

Song Exploder
Converge - Dark Horse
Episode 12

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.

("Dark Horse" by CONVERGE)

Hrishikesh: The band Converge formed in 1990, when its members were teenagers. They've been making music that lives somewhere in the intersection of punk, hardcore, and metal for almost 25 years. Guitarist Kurt Ballou spoke to me from his studio GodCity, which is where Converge writes and records. I also spoke over the phone with singer Jake Bannon. Coming up, they'll talk about how the physical space of GodCity influenced their songwriting, how the Boston hardcore scene gave them a home, and how to get the classic Swedish death metal guitar tone.

("Dark Horse" by CONVERGE)

(Music fades)

Kurt: Hi, this is Kurt Ballou from the band Converge. I play guitar in the band, and I'm also a recording engineer, and I recorded the majority of our most recent material. The other members of Converge are Jake Bannon on vocals, Nate Newton on bass, and Ben Koller on drums. Today, we're going to talk about the song "Dark Horse," which is the first song on our 2009 album, *Axe to Fall*. The guitar tracks on this song, I fall into this trap whenever I'm recording, especially a Converge record, where like if I do something, I want to use it. I'm not good at editing out the stuff that I've put effort into [laughter]. So sometimes, like, I'll record tracks with a whole bunch of different tones, just to experiment to see which one I liked the best. And what I end up usually doing is just using all of them.

(Guitar)

Kurt: This record had a little bit of a longer recording process, where we, sort of, picked at it over the course of several months. And within that process, I was recording other bands. And one of the bands that I recorded was called Black Breath. And I really liked the guitar sound that I got for them. And decided, late

at night, after one of their sessions, to do another layer of guitar tracks with their guitar tone in this record.

(Guitar)

Kurt: The big character of their tone is the Boss Heavy Metal Pedal, which is pretty well known these days for producing the classic Swedish death metal tone. For some reason, a bunch of American post-hardcore type bands have latched onto that in recent years. It's a pretty awesome tone. So I used that, it's just layered for thickness.

(Guitar)

(Guitar fades)

Jake: Hi, I'm Jake. I sing for Converge, and create visuals, write lyrics, all that stuff. This song is about losing a friend, and looking through that loss at the rest of your life that you have in front of you, and what you can do with it. To me, it's a very positive song, you know, trying to ride towards positivity, trying to live a constructive, positive life. I feel that people don't really understand our band, they would possibly misinterpret our, sort of, aggression level for something that was not positive in some way. We're about trying to find some sort of light at the end of the tunnel. Negative themes, it's not really our style. It's just not who we are as people.

Kurt: Jake really has two different modes that he sings in. There's shouty Jake.

(Vocals: "Let their sadness be our blessing / Let their losses lead the way")

Kurt: And there's monster Jake.

(Vocals: "To free the light from all of us")

Kurt: Where he uses pretty much an entire lung's worth of air for every word. I think recording vocals is one of the hardest things to do, particularly in a hardcore band. Because, you know, vocalists, they feed off the energy of a crowd. And so, when you're standing on a stage, and you've got all these people with their eyes fixed on you, and you've got like a drummer, like Ben behind you, and then, and Nate and I, and it's super loud. So you've got all this volume, pushing the words out of you from behind. You've got this much different feeling than being

in a room by yourself with some headphones on. Jake is adamant about recording all of his vocals with a handheld microphone. That's just the way that he performs best.

Jake: Well, it's my instrument. Why would a guitarist want to put a guitar on a stand? Probably feels a bit awkward, because you don't really have the tactile feel of holding a neck, and being able to move it appropriately the way your body wants to move. And it's no different with a microphone either. You know, you just play. It's what I'm used to.

Kurt: The backing vocal choices are, generally, a band decision. Nate's a very strong singer. I'm not as strong a singer as he is, but I can fake it good enough for a recording. It's just sort of reinforcing the chorus.

(Vocals: "The dark horse will one day come / To free the light from all of us / One day the dark horse will come / Dark horse will come")

Kurt: Nate really plays bass like a guitar [laughter]. He doesn't pick anywhere near the bridge. And he plays a lot of chords. And I mean, he's a guitar player that, you know, we got to play bass for us.

(Bass)

Kurt: When Nate, Ben and I are working on the music for a song, in the past, you know, 10 years or so, we've really tried to create a musical song structure that will be in support of a memorable vocal structure. I think early in the band's career, we tended to just chain together riffs that we thought sounded cool. And that's, you know, that's all well and good. And that's certainly in the tradition of metal is how it was done. We're all more a fan of the pop song format. And we find that our favorite, most memorable metal songs were written with a hook, a repeated chorus, and, you know, a sensical verse. And with "Dark Horse," it really is, like it's pretty verse, chorus, verse, chorus, bridge, chorus. And I think that that's one of the reasons why it's, I think, a memorable song. You know, we're working in this, sort of, 5/8 pattern. And one of the riffs we came up with,

(Guitar)

Kurt: just sounded better with, sort of, 5/4 drum beat behind it. So like,

(Drums join)

(Drums)

Kurt: I started GodCity in around 1995 in my parents' basement, just with some modest recording equipment, a half inch, 8-track recorder, and that sort of snowballed. I set up my current studio in Salem, Massachusetts, and I've been open here since about the end of 2003. The relationship between GodCity and Converge is definitely a symbiotic one. The space that you're recording in, the space that you're practicing in affects your creative process. You know, like when you get on a stage behind, like, a drum set in some huge room, and you just like hit the snare drum once, and it's [makes an explosion sound] like, "Awesome. I just want to, like, play slow stuff [laughter]." My studio is what I would call a medium-sized live room, and it's quite well treated. So it's pretty dead in here, so we can hear what we're doing fairly clearly. And I think that that's one of the reasons why we tend to write predominantly fast songs. It's actually the first time I've thought about it that way, but it makes a lot of sense.

(Drums)

(Drums end)

Kurt: Every, like, teenage weirdo has a need to define themselves, to establish their independence, but in doing so, also needs to feel a sense of belonging, but maybe belonging to something that's a little bit outside of what everybody else belongs to. And that community of hardcore bands, and underground metal bands, and stuff is the community that I gravitated towards and felt was, you know, a surrogate family of sorts to me. And I know that, you know, Jake absolutely felt the same way.

Jake: I've never really had a foundation of support for my creative efforts. You know, I've kind of just done what I've done since I've been a kid. You know, nobody's patted me on the back and said, "I'm doing a good job" or not.

Kurt: We're certainly not a huge band by conventional standards, but in terms of the musical scene in which we love and we play to, I never thought it would be possible for a band to do as much as we've done.

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Dark Horse," by Converge, in its entirety.

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Hrishikesh: For more information on Converge, including links to buy their music, visit songexploder.net.

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