

Song Exploder
Peter Bjorn and John - Young Folks
Episode 84

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.

("Young Folks" by PETER BJORN AND JOHN)

Hrishikesh: In 2006, Swedish trio Peter Bjorn and John released their third album, *Writer's Block*. For months and months after that, it felt like you couldn't go anywhere without hearing the first single from that album, "Young Folks." It was on top 10 lists for Song of the Year in places like Pitchfork and NME. It's been covered by James Blunt, and remixed by Kanye West, along with countless other versions out there. Now, ten years later, Peter Bjorn and John break down the song, and tell the story of how it all came together, and how it almost didn't come together at all.

("Young Folks" by PETER BJORN AND JOHN)

(Music fades)

Björn: I'm Björn, I play bass guitar in Peter Bjorn and John. We were working at a studio in Högalid, like a space that I had at the moment.

John: It was pretty low budget, everything. The record before we did in a proper studio, and that record sort of flopped. We thought we would take over Sweden and the world with that record, but it didn't happen. So we did this record more low key and low budget in Bjorn's own little studio space. I'm John, and I play drums.

Peter: We talked about actually splitting up during that period. And we put out the first two records on small like one-man labels, and done a lot of shows in Sweden and some in Norway, but nothing much happened, you know? And I think we were kind of tired and, yeah, we're talking about splitting up. And then, we said, "Okay, let's make one more record." But if no one wants to release this like a proper label, then you know whatever. I'm Peter, and I usually sing, play guitar, and write songs as well. We all write songs. Björn had a piano piece, which sounded a bit like a jazz, Duke Ellington thing.

(Piano)

(Piano fades)

Björn: Yeah, I played this stuff on piano, the little sort of melody and chords. I was working on a jazz album at the same time, and I just thought it sounded too much like Duke Ellington, or it just felt a bit like a rip off. So we took out the chords, made it more clean, and made it feel more pop.

(Whistling)

(Whistling ends)

Björn: Whistling seemed like a good way of like presenting a melody without making it either that way or the other way, you know? We think just like, "Oh, it's a pure note."

Peter: It was a placeholder. The idea was to use it as a riff, but not whistling. I seem to remember he was talking about synth or keyboard or

Björn: Ah, right.

Peter: some other instrument instead of the whistling.

John: But I think that sound of that whistle, and it's a bit out of tune, I think it's in [laughter] some way actually connects to people, because it's something everyone can do. It's not like a synth that cost like \$30,000. It's like everyone can do a whistle. The way it's recorded and the way it sounds, sounds like a regular person doing it on the street.

(Whistling)

Peter: Since we recorded it in this little space, it was sort of a lot of acoustic problems, and [laughter] we talking a lot about the drums, not using cymbals or the drum patterns, or like, without cymbals.

Björn: There was more of being able to record it. It was just sounding better just doing kick drum and snare.

(Drums)

(Drums end)

Björn: It's live, no loops, no like click or anything.

John: I was like this was the beat I played when I wanted to show like my father, like this is how a idiot would play drums [laughter].

(Drums)

Björn: That's really interesting, because I think it's got a super live feel and it's really funky. But idiots can be the most groovy people in the world now.

(Drums end)

Björn: The lack of like ghost notes and stuff, it's more like a drum machine sort of, you can do with two fingers, you know, [mimics a beat], sitting, like doing on a drum machine, But

John: that song, Daft Punk "Robot Rock," that album was out, and we were into that, and we wanted to make like the intro of the song as the intro of "Robot Rock." It starts with like just very dry tom toms.

("Robot Rock" by DAFT PUNK)

(Music fades)

John: We wanted to do that in a nerdy [laughter], uncool way. So it starts with the most ridiculous drum fill we could ever come up with.

(Drums)

(Bass joins)

(Bass)

Björn: We have this old, Framus bass that Peter had, which sounded really cool and distorted.

(Bass)

Peter: It's a hollow body. It's a really weird one. Like it's got a super big head. Like the body's pretty weird too. And actually for the video, the cartoonist who did all the paintings for the video, he uses that bass as the role model. So you can sort of see it in the video. There was only one string that wasn't tuned. I think the A string on the bass, which made it kind of easy to decide which string to play [laughter]. But also it made sort of like, it jumped around a little bit more than maybe a normal bassline would do, you know, just playing on one string.

(Bass)

(Bass ends)

John: We borrowed the percussion from my old day job at a percussion ensemble. We stole the bongos from there.

(Percussion)

(Boots sound)

Peter: It's two boots against a laminated floor into our spring reverb.

John: And those boots, it's also a bit cartoonish, like creating sounds for a cartoon movie or something. Low budgets, but cool.

(Bells)

Peter: What are they called? Bells?

John: Yeah, tubular bells.

Peter: Yeah.

John: But we did like a glissando with the sticks on the side of the tubular bells, like [mimics a glissando].

Björn: Because you have to find stuff that sounds like cymbals [laughter].

(Bells)

Björn: I remember like working on the lyrics pretty long time. We got some vocals down on the first verse and chorus.

(Vocals: "If I told you things I did before / Told you how I used to be / Would you go along with someone like me?")

Björn: After a while we'd be sort of like, "Oh, we want to make a duet."

Peter: We talked about all sorts of persons singing the duet thing. And we always said like, "We can't use Victoria from The Concretes because [laughter] we had just, on the record before *Falling Out*, we did a cover of a Concrete song, "Teen Love." And we hung out a lot with them, like went to the same parties. It was sort of a scene here in Stockholm. And it just felt like, you know, too obvious. But then, in the end, I guess we realized that she would perfectly suit the song.

(Vocals: "It doesn't matter what you did / Who you were hanging with / We could stick around and see this night through")

Peter: When we talked about the song and the lyric, we always talked about someone has been through quite a few relationships, and a bit burnt out and, you know, go into a bar and meeting someone new. And maybe this could be, you know, something. But they're kind of jaded.

(Vocals: "Usually when things has gone this far / People tend to disappear / No one will surprise me unless you do")

Peter: I mean, you can hear that her voice would fit this jaded feel. What would you do if you would meet a person somewhere, and like how would you phrase it, and how would you actually have a discussion with someone? And that's the whole setup for the dialogue. It's not about young folks. So that was a big misunderstanding. It's called "Young Folks," and also has a sort of childish stance to it with the whistling and everything. And the video with these kids made it, probably a bit confusing. But this is not about young people.

(Vocals: "And we don't care about the young folks / Talking 'bout the young style / And we don't care about the old folks / Talking 'bout the old style too")

Peter: I remember that I recorded the whole thing, like the whole lyric, and I wasn't there when she did her thing.

Björn: But when she came to studio, it didn't work out at all because it was too low.

Peter: Mmm.

Björn: The key was too low for her. We knew exactly how she sang, but we didn't know what key she sang in [laughter]. So we pitched it,

John: [laughter]

Peter: The whole song, yeah, I guess.

Björn: Yeah. We pitched the whole song up, and I mean, not the drums, but bass, and keyboards, and other stuff, the harmonic stuff. The whistling got pitched up, so it's now humanly incredible that Peter can whistle that live, because it's so high.

Peter: Yeah. I can't always do it either so [laughter].

Björn: Yeah. And Peter came back and redid his vocals. So it's always a hassle if you have to change the key, but we pitched it up, and then we kept it like that.

(Synth)

John: I remember the feeling when we almost finished the song, like a moment of starting to move about and dance in the studio, we felt like this is a groovy song. And a couple of days later, we burn it out on a CD-R. And me and Peter played records on this club in Stockholm in a basement. And when we played this song, I remember like four or five people coming up to us, and asking, "What song is this?" And like it was the first big reaction we ever had on the song. So, at that point, we felt like, "Ah, maybe we have something here."

Peter: The first thing we did in New York was the Conan O'Brien Show, like before we ever play the gig.

(Conan O'Brien: "Please welcome Peter Bjorn and John")

(Applause)

Peter: That's the first thing we did in America. And seeing that show broadcast later the same evening in some, you know, some divey pub in lower east side, that's when it sort of hit me. And that was like half a year later. Because we were

working all the time, so you just couldn't really take it in. You don't realize that you're actually making it [laughter], you know? Still have to borrow money to buy an extra guitar, at that point, you know? And it's a standard now. It's like, there's like Latin verses, and Bluegrass versions, and that's quite an accolade. Is that what you say, is that a word? Yeah. And that's, I mean, that's a good feeling to be part of making a standard.

(Vocals with synth: "Talking only me and you / Talking only me and you")

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Young Folks," by Peter Bjorn and John, in its entirety.

("Young Folks" by PETER BJORN AND JOHN)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net to learn more about Peter Bjorn and John. On the site, you'll find the music video for "Young Folks," and a video of that 2007 live performance on *Conan*.

Next time on Song Exploder, Phantogram.

("You Don't Get Me High Anymore" by PHANTOGRAM)

Hrishikesh: You can find all the past and future episodes of Song Exploder at songexploder.net or wherever you download podcasts. And you should follow Song Exploder on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram for news updates and giveaways. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a curated network of extraordinary, story-driven shows. Learn more at radiotopia.fm. This episode was edited by Christian Koons and me. My name's Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.

("You Don't Get Me High Anymore" by PHANTOGRAM)

(Music fades)