

**Song Exploder**  
**Yusuf / Cat Stevens - Father & Son**  
**Episode 200**

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.

*("Father & Son" by YUSUF / CAT STEVENS)*

Hrishikesh: The legendary singer/songwriter Yusuf / Cat Stevens released his first album in 1967. He's a member of the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, and his albums have sold millions. In 2020, he released *Tea for the Tillerman 2*, a re-imagining of his hit 1970 album, *Tea for the Tillerman*. In the song "Father & Son," he sings a duet between the two title characters, doing both voices. But in the 2020 version, he approached this song in kind of an astonishing way - he recorded the part of the father, but for the part of the son, he used a live recording of himself from 1970, taken from a show he played at The Troubadour in Los Angeles. So the two parts are still both sung in his voice, but 50 years apart. In this episode, the 200th episode of Song Exploder, Yusuf / Cat Stevens tells the story of how he created, and then re-created "Father & Son."

*("Father & Son" by YUSUF / CAT STEVENS)*

Yusuf: Yeah my name is Yusuf / Cat Stevens.

Hrishikesh: The story begins with songs and lyrics that weren't originally intended for an album.

*(Music fades out)*

Yusuf: They grew out of a whole project which I was working on, which was a musical. I'd always wanted to write a musical, because I lived in the West End, and so therefore, I was surrounded by theaters, and it shaped the background and the soundtrack to my life. And so, I was working with a man called Nigel Hawthorne, well known actor, comedian, and a writer. And we were chosen as a subject for the musical, *The Russian Revolution*. Well, the name of the musical was *Revolussia*, and there was this story going on in the countryside, this Russian family lived on a farm you know out there in the outskirts. Well, the son's name was Sasha, and the Father's name, it was Dad, you know, his father. And the son, in this scene, was wanting to join the revolution.

*(Guitar along with drums and bass)*

Yusuf: But the father loves you, you know he loves you. That's why he wants you to stay home.

*(Father's first verse vocals along with guitars: "It's not time to make a change / Just relax, take it easy / You're still young, that's your fault / There's so much you have to know / Find a girl, settle down / If you want you can marry / Look at me / I am old, but I'm happy")*

Yusuf: I think as a writer, you know, you take on all sorts of characters and personalities. But when you're writing for a musical, of course, you have to do that much more seriously, you must enter the character that you're writing about. But a lot of my songs were very, very autobiographical, I would say. And so there was always two sides of me, you know, there was the side which, you know, wanted to get out and do things, and the other side was, "I kinda like things the way they are, for now." So it was me talking to me, in two different states of mind. And you know, all the nuances of what a young man would be thinking when there's a revolution outside his front door, you know, that was pretty simple to put together, and the words simply followed. The song itself wasn't difficult to perform as two people, because I just simply shifted the octave up for the son and down for the father. And that kind of has its own impact on the emotion.

*(Son's first verse vocals along with full instrumental: "How can I try to explain? / When I do, he turns away again / It's always been the same / Same old story")*

Yusuf: At that point, we wanted to get some backing for the musical. So my manager, he had some connections with some pretty rich people, we met one of them. And when he heard this thing he wasn't really interested, but he knew someone who was in the music business, and his name was Chris Blackwell. Chris Blackwell, of course, ran Island Records. Now Island Records was a really you know elite label with a real leaning towards allowing artists to express themselves. Well, that's pretty great. So we played some of the songs, when we got to "Father & Son," I think his jaw dropped. And he said, "Look, I want to talk some more about this." But then when we met next, he offered me, you know, a record contract. And that was really, you know, that took me right off course as far as my musical was concerned. So I said, "Yeah, well okay." He said, "We'll put you together with a producer." And that's where I got introduced to Paul Samwell-Smith.

I used to go and listen to him, he was the bass player with The Yardbirds, so I used to dance to his music in the club, just down the road from where I lived in Oxford Street. So we work through all the songs, and of course, one of them would have been "Father and Son," it was. But I didn't like the way it turned out, so it never ended up on the first album I recorded, called *Mona Bone Jakon*. So the second album was where we were really primed, I think, after the first and the second one just seemed to work. So that was *Tea for the Tillerman*.

*(Son's first verse vocals along with full instrumental: "From the moment I could talk / I was ordered to listen / Now there's a way / And I know that I have to go away / I know, I have to go")*

Yusuf: When I sang that song in Morgan Studios, which was where we finally got a hold of the song, it was a moment where I was singing the son's part, where I could actually hear the timbre, the sound of my own father's voice. And that was very strange because I was singing the son's part. But I got my father's voice up there. He was from Cyprus, so he had a very strong Mediterranean passionate side, and you knew when he was angry, you know. And so I got that kind of anger out of me in the role of the son. And it was a very important moment in my recording memories, that moment where I sounded like my father but I was singing the son's part, strange.

*(Fourth verse vocals along with full instrumental and backing vocals: "All the times that I've cried / Keeping all the things I knew inside / It's hard / But it's harder to ignore it")*

Yusuf: But dad was always supportive of me. He was much more relaxed with me and you know he bought my first guitar, you know. He didn't quite understand what the music business was all about, but he thought, "Well, if it makes a living, it's okay." And he used to always ask my brother, "How's Stevie?" Because you know, he used to call me Stevie. He said, "How's Stevie, is he doing all right?" And they would say, "Yeah, he's doing very well dad."

Hrishikesh: In fact, *Tea for the Tillerman* went on to go triple platinum. And in 2003, *Rolling Stone* included it in their list of the greatest albums of all time.

*(Instrumental ends)*

Yusuf: I didn't really intend to do another version, to be honest. But it was my son's idea when we were talking about what to do for the 50th, you know, anniversary of the release of *Tea for the Tillerman*, so what are we gonna do? And he

suggested this idea, "Why don't we record it again, because you're singing it kind of differently today," I said, "well, that's a good idea."

*(2020 version instrumental)*

Yusuf: It was nothing about doing an old kind of replicate of what I'd done before. I just wanted to live them again, as I do when I sing them you know live, and that was the idea. So that's how we got back to recording "Father and Son" again.

*(Instrumental fades)*

Yusuf: My son has a lot of good ideas. I mean it was again my son who suggested maybe we could pick, you know, a voice from the 1970s or some of the old recordings, and that could be the son and then I could be singing the father's part. I said, "I don't think that's gonna work." Using the original vocal was an idea, but it's kind of a repeat, and I didn't want to just do that. So we wanted to use something from that moment in time, but something new, something different that other people haven't heard. But then you know what? We found this great recording of me singing "Father and Son" in the Troubadour back in 1970.

*(1970 Troubadour version: "If they were right, I'd agree / But it's them they know, not me / Now there's a way / And I know that I have to go away / I know, I have to go")*

Yusuf: I thought, "I think this might work."

*(1970 Troubadour version fades as Yusuf says, "Thank you." followed by applause)*

Yusuf: The first thing to do was actually to lay down the whole song.

*(Guitar along with drums and bass)*

*(Drums)*

Yusuf: So that's basically what we did, we laid down the whole song, including the part which will be taken over by the 1970s version.

*(Troubadour vocals: "All the times that I've cried / Keeping all the things I knew inside / It's hard / But it's harder to ignore it" vocals fade)*

*(Piano)*

Yusuf: Anyway, when we finally got into the studio, there were lots of ideas, and this was one of them, you know to have the son shipped in from 1970. There were other things too. I'd actually been involved in putting on a kind of a musical again. I wrote this thing called *Moon Shadow*, and because we did that, and because "Father and Son" was in it, I'd come up with all these new ideas. One of them was this counterpoint melody, which I really loved, and it's played by slide guitar.

*(Slide guitar melody)*

Yusuf: And voices come in.

*(Background vocals: \*oohs\*)*

Yusuf: The band I used for most of the album of *Tea for the Tillerman 2* were the guys that I play live with, and my songs more recently have turned towards the electric guitar much, much more. And so, the other interesting little riff that I found was really, really lovely, and I found it kind of gave it a modern touch.

*(Electric guitar bridge riff)*

Yusuf: When I go out live, you know people obviously want to hear the songs that they love, the songs that they grew up with. And I sing those songs, you know. But I do need to try and make it more real for my own purposes and to meet the emotion of the song again. And so yes, I find new ways of expressing something of myself today in those songs.

*(Strings)*

Yusuf: It's a choice, you know, whether or not you're going to add strings or not, but the song certainly deserves strings.

*(Son's fourth verse vocals along with strings: "If they were right, I'd agree / But it's them they know, not me / Now there's a way / And I know that I have to go away / I know, I have to go")*

Yusuf: One of the lyrics I find very intriguing, and which I love to think about, it says "There's a way I know, I have to go away." That second "away," could be either "a way" or it could be "away." I have to go, anyway, it just intrigues me.

*(Electric guitar)*

Yusuf: Even though you would expect that I would start to like take the father's role, I certainly don't. I still wait for the son's part and then I wanna sing it much more than I wanna sing the father's part. The father's part is great, you know, you go through, you swim through it, and it's fine. You know he's kind of casual, he's a bit concerned, you know, but he's settled down, you know, sit down, just take it easy. Yeah. But, yeah, I wanna get back to the son. There's a way I know, I've gotta go. So I always choose the son's dynamic. Because there are still things to march about, there's still things to shout about, still things to sing about. I think that's the world that we live in, and it's never gonna change.

Hrishikesh: And now, here's the 2020 version of "Father & Son," by Yusuf / Cat Stevens, in its entirety.

*("Father & Son" by YUSUF / CAT STEVENS)*

Hrishikesh: For more, visit [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net). You'll find links to buy or stream both versions of "Father & Son," and you can watch the stop-motion animated video that was made for the new version of the song.

This episode of Song Exploder was made by me, Hrishikesh Hirway, with editing help from Teeny Lieberman and Casey Deal. Carlos Lerma makes illustrations for each episode, which you can find on the show's website and instagram. Special thanks to Jessica Powell and the folks at Audioshake for letting me try out their technology. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a collective of creative, independent podcasts. You can learn more about our shows at [radiotopia.fm](http://radiotopia.fm). If you'd like to support the podcast, you can get a Song Exploder t-shirt at [songexploder.net/shirt](http://songexploder.net/shirt). You can also follow the show on Twitter and Instagram, @SongExploder. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway. Thanks for listening.