy as I could be. I only thought about it when I was confronted with other people's reaction, where you were reminded on a fairly constant level that you were different.

The main thing I discovered was that there were two types of people: those who looked at me like they wanted to throw up and those who said "you're different and that's ok". I'm still aware of people's reactions now, even though my cleft is not particularly a bad one.

Music was a great thing for me. I was born into a huge legacy of music: my grandfather played concert violin and musical saw (an instrument featured on my new album) in the music halls, my father played with great Blues performers like Muddy Waters, John Lee Hooker and Memphis Slim and my uncle with Dave Berry and the Cruisers and Little Walter. I was writing songs when I was 9 and it was obvious to my father and grandfather that I had a gift.

However it took me a long time to get going as a solo artist. People like my dad and Jarvis Cocker were on at me to do an album and I knew I had this gift but I kept it quiet. I was in bands from a very young age but I was very careful about who I sang in front of – it terrified me. Then, 10 years ago my father was diagnosed with cancer. He was always saying "if you don't do it you will look back and regret it" and that's when I started my solo career. I

found I could sing and open up my heart and my mouth and let my feelings come out. They weren't angry and hateful, they were trying to understand how people feel. I had to accept myself – all of us have to do that whatever afflictions we have, inside or out. The hardest, and easiest, thing is to accept yourself. My dad died two years ago, I was very close to him and I miss him dearly - and he was right, I've never looked back.

My experience of growing up with a cleft made me very sensitive for myself and others and it has affected my writing, it gave me the empathy to see someone's pain that people around me didn't have. It is obvious to me - like a little bird hovering over their head. I never realised that before, until I started talking about it here. Songs pop into my head fully formed and I've always wondered "where the hell does this come from?"



The new album "Truelove's Gutter" is about people who've had terrible experiences: there's a song about a friend who is physically perfect but was abused as a child. People have died of drug overdoses and suffered a lot of emotional turmoil, all I have is a little scar on my face – it's not the end of the world.



I went through a horrendous time of alcoholism and drug dependency through the lifestyle of a travelling musician and low self esteem and I used to react violently if someone said something. It's understandable but doesn't achieve anything. It won't stop them being cruel or unkind, it will probably just make them worse. The change came from within, you can't do things to please other people in life. Now I look in the mirror and I say "I'm glad I'm me".

I'd had around 20 operations from birth and I refused the final, cosmetic operation at 16 because it would have turned me into someone else. I am the sum of my physical and emotional experience. If I'd had the operation I

would have been "just like them" and I was happy to be me. It reminds me to be humble and that I'm not perfect.

It's not an issue now because I have a partner of 20 years and 3 beautiful children – the question is how to get to that point without destroying myself with alcohol and drugs and how to believe in the words of my father and grandfather that I had worth. It took until I was 30 and my dad was diagnosed with cancer.

There is a general thing in society – forget about hare lip. Society is royally f*****d up with celebrity culture. They celebrate perfect bodies but what is crucially missing are the perfect minds, people are as shallow as an after eight mint wrapper. I have no interest in celebrity culture and always refuse any invitations that take you in range of Hello and OK magazine culture – I'm a musician, songwriter, father and husband.

I adore my wife who is incredibly beautiful, smart, wise and witty. She's a fantastic person but even she still worries that "her arse looks big in this skirt". We are all trying to be someone we are not, to accept yourself is one of the hardest but also the most beautifully easy things and this was

my journey. Ghandi said "be who you want to be", be the person you want the world to be.

Now, I pity the people who react negatively to me - anyone who carries around hate and that lack of understanding. I understand why they behave like that because I am different but I won't apologise and hide it. You have to be positive about who you are – you are different and the world will be divided into two halves, those who react badly and those who accept you.

I worry for children the most, people can be very cruel and make them feel like they have no worth. They feel that nothing will ever work for them and they want the same things that everyone else wants, to love and be loved. It will be alright but there are so many issues they have to overcome. The pain that comes from how people react to you affects your feelings of self worth and value. I would say to children: "It's important not to want to be something or someone else. You are different from everyone else, that's good, it gives you a perspective they never had. Encourage the empathy and understanding, look in the mirror and love yourself - you are beautiful"

When we started to think about having a family I was incredibly anxious of passing the cleft lip on to my children. I looked into it but I don't think it is hereditary and all three are blond, beautiful, healthy and happy and I'm very happy. It fills me with such joy to know that they don't have to go through what I went through.

Weighing it all up I'm glad that it happened because friends are so awesome and beautiful. I've been through a lot of phases, I was very hard

emotionally but I got encouragement and love from my family and wife and the gentle man has learned to rule. I still have issues but it's not a problem, I have the ability to laugh at myself, not take myself too seriously. That's why I've always loved Sheffield, because it's full of people with a self effacing sense of humour – be able to laugh at yourself – it's not that bad.

Now I'm just a man with a hare lip and cleft palate who gets up on stage and sings to 2 – 5,000 people so it is



possible to achieve something positive in your life. To anyone who reads this "You are worth it".