

Song Exploder
New Order - Blue Monday
Episode 252

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. I'm Hrishikesh Hirway.

("Blue Monday" by NEW ORDER)

In May 1980, the band Joy Division was devastated by the death of lead singer Ian Curtis. The three remaining band members, Bernard Sumner, Peter Hook, and Stephen Morris, decided they would keep making music together, and a few months later, Gillian Gilbert joined them. They called the band New Order.

New Order is one of the most influential bands of the last four decades. Their song "Blue Monday" came out in 1983, and it holds the record for being the best-selling 12-inch single of all time. Rolling Stone put "Blue Monday" on its list of the 500 Greatest Songs of All Time, and Pitchfork included it in its top 5 best songs of the 1980s.

To celebrate the 40th anniversary of the release of "Blue Monday," in this episode, New Order discusses how they created the song. This episode was produced in collaboration with Transmissions, the official New Order and Joy Division podcast produced by Cup & Nuzzle. We've put together this story out of the hours and hours of interviews they've recorded, along with a new interview I did with Peter Hook. As you'll hear the band explain, nothing about "Blue Monday" 's success, or really even its existence, was something that they planned for.

("Blue Monday" by NEW ORDER)

(Vocals: "How does it feel / To treat me like you do? / When you've laid your hands upon me / And told me who you are?")

Stephen: What does the band that used to be Joy Division do, now that you're no longer Joy Division?

Hrishikesh: That's drummer Stephen Morris.

Stephen: Obviously you're a bit numb, really, emotionally.

Hrishikesh: Here's bassist Peter Hook:

Peter: Rather than deal with the grief around Ian's death, we just threw ourselves into recording and writing. We just got on with it, and it was a real struggle.

Bernard: It wasn't anyone's particular fault.

Hrishikesh: This is guitarist and vocalist Bernard Sumner.

Bernard: It was just a difficult transitional period. But it was necessary, you know.

Peter: The three of us, we were playing together really, really well.

Stephen: But the main problem was that if one of us was going to sing, we had to sing and play at the same time.

Bernard and Hooky couldn't do it. So we got Gillian in, playing guitar and eventually keyboards.

Hrishikesh: Here's Gillian Gilbert:

Gillian: We went to New York. We played at, like, these really dark clubs with no air conditioning on a tiny little stage.

And then we'd go out clubbing after we'd finished, because the clubs were open 'till 4 o'clock, 5 o'clock in the morning. We used to listen to Italian disco, European disco, and it just seemed a lot more fun.

Peter: Bernard, in particular, was very excited by all this.

Bernard: I started hearing frequencies that I'd never heard before. A lot of sub bass.

Peter: And his ambition really was to make disco records. So the songs that he was hearing, particularly when we were in America, were the ones that he wanted to emulate.

Gillian: So when we came back we thought, well, why can't we do a track like that? We wanted to hear our song in a sort of disco club-y environment, instead of like an alternative band.

Peter: "Blue Monday" from start to finish took nearly a year.

It started as an instrumental, because we didn't believe in encores. We were so young and idealistic that we thought, we've played our set, we've played the songs that we've worked on. Why should anybody want anything else?

And then someone came up with an idea of, what about if we 'played' the synthesizers after we'd gone off?

Gillian: It was a bit like an adventure 'cause we thought, can we do it? Chain all these parts together and just have a song that just plays on its own, so we could walk off stage?

Peter: And that was where the idea came, from having a keyboard that when you press the button, played this instrumental for 10 minutes and then hopefully everyone would be happy and they'd stop moaning at us to do an encore.

Gillian: It was quite exciting, though, programming everything.

("Blue Monday" by NEW ORDER)

synth and bass

Peter: That's a Moog.

This was very much Bernard's baby. He had the idea from a few disco records, [vocalizes] *bm-dm, bm-dm* and programmed it, cuz he wanted to hear it programmed.

This was in Britannia Row, which was considered to be the state-of-the-art studio in 1981 when we recorded it.

In those days, the equipment was difficult, shall we say. You could never imagine how difficult it actually was then. Doing the wiring. Really nuts and bolts of getting things ready.

Gillian: It was a totally mad idea, cuz we started off with huge sections, and then we didn't have the technology at the time to sequence them all together.

Peter: Everything had to be programmed in one massive loop.

("Blue Monday" by NEW ORDER)

hi-hats

Bernard: I saw "Blue Monday" more of a machine, and the different rhythms within it are different gear cogs.

So you've got hi-hhats that are going [vocalizes] *t, t, t, t*

hi-hats

And you've got triplets that are going [vocalizes] *t-t-t, t-t-t / t-t-t, t-t-t t-t-t/ *

triplets plus hi-hats

And I wanted this sharp clap sound that I'd heard on disco records from the seventies.

clap sound

And then you've got the beat [vocalizes] **boom, boom / bada-bada-bada-bada / boom, boom**

kick drum

That's the engine.

drums and synths

Peter: Recording that as a backing track was very, very arduous.

all synths with drums

bass riff

Peter: That's me. That's the bass.

It's a six -string bass guitar that I started using in Joy Division. It's actually tuned the same way as a guitar. It's an octave down from E, A, D, G, B, E.

That's why a lot of early New Order, when we used to play, everybody used to think that those lines were guitar.

bass riff

That's my direct lift from Ennio Morricone.

Hrishikesh: Ennio Morricone was the composer for some of the most iconic Spaghetti Westerns, including the movie *For a Few Dollars More*.

Peter: Someone was playing it in the rec room. And I heard it,

Peter vocalizes along with clip from For A Few Dollars More

And I thought, I'll try that.

bass riff

That was the first use of the Joy Division style of bass over the synthesizers.

bass riff with synth

Stephen: We'd got an Emulator, which was like the first, I'm tempted to say affordable, but it wasn't affordable. It was very expensive.

It was a, you know, it was a big thing that you could record any sound into.

Peter: I think you had two seconds of sample. So you could record anything up to two seconds, and then it would loop the sample.

Stephen: So we recorded farts and sneezes into it, and laughed and [laughs], this is fantastic.

Peter: It was literally the first thing that we did, was to sample a fart and go up and down the keyboard. But:

choral sample

: ...that's the sample of a voice, which we liked because it sounded like a Mellotron.

Prophet synth line

And that's a Prophet synthesizer.

Stephen: It was a song that wasn't really a song. It was just a lot of electronic things that sounded good.

prophet and all other synth elements

Peter: Rob Gretton, our manager, was adamant that we needed to put vocals on it. Adamant. And we fought valiantly not to do it.

When we lost Ian Curtis, we lost a lot. Because he was so good at this, and words came to him so easily and so naturally. He really was the, the champion of it.

Stephen: The thing about it is, as a band, you've got a position. And we're happy with those roles, and, ehm, the one job that nobody really wanted suddenly became vacant.

It takes a lot to be a singer. Particularly, there's a singer, and then there's the frontman, and Ian was kind of like that.

Peter: And then when all of a sudden us three had to do it, it was hell.

Stephen: We all had goes at singing sometimes. And Bernard was quite good, because you could tell he didn't want to do it, but he did it in a kind of half-hearted, disinterested way that was somehow quite charming.

("Blue Monday" by NEW ORDER)

(Vocals: "How does it feel / To treat me like you do? / When you've laid your hands upon me / And told me who you are")

So Bernard ended up getting the short, or longest, straw, and inherited the curse of the lead singer.

("Blue Monday" by NEW ORDER)

(Vocals: "I thought I was mistaken / I thought I'd heard your words / Tell me how do I feel / Tell me now, how do I feel")

Peter: The lyrics were all written together by me, Bernie, and Steve. It was always the last thing that we did was the vocal. And the last thing that we'd do would be the lyric, and Bernard would actually be in singing while me and Steve were still scribbling lyrics down for him to try. Try this, try that word. Try this.

("Blue Monday" by NEW ORDER)

(Vocals: "And I still find it so hard / To say what I need to say / But I'm quite sure that you'll tell me / Just how I should feel today")

And then the effect that you hear on "Blue Monday" is we would send it through a little bit of spring reverb, and then pump the whole lot through the speaker and record it back onto the track.

("Blue Monday" by NEW ORDER)

(Vocals: "And I thought I was mistaken / And I thought I heard you speak / Tell me how do I feel / Tell me now, how should I feel")

Peter: Once that was done, it was more or less finished, and it was the song.

Gillian: Rob, our manager, Rob Gretton, said, "This is gonna be a hit," and we were like, "I don't think so!" [laughs]. Because we couldn't imagine it at the time.

Peter: So we didn't recognize or think that Blue Monday was any different to any of the other songs in stature. The only thing that was different about it was the length.

Gillian: We didn't want to shorten the song into 3 minutes because we had this song that we thought was just complete.

Peter: We kept it at 9 minutes and we were happy to do that, but of course we couldn't put "Blue Monday" on the LP.

Bernard: One thing about vinyl was that, with albums, you were obviously limited to how much time you could put on those albums, so it was usually four tracks a side.

Peter: So it's suggested that it should be a standalone single.

Bernard: 12-inch gave you the possibility of having a higher fidelity on the record. And we really went into that in detail on Blue Monday. We went into the science of the fidelity, of getting as much power and punch on 12-inch vinyl as possible.

We were aware of the importance of putting a record on in a club and it sounding really punchy and louder than the other ones.

("Blue Monday" by NEW ORDER)

instrumental

Peter: It got voted the Number One Song, by a thousand DJs, To Rescue a Night. If they're having a bad night and they want it to go off, they put "Blue Monday" on.

Bernard: I was in a club in Berlin once, not so many years ago, and they were playing a lot of techno and stuff, and people were dancing, and then they put "Blue Monday" on, and everyone got up. So I've witnessed that.

Peter: I mean, that is such a compliment.

bass riff

Peter: Now you can lift the lid of a laptop, and you could be in doing a track like "Blue Monday" within, God, five minutes?

But the most, I suppose, unique thing about "Blue Monday" is the mistakes. That gave it its unique edginess. It didn't follow a normal song format.

But once those are all pushed up together, they do give off a kind of magic.

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Blue Monday," by New Order, in its entirety

("Blue Monday" by NEW ORDER)

To learn more, visit songexploder.net. And check out the podcast *Transmissions: The Definitive Story of Joy Division & New Order*. I'll link to it on the Song Exploder website, where you'll find also links to buy or stream "Blue Monday."

This episode of Song Exploder was made by me, Craig Eley, Kathleen Smith, and Mary Dolan. The episode artwork is by Carlos Lerma, and I made the show's theme music and logo. Special thanks to Frank Palmer, Cup & Nuzzle, Stuart Wheelley, and Warner Records.

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I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. Thanks for listening.

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