

Song Exploder
RJD2 - Games You Can Win ft. Kenna
Episode 34

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.

("Games You Can Win" by RJD2 ft. KENNA)

Hrishikesh: RJD2's been making music since 2002. His song "A Beautiful Mine" Was turned into the opening credits music for *Mad Men*. He's a producer and beatmaker, but also a singer and songwriter. For the vocals on the song "Games You Can Win," he tapped Kenna, a Grammy-nominee who Malcolm Gladwell wrote about in *Blink*.

Coming up, you'll get to hear the demo vocals that RJ originally recorded himself and sent to Kenna as a guide. They've never been released. Here's "Games You Can Win" on Song Exploder.

("Games You Can Win" by RJD2 ft. KENNA)

(Music fades)

RJ: My name is RJ Krohn. I make records under the moniker, RJD2. The first thing that came to mind when I pulled up this session, and I started thinking about it, was the drum pattern.

(Drums)

RJ: That's a recording of me playing in a basement. It was a pattern that I would play a lot to practice, you know, practicing drums. The verses, they only have the hi-hat on the 1, 2, 3, 4 of the bar. It's a very simple, basic hi-hat pattern. And I know exactly where it came from

(Drums end)

RJ: because there's this drum break that Pete Rock used. The song is called "Soul Brother #1."

("#1 Soul Brother" by PETE ROCK)

RJ: The hi-hat is just doing straight quarter notes, and everything kind of rotates around that. So for whatever reason, it stuck in my head. And so, I know that that drum pattern was, to some degree, a nod to that drum break.

(“#1 Soul Brother” by PETE ROCK)

(Music fades)

RJ: So getting back to “Games You Can Win,” the CS-80.

(CS-80)

RJ: How a synth sounds,

(CS-80)

RJ: very often dictates what notes get played on it.

(CS-80)

RJ: [laughter] It's actually a very limited instrument because you could be playing, I don't know, “Für Elise” or something, and it would just sound stupid. It all depends on the patch and the sound. It's a very distinctive sounding synthesizer. I really fell in love with it.

(CS-80)

RJ: There's two, kind of, main parts to the verse. There's the bassline, which is

(CS-80)

RJ: [mimics bassline] followed by a very high whole note.

(Synth pad with CS-80)

RJ: It's the tonal opposite of the bassline part. I was a mathematics major in college, and I've always loved numbers. One of the ways that I made sense of numbers was as fitting together in a spatial means. Oftentimes, when I'm constructing the parts of a song, I think of things like Tetris. Imagine a game of Tetris where you

could dictate the shape of any of the pieces, you know, decide how those things fit together. Kind of a crude analogy for how I often visualize how music, the parts of a song can fit together.

(Synth pad)

(Music ends)

RJ: What this song is personally about is, I realized that when I was young, I would open my mouth about anything. There was no subject that I didn't, that I was not eager to pontificate on, regardless of how informed I was. And as I got older, growing out of my twenties was learning to not do that, and learning to just be quiet when it's time to be quiet, to temper my instincts to open my mouth haphazardly and randomly on any subject. I wrote the lyrics and demoed the song myself.

(Vocals: "Keep your mouth shut 'til you get 'em in / And only play the games you can win / Play your hand close / Like you had a glass chin / Now let's begin")

RJ: But I just didn't think that I was the right singer to execute the song. And then, I sent it to Kenna because he's the kind of guy that when I hear him singing a song, I don't have doubts about the sincerity. I reached out to him and said, "Hey, I have this song. I'd like to see if you'd be interested in singing it." I sent it over.

Kenna: It's probably one of the only times in, actually it's the only time that I've sung a song that I had no, nothing to do with the lyrics on, but I love the song so much. You know whatever he's going to give you is going to be brilliant. His musicality is insane, and you have got to put it down if it's that good. My name is Kenna.

(Vocals: "Keep your mouth shut 'til you get 'em in / And only play the games you can win / Play your hand close / Like you had a glass chin / Now let's begin")

Kenna: I mean, it was one of those things where the song was there. He'd already written a great deal. I just adjusted the arrangement vocally, so that it made sense to me in the sense of crescendo, I wanted to make sure that it lifted up.

(Vocals: "The proud and the sure / The sure / The proud and the sure / The sure")

RJ: You know, make the song yours as much as you want, was basically, that's how I approach these things. And then, he cut it and had it back within a week.

(Glockenspiel)

RJ: Now we're far along into the song. Oftentimes, what will happen for me is I'll work backwards from a later point in the song for things like intros. You know, you've got these pretty beefy synth parts, and the drums are kind of gritty. You want something that can provide a contrast, so the glockenspiel and vibraphone parts were pretty drastically different.

(Vibraphone joins)

RJ: I had the vibes and the glock in the laundry room, so I just run the mic cables underneath the door and, you know, little headphone line and then go in there, and hit record, and boom.

(Glockenspiel with vibraphone)

(Vibraphone fades)

RJ: A song builds momentum to the point that then it's just rolling. And then, eventually, it's at a point where you just think of it as a keeper, and then, it's kind of the less it feels like work for me, the more it feels like I'm just watching something happen. I'm a, it feels like being an inactive participant, the further in you go, like you're listening to someone else make a song as opposed to making the song yourself.

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Games You Can Win," by RJD2 ft. Kenna, in its entirety.

("Games You Can Win" by RJD2 ft. KENNA)

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.

("Half Dome" by TORO Y MOI)

Hrishikesh: Next time on Song Exploder, Toro y Moi explodes the song “Half Dome.” Find the 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.

(“Half Dome” by TORO Y MOI)

(Music fades)

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