

Song Exploder
Blonde Redhead - Penultimo
Episode 27

Hrishikesh: You're listening to Song Exploder, where musicians take apart their songs and piece by piece tell the story of how they were made. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway.

("Penultimo" by BLONDE REDHEAD)

Hrishikesh: The band Blonde Redhead formed in 1993. Twenty-one years later, in 2014, the trio released their 9th album, and in this episode, they deconstruct "Penultimo," a song from that record that caused some dissent between the band members. At the heart of the controversy was the Pitchfactor effect pedal by Eventide, a harmonizer that does a lot, or maybe too much. Here's Blonde Redhead on Song Exploder.

("Penultimo" by BLONDE REDHEAD)

(Music fades)

Kazu: I couldn't admit to the entire concept of this song. So I was kind of resisting until the last, last moment.

(Guitar)

Kazu: This is Kazu Makino, I'm the member of Blonde Redhead. And the other members are Amedeo and Simone Pace, twin brothers from Italy.

Amedeo: I am Amedeo, I play mostly guitar in the band. I kind of started with the arpeggio part.

(Guitar)

Amedeo: The thing about the Eventide pedal with which I wrote the song, is that it just by me playing one note, it does the arpeggio so it's a harmonizer, so

Kazu: He's just playing [mimics guitar].

(Guitar)

Kazu: But the effect is doing [mimics guitar]. Ah, no

(Guitar ends)

Kazu: [mimics guitar]

(Guitar)

Amedeo: [mimics guitar] So it was a bit by accident. Kazu was not too keen on the idea of having something that was played with a pedal.

Kazu: We couldn't call it a song without the pedal. I felt like we were taking, sort of, shortcuts, or slacking off, or like cheating, or something like this. So I was a little bit skeptical about calling it a song. I worry, I censor myself quite a bit, you know, sometimes. But Ame, he's not like that, he just goes for it, and then he goes around, and he's heading off.

(Guitar ends)

Kazu: This album was, the whole thing had a rule of like, "We want it to sound timeless and warm." That's one of the reason why we started saying, "what if we play this manually on the instrument?"

Amedeo: So we started replacing the arpeggio with piano and harpsichord.

(Piano and harpsichord)

Amedeo: So I'm not a piano player, so I had to do it, first the left hand, and then, the right hand for each instrument. So I first did that [mimics piano], which is the bass, and then, I did the rest. So it took maybe four or five hours for me to do the whole thing.

Kazu: So geeky. Can we do this manually? What would it sound like? When you going to studio and making music, you walk away from reality, and you start exploring things just because you thought about it, you know?

(Piano and harpsichord fades)

Music: So the first thing was the arpeggio with the pedal. And then, second thing was the guitar.

(Guitar)

(Harpsichord joins)

(Guitar)

(Guitar ends)

Simone: I am Simone, and I play drums.

(Drums)

Simone: I do a lot of doubling stuff that I record. I recorded the whole part, and then, we just recorded it again, maybe like, a couple of times, you know, and then, we put it together.

(Drums end)

Simone: For that song, we get inspired a lot, at least from the drum part, by, you know this Fleetwood Mac record "Tusk."

("Tusk" by FLEETWOOD MAC)

Simone: He plays very simple.

("Tusk" by FLEETWOOD MAC)

Simone: You know, it's really to the point, and I think we were trying to keep, you know, things very, very simple.

(Music ends)

Simone: I really like to be limited, you know. I think being limited makes you become more creative, I think.

(Drums)

Simone: And we left the song like that for a few months.

(Drums fade)

Kazu: It was a third day of the three-day session at the Electric Lady. We turned to this song, I was like, "Wow, this one only needs melody. Like, all you have to do is to come up with the melody and lyrics." And up to then, like we were convinced by, sort of, the love that Amedeo had for this song so

Amedeo: But I had the hardest time finding the melody or, and finding a way to sing it, because the range is, was really, really, either too low or too high for me.

Kazu: I thought Amedeo was going to just deliver the song. And he always was walking around with like a of pile of paper. And then, Ame was like, "Can you come outside?" And then, he just took me out, and was like [laughter], "Kind of help me, I got nothing here." It was like, really a shock for me. It was like, "What about all those papers?!" Like, "it's nothing!" I sat down, and just started writing down, and I had to come up with something. It was like streaming off my brain basically. This is just about New York or whatever.

("Vocals: "Bowery is tame / Not the way, it used to be")

Kazu: After that, Ame went in, and then, started imitating [laughter] me, which must have been so humiliating, because he always comes up with his own stuff.

Hrishikesh: This is the first time that that had ever happened, where you had written a part for him?

Kazu: Yeah, it's first time.

(Vocals: "prepared to tell / nothing to see, / here / here / Prepared to tell / nothing to see, / here / here")

Kazu: I realized, *wow, I could never do what Amedeo does*. I think he has such an incredible sense of like phrasing and rhythm, and I could never do what he does, you know? And if I try, I sound terrible. Then that's what he had to do is try to sing like me. I think I tend to sing everything quite laid back. And then, it sounds like I'm not going to fit in the phrase into a certain space, but I always do. And he was having such a hard time doing that.

(Vocals: "Wait at the corner / meet me you know where / I can hardly see / this side of glass / men chase past / without turning around / When's your next show / should I even talk / or hit him with a chain")

Kazu: He kept trying to sing this track, and I was quite touched that he had the perseverance [laughter], patience, and then also the will to finish it, you know?

(Piano and harpsichord)

Kazu: The fact that it was for Ame, I was able to free myself from like all the brakes I was putting in myself about this song. At that moment, I realized that *this song is like right up my bloody alley*. Yeah, I remember thinking, *Oh, wow. This feels quite right*.

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Penultimo," by Blonde Redhead, in its entirety.

("Penultimo" by BLONDE REDHEAD)

Hrishikesh: You can find all the past and future episodes of Song Exploder at songexploder.net or on iTunes, Stitcher, or wherever you download podcasts. Find this show on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram @SongExploder. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a curated network of extraordinary story-driven shows. Learn more at radiotopia.fm. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.