



An interview with Richard Oakes – musician, songwriter and guitarist with 90s Britpop band Suede and co-founding member of Artmagic

“We hear a lot these days that ‘academic skills are not enough, people need life skills’ – do you agree?”

Of course I can only speak from personal experience. I left school at 17 to join Suede and to be honest I still didn't really know what I wanted to study at university, if and when I got in. My sister had studied French and became a teacher. I think I was expected to at least have tried to follow her example but all I was really interested in at the time was music. I was extremely lucky to be in the right place at the right time to start a career with Suede.

I do think academic skills are important, despite not having very many of them myself, but so are life skills. I'd have to say that any life skills I possess have come from experience and common sense and have helped me where I've got to today.

“Have your experiences given you any skills you've been able to use in your life on and off tour?”

Yes, definitely. The first thing I had to do with Suede when I joined in August 1994 was go on tour. It was the biggest life-change, going from school and bedroom music to being in a touring rock band. It was essential I kept my head together and my feet on the ground - life in a band can consist of extremes! Suede in 1994 definitely ticked a lot of those cliché boxes and I think that at such a young age I was extremely vulnerable to being sucked into the music industry machine.

There are a lot of cases throughout popular music history of young musicians having a hard time. One person I particularly identify with is Danny Kirwan, who joined Fleetwood Mac in 1968 when he was 18. They were a huge band at the time, and from what I understand he found it hard to deal with the sudden fame and the rock lifestyle that went with it. He had pretty much burned himself out by the time he was 22. I consider myself very lucky not to have gone the same way. I made sure I kept my head and ignored a lot of what was going on around me. I tried hard not to get taken in by the excesses – I thought for myself and didn't get taken in by everything that was written about me.

“Looking back, if you could give one piece of advice to your eighteen-year-old (or younger) self, what do you think it might be?”

I think the phrase “don't put all your eggs in one basket” is very apt. There have been things in my career and in my life that I've thrown myself into fully, given 100% to, and got little or no return from. I think the same could be said of any career, but the music industry has changed so much in the last 20 years that I think everyone involved in it is a lot more cautious now and everyone tries to have as many things on the go as possible. I don't think I know anyone who isn't in more than one band or doesn't have another job on the side! It can be a bit like spinning plates, but learning to focus on more than one thing can be far more rewarding in the long run. My advice to a younger me would be to learn this sooner rather than later!

