

Song Exploder
John Lennon - God
Episode 219

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. Earlier this year, I got the most amazing email. The estate of John Lennon said they have a treasure trove of audio material from his life, and they were wondering if I would be interested in making an episode around the song "God," from John Lennon's first solo album. I've never tried making a posthumous episode before, because hearing directly from the artist is at the heart of Song Exploder. But with all the interview archives that they have of him speaking, plus all the isolated tracks from the recordings, and the original demo, it actually seemed possible. So this is a very different and special episode of the show.

("God" by JOHN LENNON)

Hrishikesh: In September 1969, John Lennon told the rest of the Beatles that he was leaving the group. Their breakup was announced publicly in April 1970, and that December, John Lennon released his first solo album, *John Lennon/Plastic Ono Band*. The Plastic Ono band was the name for a rotating group of musicians that John and his wife, the artist Yoko Ono, had put together. For the making of "God," the band included Ringo Starr on drums, Billy Preston on piano, and Klaus Voormann on bass. I got to interview Klaus Voormann about his experiences making this track, and in this episode, you'll hear from him along with archival interviews with John Lennon, Ringo Starr, and Billy Preston. You'll also hear the original demo for "God," and outtakes from the recording sessions at Abbey Road Studios. They recorded the final version of this song on October 9, 1970 – John Lennon's 30th birthday.

("God" by JOHN LENNON)

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: But the story of "God" and what it was about, and what it was inspired by, really begins with the breakup of the Beatles.

("God" by JOHN LENNON)

(Music fades)

John: We were four guys that, I met Paul and said, "Do you want to join me band?" You know? And then George joined. And then Ringo joined, we were just a band who made it very, very big, that's all. And we made it very, very big, but we sold out, you know. My own taste is different from that which I've played sometimes, which is called cop-out, you know, to make money or whatever or because I didn't know any better. I didn't really enjoy writing third person songs about people who lived in concrete hat flats and things. I like first person music, but because of my hang-ups and many other things, I would only now and then specifically write about me. The only true songs I ever wrote were like "Help!" and "Strawberry Fields," you know? They were the ones that I really wrote from experience. I'm not projecting myself into a situation and writing a nice story about it, which I always found phony. And now, I wrote all about me and that's why I like it. It's me and nobody else.

Hrishikesh: In 1970, John Lennon and Yoko Ono started working with psychologist Arthur Janov, who created Primal Therapy. Primal therapy is based on the idea that we all carry around unprocessed trauma and internalized pain from very, very early on in childhood. And instead of processing that trauma, we find other ways to co-exist with it.

John: In a nutshell, primal therapy allowed us to feel feelings continually. And those feelings usually make you cry, because before I wasn't feeling things, that's all. I can feel my own fear, I can feel my own pain, therefore, I can handle it better than I could before.

Hrishikesh: Here's an excerpt from an interview with psychologist Arthur Janov.

Arthur: We had a talk, John and I, before he made that album, and he said, "Well, what about God?" And I went into a long discourse about, you know, people have a lot of pain and they tend to believe, and the less pain they have, the less they believe. And he said something like, "Well, do you mean that God is a concept by which we measure our pain?" I said, "Yes, yes," and so he wrote it.

(Guitar)

Hrishikesh: This home recording was made in the summer of 1970, right around the time when John and Yoko were attending Arthur Janov's primal therapy sessions.

(Vocals join: "God is a concept by which we measure our pain")

(Guitar)

John: I had the idea, God is a concept by which we measure our pain. So when you have a word like that, you just sit down and sing the first tune that comes into your head and the tune is the simple, "God is a concept," [sung] boom, boom, boom, boom. And then like a lot of the words, they just came out me mouth.

(Vocals join: "I'll say it again / God is a concept by which we measure our pain")

(Guitar)

John: And then I just rolled into it. "I don't believe in magic," [sung] and it was just going on in me head, and I don't know when I realized I was putting down all these things that I didn't believe in, you know, I Ching and Bible, the first three or four just came out, whatever came out, you know.

(Vocals join: "I don't believe in magic / I don't believe in I Ching / I don't believe in Bible / I don't believe in tarot / I don't believe in Hitler")

(Music fades)

John: I could have gone on, it was like a Christmas card list, you know, "Where do I end?" You know, "Churchill and who have I missed out?" It got like that, you know? And I thought I had to stop, you know. And then, I was going to leave a gap and say, "Just fill in your own, you know, put whoever you don't believe in." It was just, got out of hand, you know, so but Beatles was the final thing because it's like I no longer believe in, in myth, you know, and Beatles is another myth, you know.

(Vocals with guitar: "I don't believe in Beatles / I just believe in me / And that's reality")

(Music fades)

John: In September 1970, John Lennon started assembling musicians to record his new songs. That included Klaus Voormann. He was the bassist in Manfred Mann, and he was a longtime friend of the Beatles. He made the cover art for their album "Revolver."

Klaus: Well, he asked me to be in the Plastic Ono Band, and I was knocked out. And then, it came to now I'm going to do the Plastic Ono Band LP, and you want to do, play on the sessions. And when I heard Ringo was there, I was so happy. I mean, I always wanted to play with Ringo and I never really had the chance up to then.

Hrishikesh: Here's Ringo Starr.

Ringo: We would just sort of jam and then we'd find out how they would sort of go when we did them. It was very loose actually, and it being a trio also was a lot of fun.

John: In spite of all the things, the Beatles really could play music together when they weren't uptight. And if I get a thing going, Ringo knows where to go, you know, like that. We'd played together so long that it fits.

Hrishikesh: So the three of them started recording at Abbey Road Studios in London.

Klaus: Well, on this session, he always came in with the songs. I think the first version he did was played on a guitar. Maybe we were sitting in the studio and he was playing it.

(Vocals, guitar, bass, and drums: "God is a concept by which we measure our pain / Yes, we do")

Klaus: We never heard the songs before. Ringo hasn't heard it. I hadn't heard it. We heard completely fresh.

(Vocals, guitar, bass, and drums: "I don't believe in bubble bubble / I don't believe in double trouble")

(John: "[laughter] I haven't got the words, you see. OK, so how about that?")

(Guitar)

(Drums join)

(Vocals, guitar, and drums: "God is a concept")

(Vocals with guitar: "by which we measure our pain / [laughter] I'll say it again / God is a concept")

(John: "What key was that Klaus?")

(Klaus: "D")

(John: "D?")

(Klaus: "Yeah")

(Guitar)

(Drums)

(John: "We'll take one and then let me listen")

(Drums)

(John: "See, I haven't got a concept in me head other than it's meant to be gospel, and it doesn't sound anything like it, you know. What? No, I don't like it like this at all. In fact, I don't feel in the mood for any of this")

(Ringo: "Have a night off?")

(John: "Oh, could do, it's just such a shame to come in all the way and sprout about for 2 hours and then go, you know?")

(Ringo: "It's no good sprouting about for 12 hours and still not feeling like doing it, you know?")

(John: "Yes, yes [sigh]. Maybe I should play it on piano, you know?")

Klaus: And then, he went to the piano and he played it very simple.

(Piano)

Klaus: And he really liked it.

(Piano)

John: I can play the piano even worse than I play guitar. So that's a limited palate as they call it, you know? I have to think in terms of go from C to A, you know, like that, and I'm not quite sure where I am half the time. So it's that kind of feel about it, you know?

(Vocals, piano, and drums: "That's reality")

(John: "Oh sorry, I fucked the ending. I liked all that beginning")

(Piano)

John: I always like simple rock and nothing else, you know? I was influenced by acid and got psychedelic, you know, like the whole generation, but really I liked rock and roll. You know, and I express myself best in rock because it's primitive enough and it has no bullshit.

(Piano)

John: When you just hear, the piano does it all for you, your mind can do the rest of it. If you've got an ear, you can hear, any musician will tell you, just play a note on a piano. It's got all them harmonics in it, you know? So we got to that, you know, what the hell, it didn't need anything else.

(Piano, bass, and drums)

(Vocals join: "God is a concept")

(John: "Hey, that sounded great to me")

(Ringo: "Yeah, right, but it's very fast though")

(John: "Oh, well, the playing was tremendous [laughter]. Is it too fast?")

(Piano)

(Drums join)

(John: "Ah, that's it, OK")

(Piano with drums)

(John: "OK, OK, stop it now")

Klaus: And then he went back to the guitar, and ask me, "Klaus, you play the piano," and I can't really play rock and roll piano really well. I mean I learned classical piano, but I played a few little licks that sort of were a little gospel-y like, and I think that's the moment where they clicked with him. Why don't we ask Billy Preston to come in and play?

(Piano)

Billy: Well, John Lennon to me was the boss Beatle [laughter]. He was really a character. He was witty, and just a lot of fun. He did whatever he wanted, what he felt like doing [laughter]. Yeah, John was the boss Beatle.

Hrishikesh: Billy Preston was a Grammy-winning musician. He played organ, piano, and other keyboards as a session player in the 60s, with legends like Little Richard, Sam Cooke, Ray Charles and the Rolling Stones. He recorded with the Beatles on their last two albums. This last May, 15 years after his passing, he was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. And this is him playing piano.

(Piano)

Billy: I met the Beatles in 1962 when I was on tour with Little Richard. I was playing organ for Little Richard and they were opening act on the show. And we played one show in Liverpool, and then we went to Hamburg, Germany for two weeks, and that's where we really became good friends. We hung out there, and I used to give them free Cokes and steaks [laughter] at the club because I was with Richard so I can get things, you know. And they would always hang around me, and ask me things about America, and different things. So we became good partners.

(Piano)

Klaus: Billy is fantastic. I love the man so much. And Ringo said that he never heard Billy play a wrong note in his whole life [laughter]. When he played, I feel that he's really holding back. And he's not playing the gospel piano as crazy as he can, he really knew, I have to do something that really supports the song, and as much as there is space for it, I do something. But he could have done much more, which wouldn't have fitted the song so well.

(Drums join)

Klaus: And Ringo loves that, to play as simple as you possibly can. And it's the same with me.

(Bass with drums)

Klaus: It was perfectly clear what we were going to play. And at the moment when John starts singing a song and you hear his voice, and you hear what he's saying, you automatically know what you have to play.

Ringo: The simplicity of what Klaus and I played with him, gave him a great opportunity to actually for the first time really use his voice how he, and his emotion, how he could, you know.

(Vocals with piano: "I don't believe in tarot / I don't believe in Hitler / I don't believe in Jesus")

(Bass with drums join: "I don't believe in Kennedy / I don't believe in Buddha")

(Drums)

Klaus: Ringo always said in interviews that he never plays the same fill again.

(Drums)

Klaus: And he says, "If you ask me to play that same fill again," he can't do it.

(Drums)

Klaus: He can only do what he feels at the time.

(Piano with bass join)

Klaus: We just clicked together and it was just so much fun. And, you know, Ringo actually said the way we played, that's the best band he ever played in.

(Vocals join: "I don't believe in Beatles")

(Vocals: "I just believe in me")

Klaus: We went in the control room and listened to one take, and he said, "I just believe in me." And then he came up to me and said, "Klaus, do you think I should say Yoko and me?" And then I told John, "Look, that's a question I cannot answer for you. You know, that's something you have to know by yourself." Not lots of people know Yoko, but she is very delicate and very fine feeling. And her presence was really good. It was fantastic for John and it was good for us too. You know, lots of people that are opposed to it, and they felt that John had gone nuts or something being with Yoko and all this, you know. It was terrible, it was a terrible situation. I mean the very, very first time when Yoko came in and Ringo hadn't seen much of Yoko, he was very upset.

Ringo: We all had our wives and our families and then, you know, we'd go to work and come back. Suddenly Yoko was living in the studio with us. It freaked us out, freaked me out, anyway.

Klaus: Because he had his John from the Beatles and now she suddenly had John and Yoko, and he had a hard time to get used to this, but John was really good. He went up to Ringo and said, "Look Ringo, you know me. But now it's Yoko and me, we both are together and that's how it is." And that made him feel much better. And then the next day, everything was fine.

Ringo: And I asked him, I said, you know, "What is going on?" And he says, "Well, you know, we're going to spend every minute together." So as soon as you knew that, you were cool and that's what they did.

Billy: You could tell it was a lovely companionship. They were always holding and, you know, kissing and dancing around. They were always together.

John: There's nothing more important than our relationship, nothing. Both of us could survive apart. But what for? I'm not going to sacrifice love, real love for any friend or any business, because in the end you're alone at night. I, neither of us want to be. And nothing works better than to have somebody you love hold you.

(Vocals with piano: "I just believe in me / Yoko and me / And that's reality")

(Piano)

Klaus: John never liked his voice and when he was with the Beatles he always put lots of effects on his voice to cover up that. And because he thought the voice didn't sound good, that's what he thought.

John: I used to get a bit embarrassed in front of George and Paul, because we know each other so well, "Oh, he's trying to be Elvis or he's doing this now," you know, we were a bit super critical of each other. So we inhibited each other a lot. But this time, it was my album, and now I had Yoko there, okay so I can perform better. And I relaxed, you know.

(Vocals, piano, bass, and drums: "And so dear friends, you just have to carry on / The dream is over")

John: The dream's over, you know, I'm not just talking about the Beatles is all, I'm talking about the generation thing. You know, the dream's over, like it's over, you know, and we got to, well, I have, I need personally got to get down to so-called reality.

Klaus: John, actually, he was really trying to say something with this, "I don't believe." He meant that sort of belief with people, for example, are in despair and the last thing they ask for is, "Ah, God help me, I believe in you." And that's what he doesn't believe in. He says, "The help, you only get out of yourself. You can't ask for anybody to give it to you. And that's what you have to do. And if you don't believe in yourself, you're fucked [laughter]."

(Piano, bass, and drums)

Billy: John was very, very spiritual guy and he had a big heart, and he was very sincere in what he did and what he stood for.

Ringo: And he was always brave. He would put it out there, and the consequences sometimes were very harsh, but he would always put it out there. You know, and that's why you could not, not love him.

(Piano with bass)

John: You're born in pain, you know, and pain is what we're in most of the time. And I think that the bigger the pain, the more gods we need, you know?

(Drums join)

John: Creating is a result of pain too. I have to put it somewhere. And I write songs, you know, because that's the thing I chose to do, you know? I can't help writing them. That's the fact.

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "God," by John Lennon, in its entirety.

("God" by JOHN LENNON)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net for more. You can find links to buy or stream "God." There's a new 8-disc box set called *John Lennon Plastic Ono Band - The Ultimate Collection*. And a lot of the material in this episode, like the outtakes and the original home recording, can also be found on there. On the Song Exploder site, there's also a list of all the archival interview sources that were used to make this episode. My deepest thanks to Yoko Ono and Sean Ono Lennon, and to Simon Hilton and Sam Gannon from John Lennon's estate, and to Tim Plumley from Universal for the invitation to make this episode, and for all their help in completing it.

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