

Song Exploder
Rick Astley – Never Gonna Give You Up
Episode 233

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.

("Never Gonna Give You Up" by RICK ASTLEY)

Hrishikesh: Rick Astley is a singer and songwriter from England, whose debut single, "Never Gonna Give You Up," became an international smash hit. The song came out in July, 1987 and won the BRIT Award for "British Single of the Year." It hit number one in 25 countries, and Rick Astley was nominated for a Grammy for Best New Artist. And then, 20 years after the song came out, it became a new kind of phenomenon, when the meme Rickrolling was born. Last year, the music video for "Never Gonna Give You Up" passed a *billion* streams on YouTube. The song was written and produced by the production team Stock, Aitken, Waterman, who were hitmakers for artists like Kylie Minogue, Dead or Alive and others. For this episode, I spoke to Rick Astley, and songwriter and producer Mike Stock in his studio in London. And here the two of them tell the story of how "Never Gonna Give You Up" was made.

("Never Gonna Give You Up" by RICK ASTLEY)

(Music ends)

Rick: My name is Rick Astley.

I'm from a town called Newton-le-Willows, which is a very working class, very salt of the earth kind of area. People don't suffer fools gladly there. But it's a tiny little town. I got in a band with a couple of friends, I played drums, we were probably 16, 17 and we weren't great, but we had the right attitude. We'd practiced a lot. I used to sing a little bit from the drums. I'd always sung as a kid; church choir, school choir. And I turned up with a song one day, cause I'd borrowed a guitar. And I got one of the guys to teach me *the* three chords, you know? And that, that kind of grew into me being the singer.

We had a good following in our little town. And some local managers there got three or four bands to do a showcase. And Stock, Aiken, Waterman, which is a very small production company who hadn't had a proper, genuine, proper hit yet. Pete Waterman, one of the three producers, wanted to do something with

my voice. He didn't want to work with a band, he wasn't really interested. It wasn't their thing. If you know what I mean?

And so I signed a very small deal with them, but I didn't really want to do it, cause I'd never heard of the guy. It wasn't like he had this great track record. They just happened to turn into, in the next 6, 8, 12 months, the biggest producers in Britain.

(Synths)

(Synth ends)

Mike: My name is Mike stock. Part of the Stock, Aiken, Waterman production team.

Rick: Mike and Matt, which is Stock & Aiken, they were strictly amazing musicians, great producers. That's what they did. Pete Waterman, who was the business end of it, really, and the mouthpiece of it all, he said, "why don't you come and live in London?"

Mike: One of the concerns that Pete Waterman had was that Rick was quite shy. And it was obviously going to be very new to him to go into a London studio and record.

Rick: So I basically ended up working at their studios.

Mike: All he was doing, really, was helping out: making tea, getting me a sandwich. It was almost like an apprenticeship.

(Synths)

Mike: We used to call them "Tea Boys" or "Tape Ops." A tape op was a guy that used to make sure the tape was wound on the spools And when we run out of tape, he'd change it over. And in the meantime, he makes tea. Uh, so that's how I first met him.

Rick: And it was a bit unusual because they treated me like all the other kids who work there, but they also knew that they were going to be making a record for me.

(Synths)

(Synths end)

Mike: A girlfriend of Pete Waterman, told me what a voice he had, but I hadn't heard it yet. The first time I heard Rick sing was when Rick got behind the mic and sang "Ain't Too Proud to Beg."

Rick: Which is a cover of a Temptation song.

Mike: His voice, you know, it had a very rich tone and with all due deference to a lot of the acts we worked with, they weren't necessarily Pavarotti (*laughs*). You know, these were pop singers. And Rick had that extra ingredient: he could sing soulfully, bluesily, powerfully.

Rick: But I don't think they really knew what to do with me because I looked about 11 years old and sang like a middle-aged man who drank too much.

Mike: Deciding what to do with Rick was the difficult bit for us, for various reasons, apart from which we were working on 10 different acts, anyway, we were always working.

Rick: And I, you know, I made tea for Dead or Alive, Bananarama, Mel and Kim loads of artists that were having massive Top 5 and Top 10 records.

Mike: They were queuing up at the door, we were very successful at the time. But his voice required I think a bit more personalized approach. So for me, Rick was a great possibility, a great opportunity. So it was excitement and I thought, *let's just write the best song we can, and when he sings it, it'll have its flavor.*

(Synth)

(Synths fade)

Rick: Pete Waterman, he actually had a girlfriend in the little town that I'm from. And he says that I said to him, about having a bad phone call with his girlfriend and slamming the phone down in the car, I don't really remember it, but he says to this day that I said, "yeah, but you're never going to give her up anyway." (*laughs*)

Now whether that's true or not, I don't know, but I like the story. Do you know what I mean?

Mike: Sounds like a good story to me. I don't know that's true. But Pete did say to me, let's do a song something like "Never Gonna Give You up."

Rick: So he very often used to come in with the title, he'd go in, and he'd sort of say, "right, it's called 'buh buh buh buh buh,' and this is what it's about, And then Stock and Aiken would have to look at him, watch him leave the room. I'd have to put the coffee on, while those two worked out what he'd just said, but it worked.

Mike: To me, if you've got an idea for a lyric and it only has to be the idea of the title, that's the bullseye. So you put that on the wall, "Never Gonna Give You Up," and you throw darts at it and you're aiming to hit it every time. So everything about the song – from the opening line to the chorus – is leading up to "Never Gonna Give You Up." So you have to know where you're going and that's a great roadmap.

But if Pete came up with a random title, I was always trying to make sense of how it fits in with the artist. And Rick had already told me, he was still dating his girlfriend, whom he went to junior school with at the age of five or six, they knew each other. And so I thought, *well, this is a lifelong fidelity*. So, "Never Gonna Give You Up," that fits in. And you can lead a song to that hook line.

(Guitar)

(Guitar ends)

Rick: At some point the three guys got so busy that they thought, we need somebody to help out with keyboards, programming all of that. And I'd never even heard the term "programming." So they got this guy in called Ian Curnow – amazing player, but really technically gifted and brilliant as well. And they bought a Fairlight computer. You needed to remortgage your house to buy it. It was like a hundred thousand pounds or more even then, back in the end of the eighties.

So I helped Ian Curnow take the Fairlight out of the boxes and set it up in his programming room. I went and put the coffee on for him, got the biscuits. Mike Stock came into the little programming room. And he said, "this is Rick. He's going to be making coffee for you over the next couple of days, but this is also his first single."

And he played the chords into the computer.

(Piano)

Rick: Sang him a bit of the melody.

Mike: *(Sings melody)* That was a repeated motif.

Rick: From the moment I very first heard the very beginnings of it, I thought, *there's definitely something in this*. And then, Ian Curnow gets programming, he came up with the string thing, which to me is like a massive part of it.

(Strings)

Rick: I think he came up with the brass part as well.

(Brass)

Rick: And he was so excited because he'd never had a Fairlight before, and he's got one now to play with whenever he wants to. And all these sounds are in there, the strings, the brass and everything.

(Guitar)

Rick: See, that's not a real guitar, that was kind of cool at the time. It was almost cooler to have that play in the guitar sound than a guitar player.

(Beat joins)

Rick: That's straight out of a Linn 9000, which was their go-to drum machine. And if you listen to some of the Stock, Aiken, Waterman records, they're very, very two keyboards and the drum machine.

(Synth lead joins)

Rick: I think in their eyes, a lot of the time they were trying to emulate a lot of the great production teams – Motown and various others, you know – that basically had a sound and the artists came in and sang over it.

(Synth lead)

(Music stops)

Rick: So we'd been through that phase of it being the very rough beginnings of it in a programming room in the basement, basically. And then it got brought up to the main studio where Stock, Aiken and Waterman lived, as it were. Mike was pretty amazing at getting vocals out of people. He knows exactly what he wants. And, he was pretty tough to work with if I'm honest. Because all the keys of everything they wrote for me was really high.

Mike: I know he said to me the song was too high for him in places.

Rick: So it was hard to sing it anyway.

(Piano and Vocals: "We're no strangers to love / You know the rules and so do I")

Mike: Rick has a baritone voice. And I think he always loved Luther Vandross.

("Never Too Much" by LUTHER VAN DROSS)

Rick: He's possibly the best singer I've ever seen in my life.

("Never Too Much" by LUTHER VAN DROSS)

Mike: But with Luther Vandross, that's all so relaxed, and open and lovely. And I had to keep reminding myself, as much as Rick and anyone else, that we're making a pop song here. You got three minutes to make a point, it's not quite the same thing.

Rick: So he would just push me until he got what he felt was the best I could do, which is obvious. But I hadn't been through that experience before so it was quite hard, I think. He'd go in and he'd sort of say, "right, I know how it should sound, trust me. So even though your lungs might be bleeding, *(laughs)* just sing it for me again."

(Vocals: A full commitment's what I'm thinking of / You wouldn't get this from any other guy")

Rick: And also we didn't have Auto Tune. There was no escaping that you had to hit in the notes or else the notes weren't, they weren't there.

(Vocals: "I just wanna tell you how I'm feeling")

Mike: You know, it was for him a bit of a push, but we broke it down. So I just got him to sing, "never gonna," *(Mike sings)*. He has to sing that three or four times and we can pick the best one and then we can drop it into place. Then all he's got to do is *(sings)* "give you up"

Now, he can sing that without blinking his eyes, you know, that's simple now. But when you're making it up on the spot and trying to create it, you have to break it down.

(Vocals: "Never going to give you up / Never going to break you down / Never gonna turn around and desert you")

Rick: I can almost hear myself desperately trying to reach those notes, but that's where it sounds good.

(Vocals: "Never going to make you cry (Make you cry) / Never gonna say goodbye (Say goodbye) / Never gonna tell a lie and hurt you (Hurt you)")

Mike: Most people under recognize the backing vocals, which was Dee Lewis and Coral Gordon, and the very accurate backing vocals, which give support to what Rick's doing.

(Backing vocals: "(Give you up / Let you down) Never gonna turn around and (Desert you)")

Rick: Sounds beautiful to me, that, to be honest. I know you shouldn't say that about a record that happens to be yours, but I'm taking no credit. I'm just saying that sounds beautiful to me.

(Backing vocals: "Ooh ooh")

Rick: It went through a lot of different mixes. *A lot.*

Mike: Probably something in the order Five or six months before we delivered a mix.

Rick: They had three or four different guys who did mixes. They'd just say "Let Dave have a go." And he will just put a synth part, like a four bar loop, eight bar loop,

(Synth loop)

Rick: And then unmuted it and see if it would work somewhere.

(Synth loop)

(Beat joins)

Mike: We went through so many phases and so many changes and so many different ideas because we weren't sure what we had.

Rick: So it was a bit of a weird time at the time, because I really believed in "Never Gonna Give You Up." And so you're thinking, *well just get on with it guys, this song's great. What are you doing?* Far be it from me to say that as a 20 year old at the time, I was, but six months of your life at that point is a long time. They thought it was great, they just didn't think the marriage of it and me was right, I think. Because I looked 11 and I had, like, pretty reddish hair at that point, freckles. It's like, "just look at the way this guy looks, but just listen at the way he sounds." And is anybody going to, for one, believe it? Is anybody gonna warm to that? Yeah, I don't know, really.

Mike: To come up with the best suit of clothes for that song and that singer was always our task, you know, it's like a tailor-made suit. So I tried it, you know, that song a bit faster, about 120 beats a minute, in a more sort of house-y style. We slowed it down to 114 beats a minute,

(Beat)

Mike: to get the groove right. And I thought if we're going to be this slow. We ought to syncopate the bass a bit to energize it. And for him and the tune to bounce off.

(Beat)

(Vocals join: "We've known each other for so long / Your heart's been aching but you're too shy to say it / Inside we both know what's been going on")

Rick: Once they found their bass sound, they stuck with it.

Mike: Matt actually ended up playing it.

(Bass)

(Beat joins)

Mike: That's difficult to do, you want to get this rhythm, and move around those chord structures

(Piano)

Mike: When we put that down, it really did come together very quickly, at that point.

(Vocals join: "Never gonna give / Never gonna give (Give you up) / Never gonna give / Never gonna give (Give you up)")

Rick: The "never going to give, never going to give," it's just somebody literally pressing the keyboard down. It's French sampler is what it is, down with that vocal in it.

(Vocal sample)

Rick: I never heard that until I kind of heard the final mix of the record. And I didn't love it if I'm honest, because it felt alien, and it sounded a bit inhuman to me, but in a bizarre way, that's what's kind of funky about it.

(Drums)

Rick: The drums at the very beginning of it, that was kind of like chopped and reversed and all kinds of things, which created this weird sort of intro.

(Intro)

Rick: And funnily enough, it became this thing that you know, cause when you heard it on the radio, you'd go, "oh, that's that record?" Because they instantly know it.

(Intro fades)

Mike: Somebody played it in the office one morning when I was coming in. Pete was coming down the stairs and I was going up the stairs and we both heard it coming out of the office. We stopped in our tracks. And we said, "bloody hell, this sounds fantastic!" I mean, we could often tell when we were wrong, but you didn't know when you were right a lot of the time. But yeah, we heard it there at that moment and realized. It was all hands to the pump. let's get it out there, let's not hold back. And I remember the record label came over, uh, with Pete Robinson who was head of RCA in the UK, and he wasn't sure it was Rick singing. Other people were joking about it. So we had Rick sing it live in the foyer of our studio. And then he did a TV show, a little regional news program. And then the phones didn't stop and the lights went on and it was, uh, it was just, an instant, instant hit.

Rick: It was number one for five weeks in Britain. We didn't make the video until it went to number one, which is unheard of, this is the end of the eighties, this is MTV, who puts a single out on RCA records without a video? And I think they were just all terrified of people seeing me *(laughs)*. So yeah, so it was pretty crazy really.

Mike: Rick was thrust into the limelight, because not only did it hit number one here, but in 25 other countries, you know, and suddenly there's a lot of pressure on Rick, a lot of pressure. After that, I never saw Rick 'cause he was off on tour, he was off around the world.

Rick: And it was a number one in the U.S. As well, which, when that happens, it's like, it just changes really. You just become something else, you know?

(Synth)

Rick: So there's a thing called Rickrolling, which, if people don't know what that is, I'll do a very, very brief explanation: Somebody sends an email to somebody, and in it, there's a link to a video. You click on that and a few seconds in, or at the crucial moment where it gets really exciting, the video to "Never Gonna Give You Up" gets to play.

(Synth fades)

Rick: Our 15-year-old daughter at the time, she's 30 now, but she was 15, 16, she kind of put me straight and said, "look, just realize this isn't about you. It's just what's happening on the internet this week." And I just thought, "wow, *(laughs)* that's, that's hard to swallow, but she's absolutely right." And she was proved to be right, because ten-year-old kids want to have selfies with me sometimes. And I'm like, "what?" And it's like, because they play Fortnite.

It just became this thing that people did and it, and it grew and grew on the internet. And we've had over a billion streams of the song. And that is, you couldn't have even dreamt it.

(Synth)

Rick: How could anybody dream the internet 33-4 years ago?

Mike: this Rickrolling phenomenon, it may have spurred more interest, but it certainly was always one of those songs that isn't going to go away you know, it's part of the pop canon.

(Synth)

Rick: And, listen, I wish I had five of them, I really do, but I don't, I've got one. So it's a bit weird,

(Synth and beat)

Rick: but I think the underlying feeling of it all is, is gratitude rather than anything else, really. That I was in the position to be in that building when they were doing those things. And that, you know, the coffee I made was good enough for me to be able to stick in the room.

Hrishikesh: And now, here is "Never Gonna Give You Up" by Rick Astley, in its entirety.

("Never Gonna Give You Up" by RICK ASTLEY)

Hrishikesh: To learn more, visit songexploder.net. You'll find links to stream or download this song. And you can watch the music video that broke the internet, which, if you haven't seen in a while, still rules.

Song Exploder, and the show's theme music, were made by me. I produced this episode with Craig Eley and Casey Deal, with artwork by Carlos Lerma, music clearance by Kathleen Smith, and production assistance from Chloe Parker. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a network of independent, listener-supported, artist-owned podcasts. You can learn more about our shows at radiotopia.fm. You can follow me on Twitter and Instagram @HrishiHirway. And you can follow the show @SongExploder. You can also get a Song Exploder t-shirt at songexploder.net/shirt.

I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. Thanks for listening.