

Song Exploder
Band of Horses - Solemn Oath
Episode 79

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.

("Solemn Oath" by BAND OF HORSES)

Hrishikesh: Band of Horses released their 5th album in June 2016. In this episode, the band's frontman, Ben Bridwell breaks down the song "Solemn Oath," and how in the process of writing it, he confronted writer's block, and balancing his life in the band and at home as a husband and father. This interview was recorded on the road in Austin, Texas in a hotel room.

("Solemn Oath" by BAND OF HORSES)

(Music fades)

Ben: I'm Ben Bridwell. I sing and play guitar in Band of Horses. With this song, I was beating myself up a bit about what I'm going to do for this record. It was like, "Oh, I'll use one of my weird tunings," because that's how I learned to play guitars. I just detuned all the pegs. It makes no sense to anybody that plays guitar. There's no way to make a normal chord out of it. But I was like, "My hands are comfortable here."

(Guitar)

(Guitar ends)

Ben: And this was around the time that I was starting to hone in on, "Okay, I am compiling demos now for an actual album. These aren't just little exercises I'm doing to pass the time." I was like, "Okay, this, I should make this a song, and start telling the story." So it started with some guitar stuff. And then, I was like, "What are you going to talk about," you know? If I'm dissatisfied with some of the songs I've written, I thought it was, it was just something to talk about, like how tough it was for me to write a dang [laughter] song. So that kind of set it in motion. I think I was like promising myself that I wouldn't complain about being

in a band on a band recording. And that's what this song is. There's like the, "Right in the door, I'm tired, I'm sore, Nary a hi, no welcome home."

(Right in the door, I'm tired, I'm sore / Nary a hi, no welcome home)

Ben: So after I got home from some long ass tour, it was like, "Here's your kids. I'm going to take a nap now that you're home," you know, like from the wife. Like, "You are not special, dude, take care of the damn kids. Sorry that you had a transcendent experience like making people happy and providing for your family, but real life happens the second you walk in that door. You're at home, and these kids need some drying of tears and some wiping of butts. So get to work," you know? It's great then, "Oh, I have writer's block, sorry like [makes a whining sound]," you know? But it's real shit. It's like what I was really going through and like trying to get past. Resolving the conflict of family, and being stuck in a rut, creatively. There's a lot of that that permeates the lyrics throughout the whole album, yeah, even though it's against my better judgment, you know, "Don't complain out loud, dude!"

(Vocals: "Try not to sound bitter or to fondly remember / The dark times of the past")

Ben: It's like, "Don't bitch about your incredible profession that you're so lucky to have in your life. And you can do nothing else in this life."

(Vocals: "Like I don't deserve it or I'm not even worth it, I can do / This or that")

Ben: I definitely was having troubles. So it's the truth. At least, I'm singing from the heart, I guess. And I believed it, because it was real. I finally got out of my own way by being truthful. Even the first line, it's like, "Maybe I should go back, I'm going to think about that a little bit more like I did before, miserable and mad."

(Vocals: "Maybe I should go back, I'm gonna think about that / A little bit more like I did before, miserable and mad")

Ben: [laughter] I'm such a happier person than I was. I have followed the breadcrumbs back, and said, "Okay, Ben, what did you do that was accessible to people? Or just more popular songs?" And this is a dangerous thing to slip down, you know? Like I've become a much happier person. I'm not as dissatisfied

(Banjo)

Ben: as I used to be. And it's just funny like, "Miserable and mad," you know, like do I have to get back to that just to like write a decent song? And no, I don't, you know? It's, you can talk about it, but you can still make good songs while being happy. And I'm glad that I actually like really expressed the sentiment, and didn't like bury it under like metaphors to throw the listener off the subject. I'm proud that I was, I don't know, bared my soul for a second.

(Banjo ends)

Ben: Coming into this singing thing so late in life, I've never been that comfortable with that side of it. The revealing side, I guess, and the, just being vulnerable like that, especially the lyrics. Oh God. You know, like writing lyrics. It's a daunting prospect like, "Check out my poetry dawg!" You know, like even to the wife or anybody, that's why I've always hid behind layers of reverb or delays and things like that to try to mask the actual sentiment hiding underneath.

(Vocals: "I shouldn't repeat it, this sounds ridiculous / And I swore a solemn oath

Ben: Yeah, I guess it became part of our sound or whatever, but it was to hide for fear of revealing myself to people. So the place that we recorded this, the Panorama house or Panorama Studio in Stinson Beach, California. This fella, I believe he was an Austrian immigrant, had moved to California, and bought this piece of land, and basically built this castle with his hands, like a castle. And this is probably like the 30s or 40s, something like that? I can be wrong there, but there's a bomb shelter built in case nuclear fallout comes, or whatever. So it never was completed. The house was, but the bomb shelter is not, but you do have this massive metal tube that goes from the control room to basically a dirt hole in the ground. But the corridor itself, or whatever, was long enough to create this beautiful, natural reverb. There's mic's in there now, and you shut the huge metal, like a bank vault door kind of thing. They got lines running through there now, and that's your reverb, man! We considered that reverb to really be our narrator throughout the album.

(Drums)

Ben: A lot of people will never notice that that is the White Zombie beat.

("Thunder Kiss '65" by WHITE ZOMBIE)

(Drums)

Ben: So stupid.

Hrishikesh: [laughter]

Ben: So dumb, man. We wanted to have this band called Wine Zombie. Taking White Zombie songs, and changing the lyrics all about wine or whatever. So we were like [sung] "Pinot Grigi...o yeah!"

Hrishikesh: [laughter]

Ben: [laughter] So stupid, right? That's like one of the many little awesome, fun things about making your own stuff, is that you can put your jokes and stuff. And it's because it was on our mind because we're laughing about it probably night before.

(Vocals: "But I'm lucky as fuck, it still ain't enough, sick to my gut, having to say / You sit here 'til the coast is clear, I'll send for you one day")

Ben: This will be the first time that I've said the word "fuck" in a Band of Horses song or whatever, but it's like, I guess the resolve of that whole verse is, you know, like, "Lucky as fuck [laughter]," but it still isn't enough, basically. And I'm sick to my gut having to leave you all. Like I'm so happy, I'm so lucky to do this job, and I'm basically telling myself like, it kills me to have to leave, and to return, and have it be so disjointed or something like that. You know, that like, that I have to reacclimate to the process. I love what I do so much, but I love being at home so much. I love what I do; being a dad and being a husband so much, you know, I couldn't live without either one of them. There is a nice [laughter] sentiment, somewhere buried beneath the F words and the, you know,

(Guitar)

Ben: the little jokey things. There's a real emotion that I'm trying to convey of a real situation going on. It's like, I don't know how to balance these things when I love both of them so equally, because they both make me who I am.

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Solemn Oath," by Band of Horses, in its entirety.

(“Solemn Oath” by BAND OF HORSES)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net for more on Band of Horses.

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