

**Song Exploder**  
**The Killers - Rut**  
**Episode 119**

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.

Hrishikesh: This episode contains explicit language.

*("Rut" by THE KILLERS)*

Hrishikesh: The Killers formed in Las Vegas, Nevada in 2001. Since then, they've released five records. Their newest album, *Wonderful Wonderful*, came out in September 2017. In this episode, singer Brandon Flowers and drummer Ronnie Vannucci break down the song "Rut" from that album. But the story of this Killers song began when Brandon Flowers was on tour on his own with a solo album.

*("Rut" by THE KILLERS)*

Brandon: My name is Brandon Flowers, I'm the singer for The Killers.

*(Music ends)*

Brandon: I made a solo record, 2014? It's called *Desired Effect*, and when we were going around, I had this idea to have a song that wasn't on the record

*(Live show)*

Brandon: that was like an introduction to the show. It was based on this ascending chord progression.

*(Live show)*

Brandon: And I would just talk about little pieces that I was familiar with, with each city.

*(Live show)*

Brandon: And it was kind of like breaking the ice with the crowd.

*(Live show)*

Brandon: And so, in the middle of us searching for where we're going for this Killers record, I just started messing around with that on the piano.

*(Piano)*

Brandon: And wrote another song over it,

*(Piano)*

Brandon: and that ended up becoming "Rut."

*(Piano)*

Brandon: We got an upright in the family room for my kids, and I found myself writing on that. It never stops, that progression. It gets knocked back down to that C# every round, and it just keeps going on the same cycle through the whole song. When I brought it in to the band, I just played the progression. And this one we got to a pretty good point the first day that we went in and recorded. We had that bass, we could call it a motif, that steadily through the entire song.

*(Bass)*

Brandon: But the chords are changing and doing a completely different thing.

*(Piano joins)*

Brandon: I played that.

*(Piano with bass)*

Brandon: And that bass, that

*(Bass ends)*

Brandon: was how we discovered that it wasn't in normal time. I just played this steady thing.

*(Piano with bass)*

Brandon: When the next verse started, I was in the middle of that phrase.

*(Piano with bass)*

Brandon: And we realized that it didn't match up.

*(Piano with bass)*

Brandon: It's not in 4/4. And that is totally weird for me.

*(Piano with bass fade)*

Brandon: I didn't know until we played it with Ronnie. Ronnie's more sophisticated [laughter] with this stuff than I am. And he pointed it out, what was going on.

Ronnie: I'm Ronnie Vannucci, I play drums in The Killers. One bar is a bar of six, so there's an extra two beats. And he didn't know he was doing it, he was just riffing at the time. It was just a natural thing that happened. So I said, "You know you're putting an extra two beats? We're getting a little jazzy, getting a little proggy finally."

Brandon: And then he had to adapt his drums to fit accordingly to what was happening with the time.

Ronnie: We were trying different synths and things like that, and trying to like put these loops in.

*(Percussion)*

Ronnie: We started with that loop. We just put that in there as sort of a click to play to. Because whenever I get to play with something other than just a straight beeping sound,

*(Beeping sound)*

Ronnie: something a little more musical is a lot more fun to play with.

*(Percussion)*

Ronnie: And I think you move differently when you hear accents and I think you're able to be a little bit more musical.

*(Drums join)*

*(Yell)*

Brandon: That's Ron [laughter].

Ronnie: That's me on the drumset I think. I'm just always trying to get my voice in there [laughter].

Brandon: [laughter]

Ronnie: Drums are such a physical instrument, everything is moving. And sometimes it takes a bit of vocalizing to, like, get into that place of like, "Let's get it on motherfuckers! Let's make it happen," and sometimes it requires a shout.

*(Yell)*

*(Drums)*

Brandon: On our more lively songs, if you just listen to the drums, you can hear him. He makes strange noises [imitates noises while laughing].

Ronnie: I'll like sing along, and it sucks. I went to college for music, and every Monday we'd have Rep Class, showing the entire percussion studio what you were working on. I remember I was working on a snare drum piece, and one of the grad students, he says, "Dude, you have any idea what you're doing with your voice when you're playing your snare drum?" I was so embarrassed.

Brandon: You probably weren't aware of it.

Ronnie: I did not know I was like, making these sounds. I was in the music, and he goes,

*(Drums end)*

Ronnie: "Yeah, you might want to look at that when you're playing with an 85-piece orchestra, nobody wants to hear your voice." I was like, "OK, I'm sorry." But fuck him, I'm still doing it aren't I?

Brandon: [laughter]

*(Drums)*

*(Yell)*

*(Drums)*

*(Guitar)*

Brandon: Dave Keuning, that's him on guitar there.

Ronnie: Dave is a real big Michael Jackson fan, and that part always just reminds me of like some "Man in the Mirror" shit or something. That guitar also served as sort of a adjunct percussion instrument as well to sort of add a bit of movement.

*(Guitar ends)*

Brandon: Right after the first chorus, you suggested that Dave try like a Lindsey Buckingham style guitar.

*(Guitar)*

Ronnie: I had no idea Dave even knew how to do that so well, so it kind of surprised us that that came out of him like that.

*(Guitar fades)*

Brandon: I was really struggling to figure out what to write about on this record. I guess I had writer's block. And one of the things that I'd been pretty protective of in my writing is my family, my wife and my kids. And I think that's partially because I'm protective of them and then the other side of it is, I've never been really that personal in songs. But there were a lot of things going on. I was in the process of moving from Las Vegas, which I never thought I was going to do, but I had to. My wife has to get out of Las Vegas. She has a completely different experience with the city and the streets than I did. And so, places where I may have nostalgia, where I consider to be a part of me, and things like that, she has awful memories. And so, it's just time for her to leave. Without getting too, you know, without, I can't really directly explain her, you know, all of her experiences,

without slinging a lot of mud, but she's basically been traumatized by her childhood and has pretty severe case of PTSD. And so, I of course okayed it with her but that ended up being a big part of this record.

*(Piano)*

Brandon: And so, this song is from my wife's point of view, and it's from her perspective, and it's about resilience. So she's singing to me.

*(Vocals join: "I've done my best to fill 'em, but the cracks are starting to spread")*

Brandon: It's almost like this submission, it's her accepting that it's like, "This is happening, I'm facing this thing." She's always known, you know, obviously she's familiar with her childhood, but it wasn't until she was in her early thirties, that this condition, or this, that everything really manifested itself and reared its ugly head.

*(Vocals with piano: "I've done my best defending, but the punches are starting to land")*

Brandon: This is her accepting it instead of, for her whole life, she's been avoiding it, like it didn't even exist almost. And this is her, you know, submitting to it and realizing that, by that, she knows she's going to have to put in a lot of work. And that's another line, in the beginning of the second verse.

*(Vocals with piano: "Can't keep pretending this next stop isn't mine")*

*(Vocals with piano: "The truth is on the table, someone's gotta sign")*

Brandon: This is happening now, I'm going into this territory, but

*(Keyboard)*

Brandon: I promise that I'm going to keep climbing. Just don't leave me.

*(Processed vocals with keyboard: "Don't give up on me / 'Cause I'm just in a rut / I'm climbing but the walls keep stacking up")*

Brandon: It's my voice but Jackknife altered it.

Ronnie: Jacknife Lee, born Garret Lee, from Ireland, is a producer and multi-instrumentalist. Guy that we chose to do *Wonderful Wonderful* with.

Brandon: He knew what the content was, and turned it into a female sound from my voice. He gives it a femininity, right off of the bat, and I think that that is a great introduction for the song.

*(Processed vocals: "Don't give up on me / 'Cause I'm just in a rut")*

Ronnie: This is a really unique shape of a song, it doesn't sort of follow your traditional arc. There's two basic ways you can think about writing pop songs, there's sort of the emotional arc, and then there's sort of your textbook, "OK, 8 bars here, 16 bars here, outro, intro," that type of thing. We sort of abandoned all that and just went purely with the emotional instinct of the song. That was the other thing that Jacknife made us feel more confident in. We were in touch with the emotional part but I think he made us realize that it's OK to have a weirdly shaped song, as long as the emotional part got there.

Brandon: Coming out of the bridge, instead of going to the third chorus, we introduce this chant, this like mantra of "I'll climb."

*(Vocals with keyboard: "I'll climb and I'll climb, I'll climb and I'll climb, I'll climb and I'll climb")*

Brandon: Some are me and then we had three or four singers from Vegas, came in and did some singing too on this one.

*(Vocals with keyboard: "I'll climb and I'll climb")*

Brandon: And then from that, instead of going to a chorus, we bring in a whole new take on the chorus with these gang vocals, and it just keeps growing.

*(Vocals with keyboard: "I'll climb and I'll climb")*

*(Vocals: "Oh, but don't / Don't you give up on me")*

Ronnie: The feeling, and the trajectory of that emotional arc was going higher than we sort of anticipated. And the music needed to match that, it needed to be as heavy, if you will, as that emotional point of the song, especially with the voices at the end. You need something to compliment that, so I overdubbed that tom-tom motif, just to kind of thicken it up.

*(Vocals with drums: "Don't you give up on me (don't you give up, don't you give up)")*

Brandon: There's some big, really heavy guitars at the end too.

*(Guitars)*

*(Vocals join: "Don't you give up on me (don't you give up)")*

*(Drums join: "(don't you give up) / Don't you give up on me")*

*(Music fades)*

Hrishikesh: What does your wife think of the song?

Brandon: She likes it. You know, she feels a little maybe bare or a little bit embarrassed maybe, you know, being around everybody and she knows that we've had these conversations about her, but

*(Synth)*

Brandon: she's handling it well. And it's the first time I'd ever sit down with a piano with her, and play her the song and run lines by her, and make sure this made sense, and it helped me understand what she was going through more and be much more compassionate. Because we're both sort of going through this thing together. If I don't give up, she's not going to either.

*(Synth ends)*

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Rut," by The Killers, in its entirety.

*("Rut" by THE KILLERS)*

Hrishikesh: Visit [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net) for a link to buy this song, and to learn more about The Killers.

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