

Song Exploder
Foo Fighters - The Teacher
Episode 265

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.

This episode contains explicit language.

("The Teacher" by FOO FIGHTERS)

For the last episode of the year, I got the chance to drive up to Northridge, California, and have a conversation with Dave Grohl. We talked about the Foo Fighters song, "The Teacher," which is an epic, 10-minute-long track. Dave told me it's the most important piece of music he's ever written, because it's dedicated to his mother, Virginia, who passed away in 2022.

Dave Grohl started Foo Fighters in 1994, after Nirvana ended. This year, Foo Fighters set a record for having the most Top 10 hits on the Billboard Mainstream Rock charts. They've won 15 Grammy awards, including winning the Grammy for Best Rock album five times — more than anyone else.

"The Teacher" is from their 11th album, *But Here We Are*, which came out in June 2023. I sat with Dave in the Foo Fighters practice space, and he told me the whole story of the song. Coming up, you'll hear the two voice memos he originally recorded on acoustic guitar, plus the two demos he made on his way to figuring the song out.

("The Teacher" by FOO FIGHTERS)

(Vocals: "Hey kid, what's the plan for tomorrow? / Where will I wake up? Where will I wake up? / Hey kid, what's the plan for tomorrow? / Where will I wake up? Where will I wake up?")

Dave: My name's Dave Grohl.

(music fades out)

Last year, I went through a period of really deep mourning, because I lost two very important people in my life. One is Taylor Hawkins, our drummer. The other was my mother. She passed in July of 2022, and I was with her for all of the time leading up until her passing.

Every day during that period, I would write something on the guitar, because I felt like if I didn't have that release, I would explode.

Hrishikesh: Mm-hmm.

Dave: So I would spend the day at the hospital, and then come back to my house, and try to translate it musically. With no real clear intention of what I was trying to achieve. I was just finding these chords and progressions that mirrored the way that I felt.

Hrishikesh: Okay, let me play you this first voice memo you sent me.

("The Teacher" by FOO FIGHTERS - A section early voice memo: guitar)

Dave: I'm just wandering around a fretboard, trying to find some sort of progression that makes sense.

And there's something about that progression that seems like a journey, in a way?

This verse, and this chorus riff, is a good example of where I was mentally. You know, I was confused, and I was conflicted, and I was lost.

That first section, I wrote at a time where I was going to visit her every day in the hospital.

The B section, I wrote not long after she passed.

("The Teacher" by FOO FIGHTERS - B section early voice memo: guitar)

This voice note in particular, I think I was on a couch in Hawaii.

I got a capo, something that I've really never played with before.

What I found was a whole new world of suspended notes that were doubled, and would hang over the riff. And again, I found this progression that resonated with me emotionally.

("The Teacher" by FOO FIGHTERS - B section early voice memo fades out)

I hadn't considered putting that A section and the B section together yet.

We hadn't started recording; we hadn't started working on an album. I was just kind of banking all of these ideas.

But whenever I prepare songs for an album, it usually begins with some sort of demo process that I do on my own, just to make sure that I'm not crazy. Like, "This riff sounds cool on an acoustic guitar;

("The Teacher" by FOO FIGHTERS - A section early voice memo: guitar)

I wonder what it would sound like if I put another guitar and drums to it."

("The Teacher" by FOO FIGHTERS - A section early voice memo: add drums, more guitar)

Hrishikesh: When you're making a demo, do you try and play drums along to what you've already done on guitar? Or are you actively trying to come up with something in contrast to that part?

Dave: It's interesting that you say that, because – in the second demo,

(“The Teacher” by FOO FIGHTERS - B section early voice memo: guitar)

I really wasn't sure what I was doing.

All I remembered was how I strummed that riff.

Usually when I go in to do a demo on my own, I'm not thinking much about what I'm going to do on the drums. I'll just start playing.

(“The Teacher” by FOO FIGHTERS - B section early voice memo: add drums)

But I do like the way that the drums just kind of rolled down the track as these other things happened around it.

If it's a big riff, there's accents that I do want to land. But real magic can happen when you lose all of those preconceived ideas and just kind of play along.

Like, if you get towards the end of that B section... When it gets into the...
(sings)...

(“The Teacher” by FOO FIGHTERS - Dave hums along to voice memo guitar and drums)

...the time signature's sort of strange.

Hrishikesh: As Dave was explaining this part of the song to me, he started illustrating it with some really intense hands-on-knees drumming. It was pretty awesome.

Dave: “Dun dun dun dun dun dun dun dun dun dun...” Then I think like, oh shit! I wonder if I could do, like, a cool Tom thing, right?

So then I start going, fuckin'... “Dun dun dun dun dun dun dun dun dun dun”

(“The Teacher” by FOO FIGHTERS - add toms)

And as I'm doing it, I'm like, I'm off the riff right now. I have no idea where I am. I'm just doing this crazy thing. But as I listened back, I'm like, Oh fuck!

(“The Teacher” by FOO FIGHTERS - demo with toms)

I actually stayed in the riff. I got lucky, and they fucking lined up.

So, with these two demos: These two ideas were separate, to me, until I imagined, if I were to put these two things together, this song is more than just a three or four minute song. Maybe it's something much bigger. And I could have a piece of music unlike anything that we've ever done, and I could dedicate it to my mother.

Hrishikesh: What was your mom's relationship like to your music?

Dave: You know, as I was sitting with my mother, in her final days, we'd watch tennis, and drink coffee, and... I would strum a guitar, and play guitar to her, all day long.

I was working on a riff the whole time. And it was coming into shape each day, until... I think it might've been the day before she passed, I said to her, "I've been writing this. It's a song on our new record called "Show Me How," and it's a really beautiful, kind of melancholy riff." I played the riff to her, and sang the vocal melody.

And I said, "What do you think?"

And she looked at me and she was like, "...Eh." [laughs].

But, with this song, I don't know how to explain it other than to say that she was the most important person in my entire life. So, I thought, this has to be the most important music I've ever made.

And that's when "The Teacher" started to take shape.

("The Teacher" by FOO FIGHTERS - guitar scoring)

My mother was a public school teacher for 35 years.

I was raised in Virginia, outside of Washington, D. C. My parents divorced when I was, I think, five or six years old. And I was raised single handedly by my public school teacher mother.

I truly believe that teachers are teachers from birth. You're put onto this earth to do maybe the most altruistic, challenging thing: putting someone else ahead of yourself, in order for them to progress.

("The Teacher" by FOO FIGHTERS - guitar scoring fades out)

I was the worst student. I hated it when she tried to tutor me. Just, I don't want to hear that *teacher* voice, you know?

But there was one show, where the Foo Fighters were opening for the Red Hot Chili Peppers, and, this is 25 years ago. And they couldn't start the show, because the audience had already rushed the barrier in the arena.

And the promoter came out and said, "We can't begin the show until you guys back up!" And nobody listened to the promoter. Somebody else came out. "No, seriously, you guys, you need to back up. You need to back up."

My mother took the microphone, and went out there and said, "LISTEN, you kids, you need to BACK UP!" And everybody just backed the fuck up [laughs].

Hrishikesh: That's amazing.

Dave: So, we recorded the whole thing here, at our studio, 606.

And then after a few weeks we decided to go to Greg Kurstin, our producer's studio. And usually, before making a record, I've shared ideas with the guys. But with this song, they hadn't heard one lick of music.

Hrishikesh: Really?

Dave: No. I basically said, "Let me try something really quick." And I sat down, and I played the entire A section off the top of my head.

("The Teacher" by FOO FIGHTERS - solo demo drums)

Hrishikesh: Just on drums?

Dave: Just on drums.

("The Teacher" by FOO FIGHTERS - solo demo drums end)

I finish. I walk into the control room, and everyone's looking at me, kind of mystified.

It was six minutes long, and it had all these different sections. Like, "What the fuck was that?" I said, "Okay, hold on, give me a guitar. Let me show you how it goes."

("The Teacher" by FOO FIGHTERS - add Dave guitar to drums)

I think at first they were like, "Okay, Dave. Whatever, dude, let's see what happens." But then, as each member started playing with it, it just blossomed.

("The Teacher" by FOO FIGHTERS - bass)

Nate Mendel, our bassist, he's an unconventional bass player. He finds melodies within that riff.

Pat Smear, our guitarist, he's the flamethrower.

("The Teacher" by FOO FIGHTERS - Pat guitar)

Chris Shifflett, is a very methodical, nuanced player. He's an incredible player.

("The Teacher" by FOO FIGHTERS - Chris guitar)

So, by the end of the day, we had the shape of the song.

("The Teacher" by FOO FIGHTERS - add Dave guitar and drums – end)

Musically and dynamically, I thought this might be my favorite thing that we've ever done.

Hrishikesh: Was it hard to figure out how you were going to approach the lyrics, when you already had this very specific – and complicated – musical structure?

Dave: I do think that sometimes you can get stuck in the rigid parameters of: verse, chorus, verse, bridge... that conventional structure. You know, "Don't bore us, get to the chorus."

I just decided: this song is for me. It's not for the radio. This song is for my mother. So I just kind of let it go.

("The Teacher" by FOO FIGHTERS - song intro)

I imagined the arrangement of the song to be the experience, from beginning to end.

("The Teacher" by FOO FIGHTERS)

(Vocals: "Who's at the door now? / Who's at the door now?")

We were having all these guests – friends, family – come to the house. And I knew what she was thinking; she knew what I was thinking. And there'd be a knock at the door, and I'd think, *Oh, who's at the door now?* And it would be someone we've known our entire life.

("The Teacher" by FOO FIGHTERS)

(Vocals: "Hey kid, what's the plan for tomorrow? / Where will I wake up? Where will I wake up?")

That line comes from a conversation that I had with my mother when we brought her home from being in the hospital for weeks on end. At one point, she said, "Hey, I'm tired. I want to go to sleep." And I said, "Okay." And she said, "Well, if I go to sleep, where will I wake up?"

I said, "Well, if you take a nap, you're just going to wake up right here."

I didn't realize the nature of what she was asking me.

And she kind of turned her head, smiled and side eyed me, and then I knew what she meant. I said, "I don't know, but I'll meet you there."

("The Teacher" by FOO FIGHTERS)

(Vocals: "Hey kid, what's the plan for tomorrow? / Where will I wake up? Where will I wake up? / Who's at the door now? Who's at the door now? / Wake up")

Hrishikesh: Could you tell me about the "Wake up" lyrics?

Dave: I think most people's immediate reaction to seeing someone dying is to wish for them to wake up, but, um... that's not how it works.

Hrishikesh: You were there, in the actual moment?

Dave: Mm-hmm.

One of my greatest fears in life was always that I would be gone when this happened.

Hrishikesh: Like gone, like on the road?

Dave: Gone, on the road... just not present for this.

And I was there, and we were there together.

("The Teacher" by FOO FIGHTERS)

(Vocals: "Wake up / Wake up" - strings come up)

In the early demo that I did, I had some kind of cheesy mellotron sound on the keyboard. But when we recorded the song, at Greg Kurstin's studio, we had a string section come in, and Greg conducted the section for that part.

("The Teacher" by FOO FIGHTERS – ends)

So, the first half of the song is meant to sort of build to some sort of crescendo, going through the emotions of that experience.

And then the second half of the song is reflection.

(“The Teacher” by FOO FIGHTERS - B section comes in)

(Vocals: “You showed me how to breathe, never showed me how to say goodbye / You showed me how to be, never showed me how to say goodbye”)

I wrote those lyrics the night before I had to go sing the song. There aren't too many Foo Fighters songs that are one chord, with a simple groove, for bar after bar after bar.

Any other song I'd ever written, I would probably just toss that and think, *I would rather it be something that had more movement. Or, I wish that the chords would do something more interesting.*

But in that moment, I just relieved myself of any of those second-guesses. I just thought, fuck it. That's what I mean. And that's what I'm going to say. And that's how I'm gonna sing it.

(“The Teacher” by FOO FIGHTERS – music fades out to isolated vocals)

(Vocals: “You showed me how to breathe, never showed me how to say goodbye”)

We really built this song. More so than any other Foo Fighters song we've ever recorded. And my favorite part of the song really is the end of the song.

I imagined that the song would sort of collapse in on itself, and deconstruct, in this massive wash of noise.

(“The Teacher” by FOO FIGHTERS - outro of song swells and then suddenly ends)

To me, this was the sound of life ending. Your final moments, I thought, just become this distortion of everything you've ever experienced in your life.

And then (snaps fingers) –

(“The Teacher” by FOO FIGHTERS - outro cuts off again, in time with finger snap)

– it just turns off.

The funny thing is... I imagined that ending for the song because I imagined everything ending. But what I now realize is — it doesn't.

I don't believe that everything just stops. I truly believe that this is just some sort of transition.

("The Teacher" by FOO FIGHTERS - scoring comes up)

I was probably my only friend that enjoyed hanging out with their parent, you know? She was cool.

She was really good at being a mother, especially the challenge of being my mother. I can't even imagine... A hyperactive punk rock nightmare. But we were best friends.

I felt like I needed to honor her, or pay tribute to her, or do justice with this piece of music. So that's when it turned into something other than just a song. It's the most important thing that I've ever written, because I wrote it for such a gigantic reason.

Hrishikesh: I was wondering how you felt about this, but, a few years ago my mom passed away –

Dave: Oh, I'm sorry.

Hrishikesh: And I wrote a song about her. And, you know, there's this whole process of grief that you go through... And then you try and put it together in a song... But then, there was like this extra little coda of grief for me, which was that I could never let her know that I did this thing for her.

Dave: I don't believe that. I bet you could. I bet she knows.

Hrishikesh: Is that how you feel about your mom?

Dave: Yes.

Hrishikesh: And this song?

Dave: Yeah. She's here. She knows, for sure. Yeah.

Hrishikesh: How do you think she feels about it? About the song?

("The Teacher" by FOO FIGHTERS - scoring fades out)

Dave: "Eh." [laughs] "That's nice, David." [laughs]

Hrishikesh: Coming up, you'll hear how all of these ideas and elements came together in the final song.

—

And now, here's "The Teacher" by Foo Fighters, in its entirety.

("The Teacher" by FOO FIGHTERS)

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

If you liked this episode, you might also like Metallica's episode, from 2017. You'll find that one at songexploder.net/metallica.

This episode was produced by Craig Eley, Theo Balcomb, Kathleen Smith, Mary Dolan, and me. The episode artwork is by Carlos Lerma, and I made the show's theme music and logo.

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This is the end of our 10th year of Song Exploder. I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. Thank you so much for listening.