

Song Exploder
Sheryl Crow - Redemption Day ft. Johnny Cash
Episode 161

Thao: 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 Thao Nguyen.

("Redemption Day" by SHERYL CROW ft. JOHNNY CASH)

Thao: Sheryl Crow is a singer-songwriter from Missouri. She's released ten studio albums, sold over 50 million records, and has won nine Grammys. In April 2019, Sheryl Crow released a new version of her song "Redemption Day," which was first released on her self-titled album in 1996. This new version features vocals from Johnny Cash, who recorded a cover of the song that was released posthumously in 2010. And in this episode, Sheryl Crow breaks down how it all came together.

("Redemption Day" by SHERYL CROW ft. JOHNNY CASH)

Thao: The story starts in 1995.

Sheryl: Hi, I'm Sheryl Crow.

(Music fades out)

Sheryl: So "Redemption Day" was really inspired by having made a trip to Bosnia. And having performed for the troops over there and really just having been witness to what war can do to not only communities but the countryside and to the psyche of a country.

(News reporting of Sheryl Crow's live performance for the troops in Bosnia)

Sheryl: I was really struck by not only what I'd seen but also by what I was seeing on TV, which was mostly coverage of what was going on in Rwanda simultaneously. And yet the questions that kept going through my mind were, "Why are we in this area and not in Rwanda trying to protect the people from the genocide that was happening? Why we would be using our human resources as well as our financial resources in one area of the world and not in another." A lot of times, those decisions are not made on human rights, but out of greed and out of wanting to continue a stronghold in a certain part of the world where we can have more control over oil and over decisions made that affect our economy.

And it felt careless and personal and egregious to me, and it still does. But I didn't sit down and write the lyric, in fact, I didn't even have an idea for a song about that trip until I got home. And I sat down on my couch and was really wanting to write a song about this breakup that I'd had before I went to Bosnia, and instead what wound up coming out was a song that was not at all about a breakup. I opened up my computer and started typing, and what came out were seven stanzas, top to bottom basically, just in a complete thought, and it was really in the tradition of a Bob Dylan kind of lyric. When I read a Bob Dylan lyric, there's a very distinct cadence and that oftentimes dictates what you're going to sing. And that was really the case in "Redemption Day." What followed that was a melody and a guitar groove that just fell in with the cadence of that lyric.

(Vocals along with guitar and train beat: "I've wept for those who suffer long / But how I weep for those who've gone")

Sheryl: There's an old tradition of talking blues that oftentimes would apply what they used to call a train beat.

(Train beat)

Sheryl: And that was sort of the visual backdrop for the song, just the lonesome cry of a train beat.

(Vocals along with guitar and train beat: "Into rooms of grief and questioned wrong / But keep on killing")

Sheryl: It was very inspired by the feeling of lonesomeness and of standing there with these questions about why we make the decisions we do and how will it affect our children, our children's children. And then, at the end of the day, we all get on the same train and we all go to the same place which is obviously death. But that being said, it still is a song of hope.

(Vocals along with guitars, bass, and beat: "There is a train that's headed straight / To Heaven's gate, to Heaven's gate / And on the way, child and man / And woman wait, watch and wait / For redemption day")

(Guitars along with train beat)

Sheryl: It was a very quick song to record. We basically went in, in an afternoon, and it was done by the evening. And I put it out in 1996. I've had throughout my career

a lot of songs I've written that have been very politically oriented. But generally the singles are the ones that are more accessible to commercial radio, not necessarily the political songs or the songs that have social meaning. I've been very lucky to have sold a lot of records that had the songs I cared about in the track listing. So I know a fair amount of people heard the songs that meant the most to me even though the singles were what got the most play at radio.

(Guitars along with train beat end)

Thao: One of the people who heard “Redemption Day” was Johnny Cash.

Sheryl: I got a phone call from Jimmy Tittle who is married to Kathy Cash, Johnny's daughter, and he had said, “I played Johnny your song “Redemption Day,” and he would really like to record it, but he's got some questions for you.” And he put him on the phone, and I was taken aback just by the whole scenario, let alone, you know, being on the phone with him. I grew up loving Johnny, loving the old school country sound. And they were always just really kind to me. I can speak from my point of view of not having known them as well as a lot of other people did, that they were amazing kind of mentor types. They were always very supportive to me and they seem to always kind of root for what I was doing, and that meant a lot to me.

Thao: Sheryl met Johnny Cash and June Carter Cash in the 1990s. When June Carter passed away in 2003, Sheryl sang at her funeral. The phone call from Johnny Cash came a few months after that.

Sheryl: This was shortly after June had passed and I had seen Johnny at her funeral. And I would not have expected that he was going to go back into the studio and record more, especially being in that process of still mourning June's death. So, you know, he asked me a lot of questions about different lines in the song, I think mainly so that he could feel he was behind everything he was singing. One of the lines he asked me about was “Come leaders, come ye men of great / Throw us a bone but save the plate.”

(Vocals along with guitars and train beat: “Throw us a bone but save the plate”)

Sheryl: And, you know, my explanation for that was that sometimes we're spoon fed just enough facts to make us feel we're informed, but we don't ever really get the full story. Then a couple of weeks later, Jimmy called and said, “Hey, we're sending you the demo and call me when you get it.”

(Guitar)

Sherly: You know, he really just made it his own.

(Johnny Cash version: "Come leaders, come ye men of great / Let us hear you pontificate / Your many virtues laid to waste / And we aren't listening")

Sheryl: And so I called him, and Johnny got on the phone and asked me how I liked it, and I mean it's just, just an extraordinary experience. He went on to say, "This is going to be the most important song on the record." And to hear him say he wanted to build a body of work around a song I had written, I mean, you know, obviously it was a profound moment for me, and it still continues to be profound to me especially the older I get. And then he passed away shortly thereafter.

(Johnny Cash version: "There is a train that's heading straight / To Heaven's gate, to Heaven's gate")

(Music fades out)

Thao: Johnny Cash's version of the song was released posthumously, seven years later, in 2010, on the album *American VI: Ain't No Grave*.

Sheryl: A couple years back, we were out on a country tour and opening up for a country act, and so we called Johnny's son, John Carter, and said, "Can we integrate Johnny's vocal into the live version and use some footage for the video?"

(Sheryl Crow's live performance)

Sheryl: So we did, and that's when we started to really witness the weight that he brings to a song that he really gets behind, and just how powerful it was to hear him singing about freedom to these big country audiences.

(Johnny Cash's integrated vocals in the live performance)

Sheryl: Just having been able to bear witness to the impact that that had, that really inspired this version.

(Live performance ends to applause)

Sheryl: So when I started making the record, this nagging feeling still kept hanging around that we need to put the song out. It needs to be heard in that incarnation. But it didn't feel exactly right, mainly because it felt like it was just snatching something out of the past and trying to make it work for now. If I had tried to integrate Johnny's version with my old version, which were very similar, I'm not sure it would have had the weight that it needed today. You know, today is something different in our country's evolution. Our unique experiment in democracy, all the things that we've based that on are starting to be attacked. The truth is being so challenged, and the importance of the office of presidency is being challenged at this moment. And the fact that we aren't doing anything about what's happening in the environment, all the while, we know what the outcome of our doing nothing will be. And it's not enough to say, "Well, it's not going to affect me." I'm a mom now of two small children, and even though I may not be here to see the effects of our not doing anything, they will someday ask the hard questions. That's really the story of this song, "Why did you make the decisions you made?" And that feels so much more urgent and dire than revisiting the lonesomeness of a train beat.

(Piano)

Sheryl: I have a Yamaha 7 foot Grand in my studio. I sat down at the piano and just started playing, and that's what we wound up with. And actually my mom was a piano teacher but I did not take from her. I did take from the time I was seven all the way through college, and I got my degree in classical piano.

(Piano)

Sheryl: The piano I think brings it a certain amount of starkness and urgency that it needs for right now.

(Piano ends)

Sheryl: We had a string arrangement done by this wonderful string arranger named Davide.

(Strings)

Thao: That's italian violinist and composer Davide Rossi.

(Strings)

Sheryl: It was pretty simple and moved for the most part with the chords. And I had him add like a few lines here and there.

(Strings)

(Strings fade)

Sheryl: And then, the more I played it for people, I started feeling like, "Oh this deserves something bigger." So we wound up having another wonderful string arranger do kind of an elaborate string arrangement for it. We recorded it at Apple in London and just really beautiful, an extraordinary arrangement. However, I found that it didn't feel urgent to me or didn't have that starkness. It almost became weighted down, and I didn't want the listener to feel like they were listening to a TV commercial. And I realized that what really makes the song just kill you, is the simplicity of it. So we wound up going back to Davide's.

(Strings)

Sheryl: The strings are really just a little bit of a bed back there to create sort of a sonic environment that you're not totally aware of, but that is moving you. And then we got Johnny's vocal in there, and that was it.

Thao: Sheryl got in touch with Johnny Cash's estate, and they sent her the vocal track from his cover version, the vocals he recorded in 2003.

(Johnny vocals along with strings: "Fire rages in the streets / And swallows everything it meets / It's just an image often seen / On television")

Sheryl: It's really hard to explain but having somebody's voice in your head, who is no longer on this plane, it was very emotional and also very, I don't know that there's a word for it, just extremely eerie, you know, it was like having him in the booth with me.

(Johnny vocals: "Was there no oil to excavate? / No riches in trade for the fate / Of every person who died in hate / Throw us a bone, you men of great")

Sheryl: Because of the timbre of his voice, but also how present he was when he sang it, how present on the mic he was, you could hear all of his mouth noises even.

And to have that in my head and to be singing with it, just felt like he was standing next to me.

(Vocals with both Johnny and Sheryl singing together: "There is a train that's heading straight / To Heaven's gate, to Heaven's gate")

Sheryl: Singing with Johnny on the vocal, I basically just listened to his phrasing and I just added a subtle harmony and let him take the melody. Obviously, I didn't have an option with that but I would have wanted him to sing the melody anyway.

(Vocals along with piano: "And on the way, child and man / And woman wait, watch and wait / For redemption day")

Sheryl: The chorus is very hopeful. But it also is an indictment of all the things that you do in your life. It's the things you say. It's the way you treat your neighbor. It's the decisions you make. It's what your children witness that add up to all the moments that you carry with you on that train that define the importance of your life, your legacy.

(Piano)

Sheryl: We're sort of standing at the precipice of hopefully inciting real change and committing to who it is that we believe ourselves to be.

(Strings join)

Sheryl: There is opportunity in that, and nothing is over yet.

(Music ends)

Thao: And now, here is "Redemption Day," by Sheryl Crow ft. Johnny Cash, in its entirety.

("Redemption Day" by SHERYL CROW ft. JOHNNY CASH)

Thao: Visit songexploder.net for more information about Sheryl Crow and Johnny Cash. You'll also find a link to buy or stream this song. Next time on Song Exploder, Big Thief. Song Exploder is made by creator Hrishikesh Hirway, producer Christian Koons, and me, the guest host for the

year. Carlos Lerma is our illustrator, he makes portraits for every episode, which you can see on the Song Exploder website. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a collective of fiercely independent podcasts. You can learn about all of our shows at radiotopia.fm. You can also find Song Exploder on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter @SongExploder. And you can find me @thaogetstaydown. My name is Thao Nguyen, thanks for listening.

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