

Song Exploder
Imagine Dragons - Follow You
Episode 209

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.

("Follow You" by Imagine Dragons)

Hrishikesh: Imagine Dragons are a Grammy-award winning band from Las Vegas. They've sold over 20 million albums so far, and they were the most streamed band on Spotify in 2018. In March of this year, they released the song "Follow You." Singer Dan Reynolds started the song at home, and then later, the band took it to the studio Shangri-La, to record parts of it with legendary producer Rick Rubin. In this episode, Dan breaks down the song, which tells a deeply personal story of his relationship to his wife.

Dan: My name is Dan Reynolds, and I sing for the band Imagine Dragons.

(Music fades out)

Dan: There were a lot of things that kinda led to this and we'd gone through therapy and different things. But we decided, you know what, after seven years of being married, this isn't gonna work. We're gonna get a divorce. And that was a really difficult decision, super heartbreaking. We had actually been together for over a decade at that point. We had three kids, and Imagine Dragons blew up after we got married. And so I traveled a lot, which was really difficult. And also went through a big faith crisis, I was raised in Mormonism and it never really settled in correctly for me. So I was just dealing with different things that made a marriage difficult, made me a difficult partner to be with. So we got separated, and after seven months of zero communication, I came home to sit in an attorney's office and sign the final papers. And when I was driving to sign the papers, Aja sent me a very lengthy text message. Expressing seven months of pain that she had been through and really expressing seven years of marriage. But doing it in the most heartfelt way.

(Guitar)

Dan: It was, I love you. I accept you, and we're gonna be great co-parents together for these children separated, kind of like this text of freedom and love and

forgiveness. And I read it and I was like reminded about how important this woman was to me. It made me rethink a lot of things about myself, about our relationship, about our family. So, we sat down at the table to sign these papers and we kinda looked at each other across the table. And I think we were both crying. And I said something like, "Hey, why are we doing this? Let's get outta here." So we got up from the table and we went to eat, and just felt the deepest sense of love and loyalty and it felt like the first time we had met, which was magical for both of us. Then we decided, well, why don't we just start dating again, even though we were still married. So we just started dating.

(Guitar ends)

Dan: Since the age of 12, I've written almost a song a day. And I was like, this is incredible. Me and Aja are dating again. We may get back together. This is the second chance! I have to write about this today. And I went through a bunch of tracks that Joel Little had sent me, who's an incredible producer that we've worked with in the past. And I listened to a couple of them and one of them was a basic beat with a synth.

(Minimalist beat along with synth)

Dan: It's like a really beautiful haunting organ, and it felt nostalgic to me immediately. It made me feel like some sense of worship, and when I hear that, something about the worship made me think of love. And the melody always comes first.

(Dan vocally brainstorms melodies)

Dan: And then I just start to sing about whatever's in my head. Loyalty was really in my mind, like loyalty to this woman, who's been with me through everything. And I'm not an easy person to be with for a long time. I am very bipolar. I've dealt with serious depression since I was young, anxiety, like high highs, low lows. And she's been with me through everything.

(Synth)

Dan: So I think something about that was in my mind.

(Full demo chorus: "I will follow you way down wherever you may go / I'll follow you way down to your deepest low / I'll always be around wherever life takes you")

Dan: I'll get the chorus right first, then I know. Okay. Now I know what I'm writing about. I'm writing about following someone through the ups and downs of life. I'll follow you way down, wherever you may go. I'll follow you way down to your deepest low.

(Synth ends)

Dan: Well, one of my first thoughts was don't muddy it up, don't cloudy this up. One of the things I really tried to do with this record was be less metaphorical. One of the reasons I was overly metaphorical in a lot of my early works, not even because I was trying to sound poetic, it's really because I was afraid of my family knowing what I was singing about, from a very young age. So if my mom happened to hear the song, she's not gonna be like, "Son, are you having a problem with your faith?" Like, I didn't wanna have that conversation. So I would always be over the top metaphorical. And I recall immediately with "Follow You," lyrically thinking, don't overthink this.

(First verse and pre-chorus vocals: "You know I got your number, number all night / I'm always on your team, I got your back, alright / Taking those, taking those losses if he treats you right / I wanna put you into the spotlight / If the world would only know what you've been holding back / Heart attacks every night / Oh, you know it's not right")

Dan: When I finished the song, I get on my Gmail and I send the demo to the band, then Wayne will add guitar at his house and send it back.

(Guitar stem)

Dan: Wayne's guitar is a very personal thing for him. Wayne is super involved, I'm very excitable. Wayne is very grounded, he's very even keeled. And, in the early stages of the band, Wayne and I were primary songwriters. And then we would get in the studio with Ben and Platzman. Then they would bring their opinions to the table on these demos and really be involved then.

(Guitar ends)

Dan: Then the next iteration was when we went to the studio. Rick Rubin is the producer, and we did it at his studio in Malibu, which is known as Shangri-La. I loved working with him. We had all the stems sent over from Joel. And then we started with just the vocal, the synth and built from there. Our goal with this track

was to really marry the modern with the throwback. Like 50% organic and 50% programmed. And so there's real drums.

(Hi-hat stem)

Dan: On top of programmed drums.

(Electronic drums)

Dan: Then we added on organ with Cory Henry.

(Organ)

Dan: Watching him work was incredible. And he really brings that sense of almost worship to the song.

(Piano)

Dan: And that's Wayne playing that on a really vintage, upright piano. We wanted to give human resonance to the track. You know, it's good as you can get the best programmed piano, you're not gonna have the depth that's gonna come from a vintage old, upright piano in Rick's room at Shangri-La.

(Piano ends)

Dan: We thought, okay, well, it'd be interesting to start the song and play it as though you're hearing it on old radio in like the eighties or something like that. And we recorded it through a tape cassette player, and then the song, you hear it rewind, and that's when the song opens up.

(Intro)

Dan: I typically use my demo vocals on almost every single song that we've put out.

(Second verse vocals: "Call you up, you've been crying, crying all night / You're only disappointed in yourself, alright")

Dan: This is not a room that any studio engineer would ever recommend. There's no sound dampening on any of the walls. So as you listen to this track, it's there. I can really hear it grabbing, compressing, grabbing the room.

(First verse vocals: "You know I got your number, number all night / I'm always on your team, I got your back, alright")

Dan: It's not typically how people are doing their vocals. They're in a vocal booth and they're doing it correct. But for this song, when I tried to do it in a vocal booth, it just didn't sound as cool. It sounded like doing a vocal in a vocal booth and not doing it in a weird room with weird acoustics.

(Pre-chorus vocals: "If the world would only know what you've been holding back / Heart attacks every night / Oh you know it's not right")

Dan: And then I wanted to get to a bridge that actually had one moment where it was like, "But really honey, I want to tell you something serious, which is that I love you. And I know that you've had to live in a circumstance that's been really difficult with marrying into Mormonism, sticking by my side through ups and downs." Like, it was a moment where I wanted to just, "It's just me and you here for a second on this bridge. Let me just tell you that I love you and I appreciate you."

(Bridge vocals: "You're not the type to give yourself enough love / She live her life, hand in a tight glove")

(Pad)

Dan: The lyrics are, "She's not the type to give herself enough love. She lives her life hand in a tight glove. I wish that I could fix it. I could fix it for you, but instead I'll be right here coming through." Anybody who is married into a very conservative family or a family that is very outside the world that you were raised in, it's a very daunting experience. So when she met my family, I think she felt a very high level of scrutiny, whether it was there or not. And I hated that. She was always holding back her words, afraid to be too provocative, afraid to be herself. And it's hard for me even talking about that bridge without it making me feel emotional because of how big of a factor that's played in our entire marriage. And it's little things like that, that make you really love someone.

(Pad ends)

Dan: And then I just stacked my vocal a bunch of times, doing like my own interpretation of The Beach Boys. It's supposed to be, "But by the way, here's to the rest of our life."

*(Stacked vocals: "But instead I'll be right here comin' through / *harmonized scat singing* / right here comin' through / *harmonized scat singing* / I'll follow you way down wherever you may go")*

Dan: Like, take it over the top. And make you laugh when you hear this, and make you smile, and know that we have good times ahead of us, and wow, look what we just made it through. That was my thought process. So Rick Rubin's idea was, he said, "Okay, we just got to a high level here with the

(Dan does the bridge scat singing)

Dan: okay, what are you gonna do that's gonna make me not feel like you're actually taking a step down after that?" So I heard this melody in my head that was way out of my range. But Rick really wanted me to go for it. I just remember being like, "I don't think I can hit this, but I'll try. And if I do hit it, it's not gonna sound pretty."

(High vocals: "I'll follow you")

Dan: And then I did it and Rick was like, "I like it!" It went something like that.

(High vocals along with strings: "I'll follow you / Wherever life takes you / Wherever life takes you)

Dan: I actually re-sang this song. I wanna say three times. And we even did a version of the song by the way, completely different. It's very organic, and it's more live instrumentation.

(Live instrumentation version chorus)

Dan: But Rick said to me, you know, "Are you trying to make an Imagine Dragons song that's influenced by The Beach Boys? Or are you trying to make a Beach Boys song? And that made me think a lot about it. I was leaning towards putting out the other version of the song. But Rick also said, "Well, why don't you go listen to 'em both?" So I put on my headphones and I went on a run. I remember this super vividly, I went on a run on the beach. And the one that we didn't put

out, gave me a feeling of like a party. Then I played the other one, and it was like emotional for me. It sounded like I worship this woman. This is my religion. Because religion hasn't worked for me.

(Synth)

Dan: I typically never write love songs. It feels trite to me and redundant. It's like, "Okay, how are you gonna say it better than, you know, how it's been said before?" But I'm really glad that this song was written. It commemorates something that's really important to me and a life change that's the best decision I made. I hope that this song is something that I can always go back to and listen to remind me of what's most important to me, which is loyalty to those that I love. I really do hope that just on a selfish level, just for me, it is something I always can listen to and say, "You know what? There was a lot I learned in the time period of our relationship that's captured in, in a small song."

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Follow You," by Imagine Dragons, in its entirety.

("Follow You" by Imagine Dragons)

Hrishikesh: To learn more, visit songexploder.net. You'll find links to buy or stream "Follow You," and you can watch the music video.

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