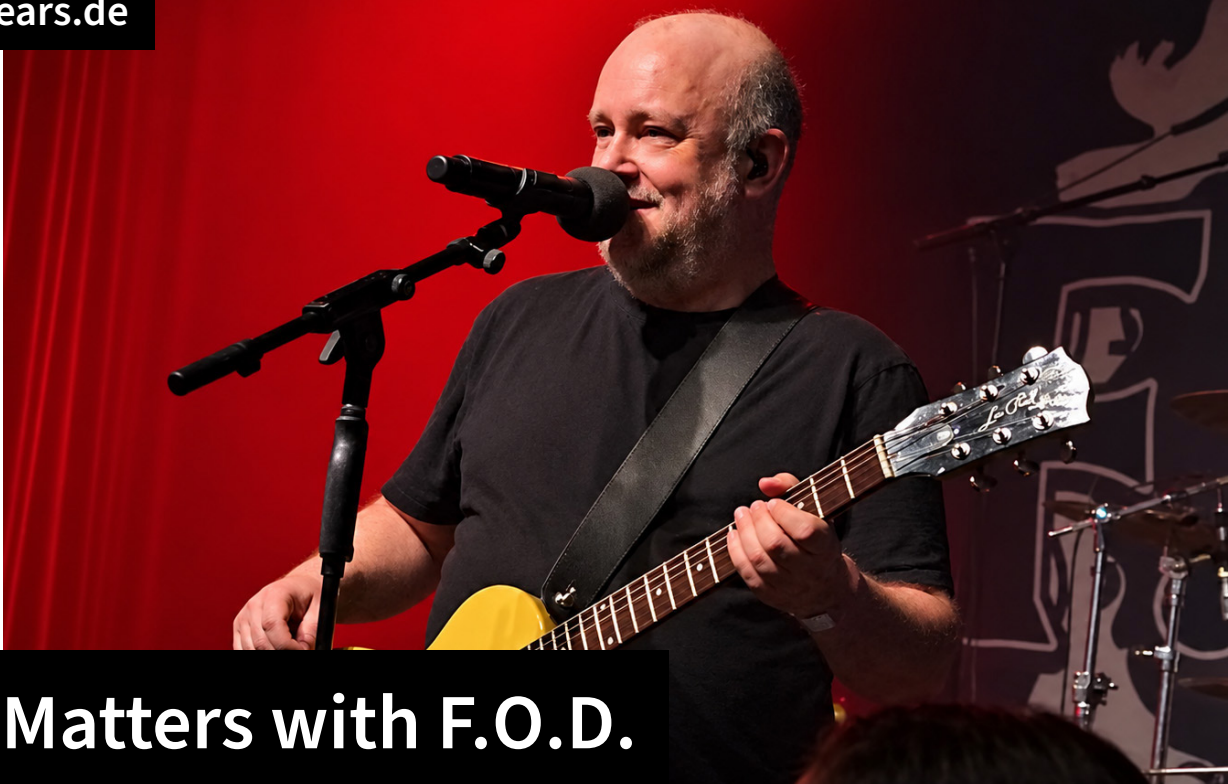


Hans Roofthoof (51), singer and guitarist of F.O.D. with two solo albums under his belt, prefers writing lyrics about things happening around him. "Maybe a little too personal," as he puts it.



Letters & Matters with F.O.D. LYRICS TALK NO. 3

This text was translated using AI. Sorry if some parts sound a bit odd!

Lyrics are just decorative extras anyway – as long as the music hits hard. Right? Or maybe not? In this section, we talk about lyrics at irregular intervals. And we talk directly to the people who write them!

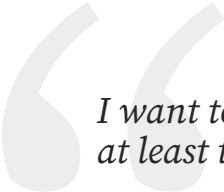
From fully stocked drinks fridges and missing nuns to declarations of love for own children, devastating heartbreak and meta-songs about songwriting – with Belgian punk rock institution F.O.D., the range of topics is as colourful as a good salad, always mixed with a generous helping of individuality and a carefully measured pinch of subtlety. And definitely phrased a whole lot cooler than this intro. So let's hand things over to the man without whom F.O.D. would have neither music nor lyrics: Hans Roofthoof (v., g.). Interviews are, by his own admission, "not really his thing" – which made us appreciate it all the more that, as part of a [band interview](#), we also got the chance to talk to him for "Letters & Matters".

Hans, you're the main songwriter in F.O.D. and, of course, you also write for your solo project. How important are lyrics to you compared to the music?

The lyrics are important, but the music always comes first. I think 95% of the songs I write start with a melody, and then I start looking for lyrics. But in the end, most of the lyrics do become important. I want to sing things that mean something, at least to me. That's why they usually end up being personal, maybe a little too personal.

So writing the lyrics first and then finding music to go with them wouldn't really work for you?

That would definitely be pretty unusual, at least for a complete song. Although every now and then, I'll come up with a line or a few words where I think, "Oh, that sounds good. Maybe I can write something around that." But then I basically need to have a good melody line already as well. With "Carry On", for example, the line "Carry on / There will be someone to guide you" was there right from the start – lyrics and melody. From there, I worked on the melody first and then on the rest of the lyrics.



*I want to sing things that mean something,
at least to me.*

When you listen to other bands or artists in your spare time, do you pay attention to the lyrics as well?

Not that much, actually. I used to. When I was much younger, I loved lying on my bed with the booklets from my new CDs and reading the lyrics. But these days, I don't have the time anymore to sit down with the lyrics to a new album.

How do you come up with the subjects for your lyrics? Where do you find inspiration for what you want to write about?

Usually, it's things that happen to me in everyday life or things I pick up on somewhere. What I see in the news, what happens within the band, family, kids, things like that. There's always far too much happening around me, so it's not hard to just pick something from all of that.

That's true, you have a surprising number of lyrics about very down-to-earth everyday and relationship topics – even though punk is also a very political genre. How important is it to you to express a certain stance through music or to criticise things going on in society?

I think it's important, but I wouldn't want to write a whole album about it. There are bands that do that, and that's obviously fine, but it's not really my thing. There are other things you can talk about as well. And I think if you listen to any F.O.D. album, you know where we stand politically. So we don't need to write too many songs about it and keep hammering the point home.

Another thing that stands out positively is that you're not afraid to talk about personal feelings and mental states. You can hear that in songs like "Autism Spectrum Disorder Blues", "High Street Gloria", "Thirtysomething and Counting" and quite a few others. What would you like listeners to take away from songs like those?

Well, I have autism. And for a long time, I didn't know anyone else who had it. I somehow had to hide it from the rest of the world or pretend it didn't exist and try to be like everybody else. Through those songs, I've somehow changed the way I look at it. I'm not the only one who feels that way. And if it can help anyone feel less alone with what they're dealing with, that makes me feel good.

“If I can help anyone feel less alone with what they’re dealing with, that makes me feel good.

Your writing style is usually very straightforward and direct, but at the same time you keep cleverly weaving in little subtleties, wordplay and interesting turns of phrase. I really like that combination. Do you aim for a particular style? What matters to you when it comes to the form of your lyrics?

I don’t really think about that at all. I probably write relatively simply because I’m not a native speaker. So if I need certain words that I don’t know in English, I look them up, and I’m always happy when I find another word that rhymes with them.

Come on, there’s clearly a bit more to it than that, isn’t there?

Well, for the first draft, that really is how it works. But I rarely finish lyrics in one go. Almost never. Sometimes I’ll go back to them ten times to improve something or add or change something until I think they’re good enough to put out there.

That’s probably what pays off. And do you feel your style has changed or developed over the years?

I hope I write better now than I did about 30 years ago. But I think that’s very hard to judge when it comes to your own lyrics. Sometimes I deliberately write more simply than I used to. Because I think it makes things easier to understand for other people who aren’t native speakers, compared to your average BAD RELIGION song, for example. I love their music, but sometimes I have no idea what they’re talking about because the language is so sophisticated or I’m missing the context. Maybe the same goes for FRENZAL RHOMB (*The difficulty of understanding some of their lyrics is mentioned in F.O.D.’s FRENZAL RHOMB homage “Frenzal Records”*). I don’t think you need a dictionary to understand an F.O.D. song.

Since 2011, F.O.D. have been a well-established name in the Belgian punk rock scene.



When I asked you to pick a song for today, you couldn't decide between "Homeward Bound" and "Feeling Gay". It occurred to me that maybe you don't actually have to choose, because both songs describe the same phenomenon from different perspectives: escaping to a place where you can retreat and get some peace from everyday life and other people's expectations. Is that right?

Yes, exactly. And it's not really a physical place, but more of a place in your mind. I've never physically found the place where I can find my inner peace – so it has to come from within myself. And the difference between the two lyrics is that "Homeward Bound" is about trying to run away from everything – which isn't necessarily a good thing. "Feeling Gay" is about enjoying and embracing the feeling of being alone and making it your own thing.

The place where I can find my inner peace has to come from within myself.

Did you have "Homeward Bound" in mind when you wrote "Feeling Gay"?

No, that one came about completely independently.

To me, there's a third song with a similar theme: "On an Island". That one is about escaping to an imaginary deserted island where you can finally get some peace and quiet. Do you see that track as part of the same thematic group?

Actually, Stijn (v.) wrote those lyrics. He sent me his ideas in Dutch and I turned them into English lyrics, so they're more or less his words. Thematically, you could say it's the "pissed-off" version: "Just leave me alone, let me do what I want." So it's not about other people's expectations like "Homeward Bound". And "Feeling Gay" – well, that's also a bit of "let me do my thing", but in a more positive way, I think.

Am I right in understanding that "gay" in this case is the old-fashioned word for "happy", while also working as a play on words?

Exactly. The story concept of "Sleepville" is about a lesbian couple, so the double meaning of the title worked really well on that album. It all came together nicely.

Then let's dig a little deeper into a second song. I picked "Left" from your latest album "The Once A Virgin Club" – one of the clearly political ones. It's about the typical self-righteous types who try to present themselves as especially virtuous, but can quickly be exposed as rather performative or hypocritical. Is that about right?

Yes.

What I particularly like about the lyrics is the sarcastic undertone. But there's one point where I'm not entirely sure about the position of the narrator. The person speaking says that it doesn't matter what we vote for or how we behave because it won't change anything anyway. Is that really your personal opinion, or was the idea to show two different sides – the self-righteous moraliser and the frustrated guy?

Difficult question. Well, it is kind of serious. It's definitely a statement of political disillusionment. To me, it feels like it doesn't matter who you vote for – in the end, nothing really good comes out of it. Even if you vote for people on the left, somehow

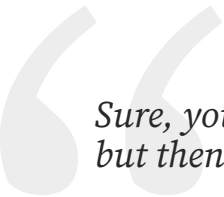
it doesn't seem to work. And the more radical they are, the less it seems to work as well. If there were elections in Belgium tomorrow, I'd have no idea who to vote for. Somehow, nobody proves that they can be trusted.

So what is your personal message in this song?

I think I'm left-wing, but I don't need anyone telling me I'm not left-wing enough or that I need to move further left or whatever. Because, in my opinion, everyone I see on the far left doesn't do anything better than the people on the right. They just isolate themselves from everything and shout as loudly as they can so they'll be heard, but they don't really achieve anything that way.

Would you say that we, as individuals, can have an impact on society? Or is there nothing we can do?

As individuals? I don't think so, no. I mean, look at what's happening in the world today. There are about ten or twenty people deciding what everyone else has to do.



*Sure, you can shout very loudly,
but then you'll just lose your voice.*

So for your children, would you rather hope that they have a strong will to change things, or more of a relaxed acceptance of things as they are?

I hope my kids speak their minds and stand up for what they believe. But I hope they don't start fighting everything that happens. They'll have to accept that the world is the way it is and that, as an individual, you can't really change much. Yeah, you can shout very loudly, but then you'll just lose your voice, I guess.

Let's get back to some lighter topics – well, depending on how you look at it... Have you ever used AI in any way to help you write lyrics?

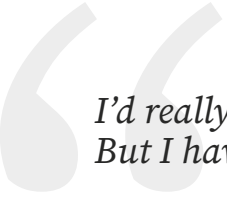
I did that on my last solo album, "Noord". I had about two weeks to write and record everything, so I didn't have the time to keep revising my lyrics over and over like I normally do. So once I had lyrics that felt finished to me, I asked AI whether there was anything that could still be improved. I'd say 80–90% is me, and AI helped me with the rest.

So it was more about editing rather than actually generating anything.

Exactly. I don't have it write new lyrics for me, but AI is really useful when it comes to language mistakes or phrases that sound awkward. After all, there can always be things in there that an English or American person would simply never say that way. I used to always send my lyrics to Hanne from FOR I AM. She's an English teacher and would proofread them for me. These days, I don't have to take up her time anymore – I use AI for that.

What would you still like to write about? Do you already have any ideas for future lyrics?

I'd really like to write a happy album. But I have no idea how to do it. Lode (*dr.*) can confirm that. When he got married two years ago, he asked me if I could play a few F.O.D. songs at the ceremony. I said, "Yeah, sure. Which ones?" And then it got pretty quiet. He wanted happy songs, but there weren't that many.



*I'd really like to write a happy album.
But I have no idea how to do it.*

But you do have a few very happy and romantic songs on “Tricks of the Trade”, and on the “Something More” EP as well!

The thing is, those songs are about my ex-wife. I can't sing them anymore because it just isn't true anymore.

That's understandable. In that case, I'm looking forward to a few new uplifting songs. I think musically, a lot of F.O.D. songs sound really happy anyway – it's only when you look at the lyrics that you realise they're actually not funny at all.

True, the music comes more easily to me in that respect. Now I just need the right lyrics to go with it. I'll try.

Anne

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