

Song Exploder
Crowded House - Don't Dream It's Over
Episode 274

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.

("Don't Dream It's Over" by CROWDED HOUSE)

Crowded House formed in 1985 in Melbourne, Australia. They've released eight albums, including their most recent one, *Gravity Stairs*, which came out last month. But on their very first album, they had a big hit with "Don't Dream It's Over."

When I was a kid, my older sister had a mixtape of her favorite songs that she'd made by taping them off the radio. We used to listen to that one tape over and over again. "Don't Dream It's Over" was a big fixture on it. She and I used to try and imitate Neil Finn's accent when we sang along.

Crowded House made "Don't Dream It's Over," with Grammy-nominated producer Mitchell Froom, who they went on to work with multiple times. For this episode, I talked to frontman Neil Finn about how the song was first written, and then how it developed with his bandmates and collaborators in the studio. And we talked about the profound connection people have had with it over the years.

("Don't Dream It's Over" by CROWDED HOUSE)

(Vocals: "Hey now, hey now / Don't dream it's over / Hey now, hey now / When the world comes in / They come, they come / To build a wall between us / We know they won't win")

(music fades out)

Neil: My name is Neil Finn, and I am the lead singer of the band Crowded House.

My brother Tim started an amazing band when I was about 14 called Split Enz. My brother was nearly six years older than me. So, I was watching what he was doing at university and, you know, just absolutely transfixed by it, and I wanted to be part of it. And then Phil Judd, the other songwriting partner, left the band.

I didn't expect to be asked to join Split Enz as young as I was—I was, you know, 18 years old. But Tim rang my mother to make sure it was okay if he asked me to join the band; son to mother courtesy. And she said yep.

Then Tim rang me and yeah, I got the shock of my life.

The band Split Enz continued for seven years after I joined.

Towards the end, Tim announced to us that he wanted to go off and have his own experience of music, and of life.

Then I was faced with the choice of, well, do I keep going in this band, and as a lead singer? But it just seemed too intimidating, and I wanted to strike out.

Paul Hester was Split Enz' last drummer. Paul was an incredible drummer. I loved playing with him. We discussed the possibility of forming a new band.

We had gone all out to find a bass player. We found Nick Seymour in that process, who impressed us by dancing around the control room as he played on our new demos.

(piano version)

And so, I went to my brother's house one day. Paul was living in my brother's house in Melbourne. And he had invited a whole bunch of people over, which... I was not into socializing that day.

So went and hid in the music room, um, played my brother's piano.

Yeah, the song just emerged at that point.

It's quite a fertile state for me to be melancholy when I'm writing. 'Cause the songs I like have a melancholy tinge, so I suppose I need to be in that state.

I was contemplating a few things that young, really young men don't think about, you know: your place in the world, what's really valid and what's important.

Um, I had a young family at the time. I'd a young son and, yeah, navigating getting up in the night, with a new band about to start. I had the ability to be able to go again, you know, to start something.

So I was determined to try and do the right thing on all fronts. You know, trying to apply the right level of passion and commitment to my music, and trying to be a good human being at the same time. It's not always compatible.

(piano version ends)

Later that day. I went home and went to my little music room where I had a four track recorder at that point, little cassette four track, and made the demo of the song.

("Don't Dream It's Over" by CROWDED HOUSE - demo)

(Lyrics: "There is freedom within / There is freedom without / Try to catch the deluge in a paper cup")

It became a guitar song.

I had a delay, a Roland Space Echo, in my room, so I just put everything through it, including the guitar there, obviously.

And I created a little snare track by tapping a matchbox, uh, with my finger.

(demo with matchbox snare)

(Vocals: "Hey now, hey now / Don't dream it's over / Hey now, hey now / When the world comes in / They come, they come / To build a wall between us / We know they won't win")

(demo fades down)

Home demos often have some degree of intimacy about them that's almost impossible to recreate in the studio.

(demo out)

Because you're sort of discovering a song at the same time as performing it, just after you've written it. So you've got this sense of extra yearning 'cause you're going *I think this is great, I think this is great... and I'm gonna make it sound great.*

So, I don't know, there's some real force of will applied to demos that give it a unique atmosphere.

(demo fades back up)

I played it to my wife. She's usually my first audience if I've got something I like. I'm always greatly reassured by her grooving to it. She's a very good dancer, and I've a vague memory of her hips starting to move, listening to it. That's her way of telling me that it's a great song.

(music stops with tape click)

I do remember taking it to rehearsal a few days later. And we knew it was good, but it really didn't sound good, at rehearsal, at all. We couldn't figure out how to translate the song into a band arrangement. It's hard to translate a, a matchbox snare drum into a full drum kit [chuckles].

But the song really emerged in its record form when I got together with Mitchell Froom.

He was really young in that whole field of production, but I really liked him and he had some good ideas.

I got together with him very soon after making that demo.

And he actually did immediately respond to "Don't Dream It's Over." He was the first person to sort of pick that out and say, wow, that's a really special song, that one.

He had a little setup in his shed out the back, you know, with a blaster box that he'd record onto.

(pad begins)

Mitchell played a little, really subtle pad in the early parts of the song. He was, you know, playing a Hammond, while I played guitar with him.

(add guitar)

It was, you know, really surprising to me to have these new angles suddenly put in front of me that I would never have come up with.

(pad and guitar continue)

One being the Hammond organ solo, which I'd never have dreamed of. I'd never even come close to a Hammond organ up to that point.

(add Hammond)

And I thought, oh, there's something a little more universal about the sound of this track now.

(Hammond ends)

We recorded at Capitol Studios. We were a young band. We hadn't really figured out how to be a band yet.

Uh, Mitchell I don't think was that sure that the band was capable of doing the things that he thought the band should be able to do [chuckles].

And in that early period, I had my doubts as well, you know. Nobody was that sure, going into making the record, how this was gonna turn out.

The day before we recorded "Don't Dream It's Over," we had a shuffle on the record called "Now We're Getting Somewhere."

A shuffle is a very difficult thing for a lot of bands to do well. And Mitchell was not at all convinced that the band knew how to do a shuffle properly.

And so Mitchell brought in Jim Keltner and Jerry Scheff.

Hrishikesh: Jim Keltner played drums for Bob Dylan, Neil Young, and Simon and Garfunkel. And Jerry Scheff was in Elvis Presley's band, and played bass for The Doors. These guys are legendary session musicians.

Neil: It ended up a really anxious day because Paul and Nick were feeling quite overlooked, rejected, by having other musicians come in.

But those guys were such a, an incredible presence in the studio. And Paul and Nick ended up just being overjoyed to be there and see how that went down. And it made a huge difference.

However, the next morning, I think, Paul and Nick probably were a little sad because it was like, well, that was a great day, but we weren't the band for that.

So, "Don't Dream It's Over" took on a slightly sadder aspect than we had played it at rehearsal.

(album version - drums, bass, guitar)

I, mean it's a beautiful feel, and there is sadness in there. Those guys were contemplating their future.

I just heard a whisper of my vocal in the drum track.

(drums, bass, guitar with whisper of vocal)

Yeah, that—we were all in the same room.

Paul was just over here to my left.

(drums, bass)

He had the kind of feel where his high hat would match my guitar strumming perfectly.

(add guitar)

And that isn't the case with many, many drummers.

(music ends)

Nick's entry to "Don't Dream" is a very signature thing for him. He'd, I daresay he could probably get into a restaurant by singing that bassline. "I'm Nick Seymour. You know? [Sings bass part] "do-do-do-do-do-do-do-do-do-do".

(bass entry line)

(bass continues with guitar)

Nick was a wild card. He was sort of adding a little funkier element to the bass than what I was used to.

He'd always come at a song in a different manner, which was the reason we hired him. But sometimes I'd have to sort of, you know, temper his enthusiasm. You know, hey, settle down a bit there now, Nick.

(bass and guitar continue, add vocals)

(Vocals: "Now I'm towing my car / There's a hole in the roof / My possessions are causing me suspicion / But there's no proof")

I was really happy with that whole verse.

"Now I'm towing my car. There's a hole in the roof. My possessions are causing me suspicion, but there's no proof."

That, to me, conjured up that feeling of, you gather possessions around you in your life and they seem really important, but they also can become burdensome and weigh you down and make you distracted from what the real stuff is. And, you know, when they start to break down, you feel like the world's falling apart a little bit. That's where the real truth is.

(“In the paper today / Tales of war and of waste / But you turn right over to the TV page”)

I loved the sound of double tracking electric guitar.

(double tracked electric guitar)

Suddenly you're lifted out of the reality of just being one guy and a guitar, and it gives it a slightly fantasy kind of sound.

(add guitar flourishes and flangs)

That's Tim Pierce playing the electric guitar flourishes.

Mitchell brought a friend of his, not knowing whether I was really capable of playing delicate lead lines.

(guitar - delicate lead line)

That was a beautiful touch.

(add vocals)

(Vocals: "Hey now, hey now / Don't dream it's over")

I'm happy with the vocal, and I'm pushing it quite a bit.

(Vocals: "When the world comes in / They come, they come")

I'd have to, you know, decide I'm gonna hit those notes. You can't be halfhearted about them.

I would routinely lose my falsetto, in those days, early in a tour, 'cause I'd be pushing my voice so hard and it made that song very difficult. I had to give the falsetto to Paul on a few occasions. I said, "You just gotta sing [sings] "dream." And I'd get both he and Nick to sing it on stage. 'Cause there was times on stage

I would go, [sings] "Hey now, hey now, don't... it's," I'd lose it completely. Wouldn't be able to sing that high note.

So, yeah. I've created a little monster for myself.

(Vocals: "Hey now, hey now / Don't dream it's over / Hey now, hey now / When the world comes in / They come, they come / To build a wall between us / We know they won't win")

(music ends)

I was aware it had a double edge to it. It had a slight sadness inherent in it. But it also had a hopeful chorus of continuing on. Don't let the negative thoughts, the tyrants, the oppressors, don't let them win.

But at the time when the record was about to come out, the prevailing wisdom was, you have to have an upbeat song for a young band. So people weren't considering "Don't Dream It's Over" as, certainly not as a first single.

They tried two or three songs before that, none of which really worked in any major kind of way.

(scoring - drums)

But there was a woman at Capitol called Paulette McCubbin, who was a junior promotion staff person, but she absolutely adored the record. And she made it her mission to ring all the stations, you know, in smaller markets, and hounded them to play the song. And actually that's where our initial success came: through secondary markets, and started to perform really well.

(scoring - add pad)

And some of the big stations then cottoned onto it.

And I remember we flew into LA not long after that, maybe two or three weeks later. And in the car from the airport, the radio was on and I heard it on the radio.

(scoring - add Hammond)

That made me realize that it was on its way.

(music ends)

It's had a lot of big moments in its life, "Don't Dream It's Over." There was a particularly profound moment, which is captured on video. The band was breaking up, we'd decided to call it quits, and we had a, an audience of maybe 150,000 people on the steps of the Sydney Opera House.

(clip plays)

There's just a very intense feeling attached to that performance.

(Neil with audience: "Hey now, hey now / Don't dream it's over / Hey now, hey now / When the world comes in / They come, they come / To build a wall between us / We know they won't win")

There's a very poignant shot of Paul shedding tears as we were singing "Don't Dream It's Over."

So, you know, I'll always remember that one.

(clip fades out)

And somehow the song has seemed to be resonant and appropriate for people in a number of different occasions.

Ariana Grande sang it in Manchester when they were mourning the loss of a whole lot of people at one of her concerts. And Bono and Edge just performed it in Las Vegas recently as a response to world events, and to the loss of Alexei Navalny. And it continually surprises me where it turns up and who finds their way into singing it, you know?

(guitar flang and then scoring)

It's a very interesting process, songwriting, because I haven't really figured it out. And I can honestly say I don't know what I'm doing most days.

Which is not something I deliberate over. I don't think, oh, I've gotta write something that's gonna mean something in 30 years' time. It's not like that. It's never that deliberate.

It's a really wonderful thing about having songs become part of people's life story. And I'm eternally grateful for that connection.

I can't fully explain it. You know, I'm really grateful. It's also a great mystery.

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

And now, here's "Don't Dream It's Over" by Crowded House, in its entirety.

("Don't Dream It's Over" by CROWDED HOUSE)

To learn more, visit songexploder.net. You'll find links to buy or stream "Don't Dream It's Over," and you can watch the music video. We also put up links for you to check out Crowded House's new album, *Gravity Stairs*, which is out now.

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.