

Song Exploder
Franz Ferdinand - Take Me Out
Episode 226

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.

Alex: I've always loved writing with other people. And my first experiences of songwriting were with my best friend, Andrew, from school. We both started playing guitar about the same time, and we were both obsessed with The Beatles. We had one of these books, you know, these kind of like, "How to play The Beatles chords" books, and we just couldn't do it. Like we learned the chords, but they just didn't sound right. And years later, like it's funny, I was at my girlfriend's flat. She had the same book, and I picked it up. I was like, "No way, this was the book that me and Andrew tried to learn the guitar from." When I started playing along with it, I was like, "No way, these chords are all wrong." And [laughter] I was like, all these years later, like as somebody who like knows the guitar a little bit better than when I was like 14 or whatever, I was like, "No way, that's why we couldn't learn these songs because the chords are actually wrong." But I have so much to thank that book for because, because the songs didn't sound right when we played them, Andrew and I, we both said, "Right, let's just make our own songs up with the chords that we know." And that's how I started writing songs, is because if we wrote our own songs, nobody was going to tell us that they didn't sound how they were supposed to sound, because it was us who dictated how they were supposed to sound.

("Take Me Out" by FRANZ FERDINAND)

Alex: I am Alex Kapranos of the band Franz Ferdinand.

Hrishikesh: Franz Ferdinand formed in 2002, in Glasgow, Scotland. They've sold millions of albums. They've won the Mercury Prize and two BRIT Awards, and they have five Grammy nominations. One of their first singles "Take Me Out," is also their biggest hit. In this episode, singer and guitarist Alex Kapranos tells the story of how he and his bandmates made the song, from the original home demo to the final studio recording.

("Take Me Out" by FRANZ FERDINAND)

(Music fades)

Alex: Nick McCarthy, who was in the band with me at the time, he and I shared a flat in Glasgow. We were both writing a lot of songs at the time, some songs I would write myself, and some songs we would write together. I was really taken with the idea of writing songs in the original Lennon-McCartney style, kind of like head-to-head. The two of you sitting opposite each other, kind of working it out. I remember hearing from Nick's room, he was mucking about on one of these old keyboards, the kind of thing you would get for Christmas when you were 12 or 13, like my first MIDI keyboard kind of thing. They're great, because they have the auto-accompaniment mode on them. So you can like hold your finger down on a key, and it'll play a crappy bassline, and it'll play the chords or whatever. So I had one of these in the flat, and I heard Nick in his bedroom mucking about with it. There was this little melody, and it went [sings melody], just like that. There's just this little, basic kind of thing. And I just remember chapping on his door, I said, "Oh, come on, let's make something. Let's make a song." So we took it into the other room, and we start trying different progressions you could do behind that little hook. Yeah, I remember it very well. I had an acoustic guitar, and Nick was playing on this little kind of keyboard thing.

(Dictaphone recording)

Alex: I mean, it sounds really crap because [laughter] it was a really bad recording. You know the little dictaphone, the sort of things you would get, I guess I would use that back then the same way that most musicians use their phone nowadays, you know, like you take voice notes or whatever.

(Dictaphone recording)

Alex: So that's the bluegrass accompaniment setting on a Yamaha keyboard from the mid-nineties.

(Dictaphone recording fades)

Alex: It was alright. It sounded kind of jaunty, and it sounded kind of fun. So it started off with that, and not actually the melody that it ended up as in the end. The night before, I'd watched a film called *Enemy at the Gates*, and it's set during the Second World War, set around the siege of Stalingrad. And one of the themes of the film is this standoff between two snipers. Jude Law is the Soviet sniper and Ed Harris is the evil Nazi. And they're both kind of tucked away hidden from each other, waiting for the other to make a move and to expose themselves.

Because as soon as the other makes a move, the other will know where they are, and will take them out. And so, I had this film fresh in my head the next day, when I was mucking about with Nick on this song. It was okay, you know, not a bad film, but this image of the two snipers left quite an impact on me. It felt like a very good metaphor for the kind of romantic situations that we sometimes find ourselves in. You know, where you both know that you're into the other, but nobody wants to kind of like expose their vulnerability and make a move, and let the other know how they feel. And so, I could write, so you can't really tell, "What am I talking about here? Am I talking about snipers, or am I talking about some kind of romantic situation?" I wrote down a bunch of imagery straight away for the idea for the verses. "So if you're lonely," you know, "I'm here waiting for you. I'm just a crosshair, just a shot away from you." And then, et cetera. "Okay, let's get a chorus together."

(Dictaphone recording)

(Dictaphone recording fades)

Alex: At the time I was really, really into Howlin' Wolf, the old blues guy, and always loved the way that he would like sing to the guitar, and the guitar would then sing back to him: [sings guitar melody] [sung] "Oh I asked her for water" [sings guitar melody], like so good, like I loved it. And the way that the guitar and the vocal, they were kind of like two dancers, intertwining their bodies across a smooth, overpolished dance floor. Like it was really, really powerful. And so, I really wanted to do something like that. And so, like, [sung] "I say, don't you know?" [sings guitar melody], like this kind of like thing.

(Dictaphone recording)

Alex: And I guess that's how you end up doing your own thing, isn't it? Like you listen to somebody you love doing something, you kind of go, "Wow, that's great. I'm going to, no, I'm not going to do it like that. Because I'm not that." And then you kind of change it, and then it becomes your thing.

(Dictaphone recording)

Alex: And the phrase, "Take me out." Are you asking me to take you out on a date, or asking me to take me out with a bullet? I always loved that in a song lyric, like a degree of ambiguity and immediacy simultaneously.

(Dictaphone recording ends)

Alex: So we then took it to the band. At that point, the band members were Bob Hardy playing bass, Paul Thomson playing drums, and Nick McCarthy playing guitar. And we kind of got our heads around it to a degree, and we played at a gig, but it never felt right. It always felt kind of wrong, because if the chorus tempo was right, then the verse tempo felt too slow. And if the verse tempo was right, then the chorus tempo felt too fast. And so, we kind of like left it for a little bit, and thought, "You know, we should come back to that, at some point." Then one day I had this idea, I said, "Right, look, we've got this problem with the tempo of the song. Why don't we just take all the verses? We'll play them just altogether."

(Vocals with guitar: "So if you're lonely, you know I'm here waiting for you / I'm just a cross-hair, I'm just a shot away from you / And if you leave here")

Alex: Then we'll slow down,

(Guitar, bass, and drums)

Alex: and then we'll play all the choruses together.

(Vocals, guitar, bass, and drums: "Well, I say you don't know? / You say you don't know / I say: take me out")

Alex: And then, we don't have to worry. Then you've got both tempos, like both tempos are right.

(Music fades)

Alex: So we tried that, and it felt really good. But it needed something else as well, it needed something really dramatic. And rather than trying to be apologetic about the tempo change, just kind of be really super bold about it and own it. This led to another idea that we'd had with, there was something that was kind of like a bit of an in-joke amongst us at the time. Bob had come across some young guy in the States, and his favorite genre of music was what he called Sports rock. And we found this amazingly amusing, like we'd never heard this term before, Sports rock. And what he meant was rock, which was played in sports stadiums. Is that a genre, is that an actual thing?

Hrishikesh: Yeah [laughter], in the 90s, there were like compilations called *Jock Rock* and *Jock Jams*.

Alex: No way. Right, so it is actually a thing. Like, see, we thought it was just some mad kid in the States. I guess we are the least sporty people you could ever come across in the world [laughter]. If you think of what a jock is, then make the inverse of it, I guess, then you'd find us [laughter]. And so, we thought it'd be funny if we played sports rock in some way. The sort of things that he was putting in his lists of favorite sports rock songs were things like Queen and "Eye of the Tiger." And we said, "So what makes it sports rock?" And one of the things that we felt identified it was the cymbal catch. You know, it's when you hit the cymbal, and then catch it immediately with your hand. So it goes [mimics cymbal catch sound].

(Guitar with drums)

Alex: It just sounded both highly amusing to us, and extremely exciting at the same time.

(Vocals, guitar, bass, and drums: "I know I won't be leaving here with you")

(Music ends)

Alex: So we'd written these chords, and rather than just having guitars strumming chords, I found that really, really boring. All of us, we were really into like early sequenced synthesizer music. Really loved Moroder, and D.A.F, and that kind of thing. And often the way it's arranged, it's like monophonic synthesizers held on an arpeggiator doing single notes, kind of like [mimics synth]

("Als wär's das letzte Mal" by D.A.F.)

(Music fades)

Alex: I thought, well, it would be great to take that approach to arrangement and stick it on guitars, and like have the guitars mimicking monophonic synthesizers. So you've got the three notes in the chord, and I took the three notes and put them on the three different instruments. The bass,

(Bass)

Alex: guitar 1,

(Guitar)

Alex: and guitar 2,

(Guitar)

Alex: which felt pretty cool to me.

(Guitars with bass)

Alex: It's funny listening to it, as well, because like even though we were trying to play like sequenced synthesizers, we really weren't pulling it off, because it's so kind of like imperfect. And that's what I love about it, listening to it, it's like, "Yeah, that's really kind of not right. It's really kind of not on the beat," but it's when you're kind of like pulling and pushing, and like pulling yourself back in time with each other. And I guess that's what makes a band. It's like listening to each other, and pulling yourself in to be in line with each other.

(Guitar with bass)

(Music ends)

Alex: What we were doing with the guitars was like having this sort of like the intertwining melody. So like where they were kind of crossing over each other, and you couldn't tell one from the other. And we were doing the same thing with the vocal as well. I sang lead and Nick would do a kind of like a backup.

(Vocals with bass: "I know I won't be leaving here (With you) / I know I won't be leaving here / I know I won't be leaving here (With you) / I know I won't be leaving here with you")

Alex: When we ended up recording, we recorded with Tore Johansson. So we went over to Malmo in the south of Sweden, to a studio called Gula Studios. And I remember saying to them that we were all really into dance music. Like we would go to clubs a lot together. And so much of dance music is led by the kick drum. And I remember we were saying to Tore, we really want the kick drum to be like really powerful and deep. And he was like, "Oh, I've got this great idea," which was to tape two kick drums together, put one against the other, then tape them together, so it makes like one super long, extra long kick drum. And what it

does to the acoustics of that, is everything is just like consistently loud, like on an 808.

(Drums)

(Drums end)

Alex: There were all these kind of like small decisions like that, which we like, how do we kind of like get what we love about dance music, and what we love about the rawness of being in a live band together. And we all liked this song. I also remember Tore's wife was really into that song as well. Like she thought, I remember her coming down to the studio, and thought, "Oh, that one's really nice, it's really catchy." But I remember Tore hated it [laughter]. Like he was like, "I don't know why you're recording this one like. But then I remember him one day sort of saying, "Well, no, I was talking to my wife, and she says she really likes it. She says it's very catchy, we should work on it." And so [laughter], thanks towards Mrs, you saved the song [laughter].

(Vocals with guitar: "I say, don't you know? / You say you don't know / I say: take me out")

(Bass and drums join: "If I wane, this could die / If I wait, this could die / I want you to take me out / If I move, this could die / Eyes move, this can die / Come on,")

(Vocals: "take me out")

Alex: I really wanted to rebel against what I called Pro Tools rock at the time. Even if you didn't play to a click like the trend, and it's still kind of rife within recording, which is to put everything in time. And you get these wonderfully correct, boring sounding performances, and like I hate it [laughter]. Like I really hate it. And again, going back to like [laughter] the thing about when Andrew and I were writing songs together, if you're writing the song, nobody can tell you that's the wrong thing to do. And it's maybe a useful realization to realize that there is no right and no proper way of doing things. And often the proper way to do things is the boring way to do things. And there's no sin worse than the sin of being boring [laughter].

(Guitar, bass, and drums)

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Take Me Out" by Franz Ferdinand, in its entirety.

("Take Me Out" by FRANZ FERDINAND)

Hrishikesh: To learn more, visit songexploder.net. You'll find links to stream or download "Take Me Out," and you can watch the video.

This episode and the show's theme music were made by me with editing help from Casey Deal and Craig Eley, artwork by Carlos Lerma, music clearance by Kathleen Smith, and production assistance from Chloe Parker. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a network of independent, listener-supported, artist-owned podcasts. You can learn more about our shows at radiotopia.fm. You can follow me on Twitter and Instagram @HrishiHirway, and you can follow the show @SongExploder. You can also get a Song Exploder t-shirt at songexploder.net/shirt. I'm Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.