

Song Exploder
War - Low Rider
Episode 271

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.

I remember watching the movie *Dazed and Confused* when I was a sophomore in high school, and the song "Low Rider" by War came on. And I had this strange moment of feeling like I was hearing the song for the first time, but I'd also already known it my whole life. It's one of my favorite movie music memories. And that song *had* been around my whole life. To me, it feels like it's part of the architecture of pop culture.

("Low Rider" by WAR)

The band War formed in 1969, in Long Beach, California. "Low Rider" is from their 1975 album *Why Can't We Be Friends?* The song was a hit as soon as it came out. It went to #1 on the Billboard R&B charts, and it's just had tremendous lasting power ever since. Besides being in *Dazed and Confused*, where I heard it, it's been sampled by The Beastie Boys, it was covered by Korn, and it was the theme song for all six seasons of *The George Lopez Show*.

For this episode, I talked to War's bandleader, Lonnie Jordan, and their producer, Jerry Goldstein. The two of them told me how "Low Rider" was made in the studio, through a combination of improvisation and meticulous editing.

("Low Rider" by WAR)

(Vocals: "Low rider drives a little slower / Low rider is a real goer")

(music fades down)

Lonnie: My name is Lonnie Jordan. I am the bandleader, music coordinator, and keyboard player of War (chuckles). That's me, along with my partner...

Jerry: I'm Jerry Goldstein. I'm War's producer from the beginning.

Lonnie: There was seven people in the band. Charles Miller: saxophone, and vocal on "Low Rider." Papa Dee Allen on percussion. Harold Brown on drums. B.B. Dickerson: bass. Howard Scott: guitar. Lee Oskar: harmonica.

It all started on the west coast of California, in a studio called Crystal Studio.

Jerry: Crystal Studio on Vine Street.

Lonnie: And we went into the studio. And uh, we didn't have a song yet.
We weren't really writers. We didn't know nothing. And Jerry knew that (chuckles). So he just took us in and said, okay, let's see what we can get.

Jerry: They'd never been in the studio, so I tried to make 'em as comfortable as possible.

Lonnie: And uh, we respected that, you know, because of his past, you know, with songs like, "Hang on, Sloopy, Sloopy, hang on." And, uh, "My boyfriend's back and I'm gonna get in trouble." All that stuff.

I would stand probably over his shoulder sometimes and watch how he was writing things, and he would just do it like it was nothing.

Jerry: Ideas just would come into my head, listening to the tracks, jamming. So, we did a 45-minute jam.

(45-minute jam)

It was just part of the creative process. We'd go in and we'd start recording, you know, and most of the time we're just jamming.

It's going along, and all of a sudden, eight minutes in, or something, there's a nice groove.

(45-minute jam - recognizable groove)

I said, ah! This is cool.

(45-minute jam continues)

So I make a note. Because it was only a small part of the jam that I had checked off and said, this part's interesting, we should work on this, you know?

(45-minute jam fades down)

Lonnie: Best editor in the world, Jerry Goldstein (chuckles).

Jerry: And that was all part of it.

It's kind of like, between myself and the band and the engineer, we were like a nine-piece band. And we all were in it at the same time together, you know, feeling it.

Lonnie: Creating it from scratch. That was our baby.

(45-minute jam repeats the groove)

(45-minute jam fades out)

Okay. Check this out. This, step by step. We did this whole 45-minute jam. We haven't developed any form yet.

Jerry: And I just found eight minutes of it that I liked.

Lonnie: Eight minutes. That's it.

Jerry: And I mixed the whole 8 minutes, and then edited it, to figure out what the record's gonna sound like and what's the order of everything. And it was, like, a process. I mean.

Lonnie: It was scientific.

Jerry: It was crazy at times. This is the way we wrote. We have tracks and ideas. And then we would just make records out of 'em. And a lot of times they were written in the studio. Like, I had to create the beginning. There was no beginning, because it was part of a jam. So I created the beginning by putting the cowbell by itself.

(Cowbell intro)

(Add timbales)

Lonnie: Papa Dee did that beginning. That's when we started creating the form of the song.

(Timbales)

When I used to play the timbales, I had my own style.

I did know people like Tito Puente, and all these other percussionists was playing like (imitates timbales) "boom, ka frrroppp!"

Mine was (imitates timbales) "ba dum, ba dum, ka pop!"

(Timbales)

And Jerry liked it. I didn't like it! But he kept it. Because he knew it was different.

Jerry: Our style was so eclectic. And he had his own way of playing them, and they just found the pocket every time.

Lonnie: And then that was, that was the trademark.

(drums)

Jerry: Harold Brown on the drums. He's singing along with it

(drums with Harold ad libbing vocals)

in his own way, you know, whatever is coming out of his head he's singing it, too.

Lonnie: That's what he did.

Jerry: But it happened on all the things he did.

Lonnie: All of the songs.

Jerry: But even the leakage was in the groove. You know what I mean?

(bass riff)

Lonnie: (Laughs)

Jerry: Ah, that's B.B. Ah, yeah. Great line. B.B. was like a very innovative bass player.

Lonnie: And I'm gonna tell you right now, a lot of rock and roll bands back in the day, after we did that song, a lot of rock and rollers simulated the bassline.

We were ahead of our time. *Gimme that bass!*

(bass ends)

Jerry: I never re-recorded any of this stuff. I always made the original jam work. You know, it's more organic that way. And that's why it's so raw. And that's why it's War.

(music out)

Lonnie: So then we come back in and say, 'Okay. Let's put some real lyrics on.' And it just so happened that Charles Miller, our saxophone player at the time, walked in the studio, and he had just parked his lowrider car outside. He'd just bought it (chuckles).

Jerry: And we all went out to see it.

Lonnie: '52 Chevy! Ooh, it was nice!

Jerry: And I said, you got that lowrider out there. And why don't we write a song about you, about lowriders? And he went out on the mic, and we wrote down everything that we wanted to write about lowriders, and the lowrider vibe, and the lowrider culture.

(Vocals: "All my friends know the low rider")

Charles had a, his own real style of singing. He was kind of brilliant in his own way. And he was a great sax player. And he also had a unique vocal sound.

(Vocals: "The low rider is a little higher, yeah")

Lonnie: The lowrider culture, the beginning of it all, was happening in Los Angeles, East LA. And we came out with a culture, you know, of people, Hispanics and Blacks, who shared the same dreams of fixing up a car and seeing who can have the best car, who can drop it the lowest. I mean, it was a crazy scene at the time.

(Vocals: "The low rider drives a little slower / Low rider is a real goer")

I was in the studio playing the piano while they were trying to work out the lyrics. And then I came back in to hear what they had.

Jerry: And then Lonnie said, why don't we try, uh, "Take a little trip?"

(Vocals: "Take a little trip / Take a little trip / Take a little trip and see / Take a little trip / Take a little trip / Take a little trip with me")

(acoustic guitar riff)

Lonnie: And then – acoustic on a song like that? Howard Scott.

Jerry: Howard Scott.

(RMI piano)

Lonnie: That piano sound is called an RMI. RMI piano.

Only a few bands had those. They didn't really like 'em (chuckles). But I liked the attitude it had.

Jerry put it on tape and said, okay, let's put it on there. Without thinking about it, because thinking, for us, was a disease.

Jerry: That's right. Nobody thought. We just.

Lonnie: No thinking.

Jerry: We just did.

Lonnie: Just do it, yeah.

Lonnie: All of our music is sax,

(saxophone riff)

and harmonica.

(same riff on harmonica)

Jerry: That's the horn section.

Lonnie: That's our horn section. Period.

(sax and harmonica)

(same riff on xylophone)

And that's me on the little xylophones.

Jerry: People don't even know the xylophone's in there, by the way.

Lonnie: No they don't. But it's a mix.

Jerry: That's part of the sound.

You know, it's like, that's what we did. We just did what we felt. And you know, there was a xylophone there that day. I didn't order it. It was just from the previous session, I guess. And actually, Stevie Wonder worked in the afternoons, and we worked in the evenings. So, I guess Stevie had it or something, you know.

(same riff on xylophone)

The line is a hook all by itself. "Da-da-da-da-da-da-da."

(sax and harmonica)

Lonnie: And if you ask someone, they said, yeah, I know that song you guys did, that "Da da da da da, da-da-da-da-da." (Laughs)

Jerry: Yeah, when I tell people who're younger, you know, or maybe don't know "Low Rider," and I sing the hook? Everybody knows that.

Lonnie: And then they sing. "Low rider..."

(Vocals: "The low rider is a little higher")

And that's it.

Jerry: I mean, I spent days editing this thing to get it right. 'Cause I had to finish the

album, and this was the last song I was doing on the album.

And it's six o'clock in the morning and I'm at Sound City, and I've got five edited versions that I had done that day.

And I took the shortest version. Because you never get enough in three minutes. And don't overdo it. Just give 'em enough. Just what it needs, and that's it.

I had a friend on some local radio station. And before we actually released it, I had this radio station play it. And the phones, the guy was saying he's never had the phones light up like it did.

Lonnie: (Chuckles) The lowrider community, and especially the Hispanic community, I mean, they made us.

Jerry: We had a huge Mexican American following. And a huge Mexican following, 'cause we would play towns like El Paso, and get more pesos in the box office than dollars.

"Low Rider" has a life of its own.

Lonnie: (Chuckles)

Jerry: It's been done so many different ways, and so many different times.

Lonnie: Yeah. I didn't even know half of the rappers until they started sampling our music! You know.

Jerry: The Beastie Boys.

Lonnie: A lot of rappers come up on stage with us. What's-the-name with the, the big clock?

Hrishikesh: Flavor Flav?

Lonnie: Yeah, Flavor Flav came up on stage. I said, wow, I'm... yeah.

Jerry: Yeah, it's kind of crazy.

Before I met these guys, I'd write the song, I'd arrange the song, I'd hire the musicians, I'd tell them what to play. So I was in total control of all the sessions.

And then they came along, and they were different from anything I'd ever worked on.

Lonnie: *Totally* different.

Jerry: The most interesting ensemble of people that I have worked with.
And the one thing I always did is allow everybody to do, you know, whatever you are, you are, whatever you want to play, you want to play. And it was completely opposite of what I had done before. I learned from them.

Lonnie: We all learned from each other, too.

Jerry: And we had a good time.

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

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And now, here's "Low Rider," by War, in its entirety.

("Low Rider" by WAR)

To learn more, visit songexploder.net. You can find links to buy or stream "Low Rider," and you can watch the music video.

War will be on tour in the USA over the summer of 2024, and you can get tickets for that at war.com.

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.

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I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. Thanks for listening.