

Song Exploder
Green Day - Basket Case
Episode 267

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 has some explicit language, including a mention of drug use.

("Basket Case" by GREEN DAY)

Green Day is a punk band from the East Bay in California. Billie Joe Armstrong, Mike Dirnt and Tré Cool have been playing music together since 1987. They've sold over 90 million records. They've won four Grammys, including twice for Best Rock Album. They put out their first album in 1990, and their second album, *Kerplunk!*, in 1991. And then, they moved to a major label and in 1994, they put out their third album, *Dookie*, which was huge. It helped bring punk into the mainstream. And this month is its 30th anniversary. So for this episode, I talked to Billie Joe Armstrong about the making of one of Green Day's biggest hits of all time – "Basket Case."

Coming up, you'll also hear from Rob Cavallo, who produced the album. Plus, you'll hear two different demo versions of "Basket Case," the first of which is basically a totally different song.

Billie Joe Armstrong traces the history of "Basket Case," from its origins as a cassette recording in a punk basement, all the way to becoming a song that helped define an era of music.

("Basket Case" by GREEN DAY)

(Vocals: "Sometimes, I give myself the creeps / Sometimes, my mind plays tricks on me / It all keeps adding up / I think I'm cracking up / Am I just paranoid? / Or am I just stoned?")

Billie Joe: My name is Billie Joe Armstrong, and I'm in the band Green Day.

(music fades out)

The other fellas that are in the band are Mike Dirnt, who's the bass player, and Tré Cool is the world's most dangerous drummer.

After *Kerplunk* came out, I think our confidence as a band, like, really got better. We went on tour, the shows were packed, in clubs, and basements, and vets' halls, and wherever we could do all-ages shows at the time.

We all practically lived together. Tré was living with this other band called East Bay Weed Company. And I started kind of crashing on the couch over there. There was a set of college kids that were on the first floor and on the top floor, but the punks were living in the basement.

When I got home from the tour, I had a little bit of money. So I spent it on a new amp and a four-track. And I was like, I'll teach myself how to record demos.

I had this melody in my head for a while.

(4-track demo comes in)

And I wanted to have this sort of grand song about a love story.

(4-track demo vocals: "I really don't know where this story began / My friend Houston had got himself a girl / Swank is her name, she's got the best of him / And he's got the best of her in the palm of their hands")

I think it was around 1992, early 93, when the song was first written.

(4-track demo vocals: "And they could care less what's coming up / Sometimes the future doesn't have much luck")

I thought the song could have this intro that would be like a ballad that would blast into the full band coming in, making it like a rocker.

("This wiggled-out thing called love / It may get kinda rough / And they don't really mind / They're on their own")

I did a beatbox effect with my mouth to create the drum sound.

But the true confession is—

(4-track demo cuts out)

`—I was on crystal meth when I wrote the lyrics to it. And I thought I was writing the greatest song ever.

(4-track demo vocals: "They said this has been motionless orbit flight / Around each other intoxicating their minds / Dancing in the street under suburban lights / They stumbled to the concrete without a hurt")

(4-track demo out)

As you know, with drugs, they wear off. And then, I felt like I'd written the *worst* song ever.

I thought that the lyrics were just embarrassingly bad. I had a few songs before that I'd written on drugs, but this one was the most pitiful I felt after.

And so, I just kind of let the song go for a while, because I felt so gross about it.

("They're on their own, own")

But, you know, I was like, maybe it'll come back.

(4-track demo ends)

You know, I was 19, 20, 21 years old when the song started to be written.

Starting the writing of *Dookie*, I think, we were leaning less about like, love songs, and trying to make more of a statement of like, everyday life, and feelings and emotions that you go through that people can identify with.

And so, I think I just got the courage to get into it again, trying to write the lyrics.

("Basket Case" by GREEN DAY - demo)

(Demo comes up)

And it was the best decision I'd ever made, probably, as a songwriter.

The approach sort of changed where now, the song, it was about panic attacks.

(Demo vocals: "I am one of those / Melodramatic fools / Neurotic to the bone / No doubt about it")

And I think I just went from there,

(Demo vocals: "Sometimes, I give myself the creeps")

and just started to kind of piece it together.

(Demo vocals: "Sometimes, my mind plays tricks on me / It all keeps adding up / I think I'm cracking up / Am I just paranoid? / Or am I just stoned?")

I had had panic attacks since I was about 10 or 11 years old. But that was in the eighties, and no one really knew what those things were.

I guess they would call it mental health now, but back then it was just like, you're having a panic attack, wait till it's over [chuckles], you know, breathe into this paper bag.

So, there were times that I would wake up in the middle of the night with panic attacks and I would ride my bike through the streets to kind of let it wear off.

And so that was one way of dealing with it for me, was, you know, writing lyrics about, you feel like you're going crazy, but you ride it out, and you're not.

(Demo vocals: "Grasping to control")

And then, me, Tré, and Mike, we started to put it together.

(Demo vocals: "So I better hold on")

We went to Andy Ernst's studio, Art of Ears, in San Francisco.

We demoed it with, like, a few other songs.

But the parts that Mike wanted to play on bass, he had already written.

All of the drum fills, even, to that point were written. You can really hear it on the demo.

(Demo vocals: "Sometimes, I give myself the creeps / Sometimes, my mind plays tricks on me / It all keeps adding up / I think I'm cracking up / Am I just paranoid? / Huh yeah, yeah")

(Demo fades out)

At the time, we were talking about doing something, maybe, on a major label.

'Cause we just felt like, you know, there were so many other bands that were getting signed that, you know, I think for us, comparing ourselves to them, we felt like we were better [chuckles].

And so, we went and met with Elliot Cahn and Jeff Saltzman; they became our managers.

And they said, we have your old records, but it would be great for people to hear your demo. So they made a bunch of copies of it and they started sending it around.

Rob: The first time I ever heard Green Day, I was sitting there mixing a self-titled album called *The Muffs*.

("Big Mouth" by THE MUFFS)

And you know, when you're sitting there and it's like two in the morning and your eyeballs are falling out and the manager of Green Day comes in. And he gives you a cassette tape and he says, you gotta listen to this band! It's great! Right, and I'm like,

("Big Mouth" fades down)

dude, I'm mixing this record. I c- I'm, I'm dying over here. I'm trying to make, you know, beat the deadline. I'm tired. My first instinct was to take the cassette and throw it in the garbage. And then this little voice inside of my head said, don't be an asshole. It could be the next big thing.

("Big Mouth" fades out)

I'm Rob Cavallo, and I was both the A&R guy and the producer of Green Day's album *Dookie*.

Billie Joe: Elliot Cahn and Jeff Saltzman knew him because they represented The Muffs, and Rob produced their first album that we, we all really loved.

And so he came over to listen to us rehearse. I was listening to every Beatles record at the time.

Rob: And there was a rumor out there, which is true, that I could play all the Beatles songs. And then Billie handed me a guitar and they were like, can you play this? Can you play that? You know, play "Ticket to Ride," or something. And I was like, oh yeah, it's just like this.

Billie Joe: And then I think we started jamming with him, because he was a really good musician, a really good guitar player.

Rob: And I signed 'em, to Reprise Warner Brothers Records.

("Basket Case" by GREEN DAY - bass stem)

Billie Joe: We recorded the album at Fantasy Studios, in Berkeley.

("Basket Case" by GREEN DAY - guitar stem)

Definitely the fanciest recording studio I'd ever been in. Seeing all that technical gear was like, *wow*.

Rob: The managers came to me and they said, you know, the band doesn't really know what it's like to do what, like what you're about to do [laughs]. But having seen them play in their rehearsal, I knew how great they were. And I said to them something like, you know, just play it like you're on stage.

Billie Joe: You know, we told him, we don't want to sort of make a record where it's overproduced. But we want this to sound *bigger*. You know, we want the drums to be large,

("Basket Case" by GREEN DAY - drum stem)

the guitars to be large,

("Basket Case" by GREEN DAY - add guitars)

and you can hear everything, more so than you could hear on our last records.

("Basket Case" by GREEN DAY - full instrumental)

("Basket Case" by GREEN DAY - drum stem)

When I heard the drums for the first time, we had different room mics around the rooms, like they all captured a different sound. Some sounded more distant.

("Basket Case" by GREEN DAY - distant drums)

Some sounded closer up.

("Basket Case" by GREEN DAY - closer drums)

Some we purposely made 'em more nasty sounding.

("Basket Case" by GREEN DAY - punk room drums)

Rob: It makes the drum set just all of a sudden feel like it's got extra fangs, and just *RARR*, it comes at you, you know.

("Basket Case" by GREEN DAY - bass stem)

Billie Joe: You know, Mike's basslines felt so musical. Where it's almost like he was playing the lead, as a bass player. But [chuckles] he would play so hard, just to make every note shine through.

And I remember Rob going, God, he's got these like *gorilla* hands.

Rob: Then Billie also who plays like a madman. So hard.

("Basket Case" by GREEN DAY - guitar stem)

The way he's chugging on that guitar, I mean, it just defined a whole style for like a whole generation of music, right there.

("Basket Case" by GREEN DAY - guitar out)

Billie Joe: Tré would sort of try to match the rhythm of my vocal with his kick drum.

(Guitar and vocals: "Sometimes, I give myself the creeps")

And then Mike would lock in with Tré, and then he would play these basslines that would also do the same thing.

(add bass stem)

Rob: It was actually one of the reasons why I signed 'em. Each guy has a personality on their own instrument.

(Isolated vocals: "I went to a shrink / To analyze my dreams / She says it's lack of sex that's bringing me down")

Billie Joe: I think that "Basket Case," the title, just came immediately.

I've always been self-deprecating. Maybe it's like a defense mechanism. You know, it's like that thing, take yourself down before someone takes you down.

So, calling myself a basket case? It was empowering, to be able to show people all the zits and imperfections that you have.

(Isolated vocals: "I went to a whore / He said my life's a bore / So quit my whining 'cause it's bringing her down")

I changed that lyric, from uh, "I went to a whore, she said my life's a bore..." That's what you hear on the demo.

(Vocals: "I went to a whore / She said my life's a bore / So quit my whining 'cause it's bringing her down")

I think at some point during rehearsals I just gender-switched the whole thing. And I think I just wanted to get people to think, in terms of what they think shrinks and whores are [chuckles].

It got me thinking differently about how to approach gender and their roles. And so yeah, I think that's a big moment on that song, was the decision to switch that from what you hear on the demo.

(Vocals: "It all keeps adding up / I think I'm cracking up / Am I just paranoid? / Ah-yuh, yah, yah")

I didn't really know what to say in the part that says "Ah-yuh, yah, yah." It always was sort of a mystery to people who are like, "What are you saying right there? What are you saying right there?" I'm like, I'm literally saying nothing. It's just something that kind of rhymed with "They're on their own."

(Vocals: "Ah-yuh, yah, yah" [laughs])

What I felt back then was that we had a good song, but I felt uncertainties. Is this song gonna make the record? Is it gonna, you know. Everything else felt really good and fluid. But that song was like, one of the more odd songs. Like I, I never thought that was gonna end up being a favorite song, at all.

Rob: Geoffrey Weiss was our product manager from Warner Brothers Records. After he heard the first few songs, he took me into the hallway and he says, I can't believe it! This album's gonna be fucking huge! I mean, dude, I am not kidding you. You have no idea what you just did. This fucking album is ginormous. It, it's gonna outsell everything.

Billie Joe: Around late spring of 1994 when it came out, it was just going crazy on alternative radio, and we were just sort of blown away by it. But we [chuckles] we weren't playing it live. I felt like it was too hard to play live. And we had our set list, and we were just gonna stick to it.

And then I think we were on Lollapalooza. Then the management called us and they were like, "You have to play the song live! You have to play the song." And we were like, okay.

I think we just started feeding off the energy of the crowd, because people just have this kind of connection to it, as this... kind of an anthem. Which I didn't know I was writing.

It's so gratifying when you can write something that you feel so vulnerable and deeply about and people can connect with.

It's like, you shared something about yourself that was a private moment. And then it helps you know that there's other people that, you know, have the same feelings and emotions, and are willing to celebrate our dysfunction.

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

—

And now, here's "Basket Case" by Green Day, in its entirety.

(*"Basket Case" by GREEN DAY*)

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

If you liked this episode, you might also like the episode with Cheap Trick, from 2021. It's about the song "Surrender," which Green Day covers sometimes. You'll find that, and all the other episodes of the show, at songexploder.net.

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

Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a network of independent, listener-supported, artist-owned podcasts. You can learn more about all of our shows at radiotopia.fm.

You can follow me on social media [@HrishiHirway](https://twitter.com/HrishiHirway). And you can follow the show [@SongExploder](https://twitter.com/SongExploder). You can also get a Song Exploder t-shirt at songexploder.net/shirt.

I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. Thanks for listening.