

Song Exploder
Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young - Our House
Episode 281

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.

Could you tell me about the day that you wrote the song? Do you remember it?

Graham: I do indeed. I had, uh, taken, uh, my girlfriend Joni Mitchell, uh, to breakfast

("Our House" by CROSBY, STILLS, NASH & YOUNG)

at a delicatessen on Ventura Boulevard in Los Angeles. It was at the end of winter, a completely awful day. Rainy and foggy and very, very cold. After breakfast, Joni and I were walking to where her car was parked, and we passed an antique store. Joni saw a vase that she wanted to buy. It was in the back, about 10 inches high. Some hand-painted flowers around the edge. And Joni bought it.

We collected the vase and drove to our house in Laurel Canyon. And as I went through the front door, I said to Joan, I said, "Hey, Joan, why don't I light a fire? And you put some flowers in that vase that you bought today?"

Well, that's all I needed. While Joni was in the backyard trying to find some flowers that hadn't died yet in winter, and I was at her piano, I got the first lines, and wrote the song.

("Our House" by CROSBY, STILLS, NASH & YOUNG)

(Vocals: "I'll light the fire / You place the flowers in the vase / That you bought today")

Hrishikesh: In 1968, singer and songwriter Graham Nash joined David Crosby and Stephen Stills to form the supergroup Crosby, Stills & Nash. All of them had already been in successful bands: Graham Nash had been in The Hollies; David Crosby was in The Byrds; and Stephen Stills was in Buffalo Springfield. And then, Neil Young joined them, to make Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young. The four of them released *Deja Vu* in 1970, and that album was a huge success. It sold over 8 million copies. It includes the song "Our House," and for this episode, I spoke to Graham Nash about the making of that song, and the relationship that led to the song.

How did you and Joni Mitchell first meet?

(music fades out)

Graham: We met early in 1967. The Hollies were playing a show in Ottawa, in Canada. Joni had been playing a show at a small folk club, and she came to see me. And our manager at the time was, uh, kind of nattering in my ear. And I said, "Hey, Robin. I'm not listening to you. I'm trying to figure out who this beautiful woman is over in the corner there."

Hrishikesh: (chuckles)

Graham: And he said, "Well, if you would listen to me, I'm telling you that that's Joni Mitchell and she wants to meet you." So I walked over to Joan. She had on a pale blue silk dress and she had on her knee what looked to me to be a Bible. But it was not a Bible. It was actually a music box. And she played it for me, and it had one note that was bad. And every time it got to that note, she would laugh.

And we would laugh because, you know, it was a music box. It's supposed to be perfect. She was staying at a hotel in Ottawa called the Chateau Laurier. We went back to the hotel. She played me 18 of the most beautiful songs I'd ever heard in my life.

Hrishikesh: Hmm.

Graham: I was in love completely. Instantly. I believed that she actually liked me also. But that's the night that I, I met Joni Mitchell.

Hrishikesh: Wow. Can you tell me a little bit about the house in question, uh, here in Laurel Canyon? When did you first encounter this house?

Graham: December the 10th, 1968. And I'd played with The Hollies on the 8th, and uh, flew the next day to, to meet Joni. Her house was at 8217 Lookout Mountain. But I pulled into the driveway and I heard other voices and that, that would kind of piss me off a little, because I just wanted to make time with Joan.

But it was David and Stephen, and they were having dinner with Joni at her house. So I went in and said hello to David. I'd known him before, because he came to England with the Byrds, and was staying at a, a very stuffy hotel. And so I called David and I said, you know, "Come and stay with me at my apartment. It's much groovier, you know." So I already knew David. I, I didn't know Stephen. The Buffalo Springfield had broken up and the Byrds had thrown David out of the band. And so Stephen and David were trying to get like a, a duo thing together, like The Everly Brothers, you know?

Hrishikesh: Mm-hmm.

Graham: And, uh, David said, "Hey, Stephen, play Willy that song." That's my middle name, Graham William Nash, and my friends call me Willy, even to this day. And I always know how old they'd been my friend when they call me Willy.

Hrishikesh: (chuckles)

Graham: So David said, "Hey, play Willy that song that we were just doing." It was a song called "You Don't Have To Cry." They played it; got to the end. I said, "Stephen, that's an incredible song. Play it again." They looked at each other; they shrugged. They played it again. I said, boy, I'm really good at what I do as a harmony singer. I, I've learned how David ends a certain phrase. I've seen Stephen's body language when he's about to finish a line. And I'd learned the words. I said, "Do me a favor. I'm not crazy. Play it one more time."

They played it one more time. I added my voice and in 45 seconds we had to stop and laugh because, even though the Buffalo Springfield and the Byrds and The Hollies were decent harmony bands, we had never heard this kind of sound.

("Our House" by CROSBY, STILLS, NASH & YOUNG)

(Vocals: "Only for you")

Anyone can sing the same notes as we can. That's no secret. But you can't sound like David and Stephen and I when we put our voices together and present it as one voice. And in that little 45 seconds of, of laughter and stuff like that, I realized I would have to go back to England and change my life.

Hrishikesh: Hmm.

Graham: You can't present me with a sound like that and not expect me to do something drastic. So I knew that I would have to go back to England and leave The Hollies and come to America and follow that sound.

(Vocals: "Now everything is easy 'cause of you")

Hrishikesh: Okay, I'd like to just play a little something here, and then I'd love to talk about it with you.

Graham: Got it.

(Vocals: "Such a cozy room / The windows are illuminated / By the evening sunshine through them / Fiery gems for you / Only for you")

That was recorded in Wally Heider Studio 3 in Los Angeles on Selma and Cahuenga.

Hrishikesh: So in this demo, it's just you, solo?

Graham: Yes.

Normally it was in C, but it was too high for me. And so I changed the key to A, and that's me putting it down in A, to make sure that that's the right key to actually make the record of.

Hrishikesh: I have a crutch of just like, pretty much everything is, I'm writing starts off in C or A minor, you know, because I can, I know where all the fingers are gonna go. Do you have that same thing? Like, do you tend to start in an all-white-keys place?

Graham: Yep. As simple as possible. Yes. Can you remember the first time you ever played a minor chord?

Hrishikesh: Yeah. (chuckles)

Graham: Quite amazing, isn't it?

Hrishikesh: Yeah. (chuckles)

Graham: Yeah. When you play a minor chord for the first time, the whole world opens up,

(minor chord)

and you get that feeling.

(minor chord resonates)

Hrishikesh: Do you remember showing this song to David and Stephen the first time?

Graham: I do. They loved the song. They thought it was very much a, a radio song, you know, that they could hear it on the radio.

And when we got to the solo,

("Our House" by CROSBY, STILLS, NASH & YOUNG)

(Vocals: "La-la, la-la-la-la-la / La-la-la-la, la-la-la-la-la / La-la-la-la-la-la-la / La-la-la-la-la-la-la")

Stephen said, "Hey, you know, in a really strange way that 'la la la' that you're singing on the demo is, is really, really cute. Let's try and do that."

Hrishikesh: When you had written that "la la la" part, were you intending it to stay that way? Or had you thought of that as a placeholder until that comment?

Graham: I imagined French horns playing, frankly.

Hrishikesh: Oh.

Graham: But when Stephen said "That "la la la" bit is kind of cute. Let's do that," um, I went right along with it, but I initially thought it was gonna be a French horn.

Hrishikesh: Did the song change in any other way from when you first wrote it to when you went to show it to your band mates?

Graham: No, it, it didn't change at all. It was a very simple record to make, 'cause it's an incredibly simple song. I really enjoy writing simple songs, because I want you immediately. I don't want you to wait for the fourth verse or the second chorus before you know what I'm talking about. I want you now.

Hrishikesh: Can you tell me about the day that you first started recording this song, then?

Graham: Yeah. I was in the Wally Heider studio. I was with Dallas Taylor, who was our drummer,

("Our House" by CROSBY, STILLS, NASH & YOUNG - drums)

and Greg Reeves, who was the bass player.

(add bass)

And we just made the record between ourselves, and then David and Stephen added their vocal parts.

Hrishikesh: Did you give specific direction to Dallas and Greg? Did you give them sort of a, a heads up of like, "Okay, this is what I'm looking for"? Like, what was the conversation with them like before you went and tracked it?

Graham: There was very little conversation when I was recording it, because I wanna play with musicians that wanna bring their best to it. And because they're great musicians, Dallas Taylor and Greg Reeves are incredible musicians, of course, there's very little talking.

I played 'em the demo, and then, I played it live for them, and then we recorded it. I think there's only, like, three takes of that song.

Hrishikesh: So this was pretty fresh after writing it?

Graham: Very much so. Yeah, I like to do that because I can still feel inside of me what it's gonna be. I can still feel that it's gonna be a great radio record. I can still feel that it's possibly gonna be well-received by the audience.

Hrishikesh: Yeah, there is something that can be lost if you've lived with a song for too long before you go to record it, where it's not surprising you anymore.

Graham: You know, once you've played a song for 20 times, you've lost it. It's gone. You know, you're just performing it. You're not actually living it.

Hrishikesh: Hmm.

Graham: And you're living it in those first couple of takes that you do.

Hrishikesh: So, one of the things that, that I think is interesting about the song is that there are two piano tracks.

Graham: Mm-hmm.

Hrishikesh: This track,

("Our House" by CROSBY, STILLS, NASH & YOUNG - piano)

but then also this track.

("Our House" by CROSBY, STILLS, NASH & YOUNG - piano)

Graham: Right.

Hrishikesh: Could you tell me uh, a little bit about your decision to put two layers of piano in the recording?

Graham: One part that I recorded is doing basically the high part

("Our House" by CROSBY, STILLS, NASH & YOUNG - piano)

and the other is playing the bass part.

("Our House" by CROSBY, STILLS, NASH & YOUNG - piano)

I wanted to fatten up the piano. I'm, I'm not a great musician. I'm a very simple guitar, piano player, and so I wanted to fatten up the sound of the piano.

(Add vocals: "Staring at the fire / For hours and hours while I listen to you / Play your love songs all night long for me")

Hrishikesh: I know you said that the first line, you know, just came right from your experience of that day, the "I'll light the fire, you place the flowers..." What about the rest of the lyrics?

Graham: Well, completing that verse is: uh, "You played your love songs all night long for me," which is what she did in Ottawa. She played me all those beautiful, beautiful songs. And then I, I, in the second verse, I say, "Come to me now and rest your head for just five minutes. Everything is done." That's an English phrase about everything being done, meaning the dishes had been washed, you know, the carpet had been vacuumed, everything was done.

(Vocals: "Come to me now / And rest your head for just five minutes / Everything is done")

And then of course, the chorus. Our house was a very, very fine house. And she had two cats: Calico and Hunter. One was a calico, uh, red and black, and Hunter was purely black, and yeah, there were two cats in the yard. Mm-hmm.

(Vocals: "Our house is a very, very, very fine house / With two cats in the yard / Life used to be so hard / Now everything is easy 'cause of you")

Hrishikesh: Could I also ask you about the harpsichord, um, how did you decide to include harpsichord in the track?

Graham: We used the Harpsichord 'cause there's no guitars on there.

("Our House" by CROSBY, STILLS, NASH & YOUNG - harpsichord)

There are no guitars on this track. It's just piano. And so in trying to make it just piano, I wanted a real big sound.

("Our House" by CROSBY, STILLS, NASH & YOUNG - all instruments)

Hrishikesh: My conversation with Graham Nash continues after this.

How did it end up working out that you went into the studio before David and Stephen showed up? Was that always the plan?

Graham: It just happened that way. You know, people sleep in late. Normally we would be in the studio until three or four in the morning. And uh, I just happened to be awake, and so was Dallas, and so was Greg. So we just went in the studio at two o'clock, you know, and, uh, they just were late to the studio. And so, me and Dallas and, and Greg just cut the record. We knew that once we'd done it, that we had got the essence of, of the song down, and we knew that David and Stephen, when they came in to listen to it, they would love it. And they would know exactly what to do as overdubs.

Hrishikesh: This song doesn't have Neil Young on it.

Graham: Neil, um, is not on "Our House," 'cause what would Neil do? He's Neil Young, for God's sake. An incredibly great guitar player, and I think he's a very decent singer. But there was no room for Neil, and Neil knew that. Neil listened to it and

he goes, "It's done. Why try and screw with it?"

Hrishikesh: Hm. I'd love to listen to the vocal arrangement now. 'Cause I have these three tracks of your voice:

(Vocals: "Such a cozy room (such a cozy room)")

and two tracks of David,

(Vocals: "Such a cozy room")

and two tracks of Stephen.

(Vocals: "Such a cozy room")

Graham: We wanted to make sure that it sounded fabulous. And that's how we did it.

(All harmonies: "Such a cozy room (such a cozy room) / The windows are illuminated / By the evening sunshine through them / Fiery gems for you, only for you")

Hrishikesh: So, one thing I wanted to ask you about is this moment where you sort of split off into this sort of counterpoint thing.

(Vocals: "Our house is a very, very, very fine house / (Very very very fine house)")

Could you tell me about that moment? That's one of the parts that I always, when I think about the song, I think of this moment.

Graham: So, what happened is, basically, it was a mistake,

Hrishikesh: Really?

Graham: Oh, yeah. It was David and Stephen just drifting off into a different part. But you see, that's what I like about first and second takes, you know, sometimes mistakes can happen that really, really are not mistakes. And so, once we did that, we made it a part of the vocal blend, but it was actually, it started out as a mistake.

(Vocals: "Is a very, very very very fine house")

Hrishikesh: What was it like just now for you to hear that vocal track? Do you still have any kind of emotional reaction at this point to hearing this song, or to hearing something like that in isolation?

Graham: I must confess that when you played uh, that, my mind was on David Crosby. Uh, you know, he passed away about a year and a half ago. And uh, that's what I was listening to. I was listening to David's part and realizing how much I loved him and how much I missed him.

(David solo vocals: "Our house is a very, very, (very, very, very) fine house / With two cats in the yard / Life used to be so hard")

(add piano)

("Now everything is easy 'cause of you / And our")

(All harmonies: "La-la-la-la-la-la-la / La-la-la-la-la-la-la...")

Hrishikesh: When did you first realize that the song was a hit?

Graham: The moment I recorded it.

Hrishikesh: (laughs)

Graham: We are good musicians. You know, we, we know what's good and what's not.

Hrishikesh: Yeah. You don't need the external validation of the audience to tell you that it was a hit.

Graham: Nope.

Hrishikesh: Okay, there's just one more thing that I wanted to play for you.

(Vocals: "Our house is a very, very, very fine house / With two cats in the yard / Life used to be so hard / Now everything is easy 'cause of you / And our / La-la-la-la-la-la-la / La-la-la-la-la-la-la...")

Graham: That's the time that we were in Philadelphia at the music hall there, and Joni was with me. And I started to, at soundcheck, play "Our House," And she joined me on vocal and piano. That's the only time it ever happened.

Hrishikesh: Oh, really? That's the only time it ever happened?

Graham: Mhmm. And I think that was pretty spontaneous because I can hear her changing the harmony line from right above me to really above me.

("Everything is done")

Graham: Shit.

Joni: (laughs)

("Such a cozy room / The windows...")

Hrishikesh: I just, I love that part.

Graham: Yep. That's me and Joni.

(Vocals: "And (and) our (our) / I'll light the fire / You place the flowers in the vase / That you bought today")

Joni: (sighs) (laughs)

Hrishikesh: Why were you recording this uh, at soundcheck?

Graham: I wasn't, but it was our front of house sound guy that was. I didn't ask him to record it. I was just making sure that I could hear the piano. So it wasn't something that I said, "Hey, record", it was done completely spontaneously.

Hrishikesh: Hmm. Hearing that version again - What does that evoke for you?

Graham: That version of, of Joni and I playing it with four hands on the piano, I feel good about it. This was a very special moment between Joni and I.

Hrishikesh: Can I ask you, how is it that you have such exquisite detail in your, your memories? I'm so impressed that you know the date that you left the band, that you remember, the hand-painted flowers around the uh, bottom of the vase. You know, I interview people for this show all the time. And there are people who are talking about a song that they wrote the year before and they can't remember anything.

Graham: I have a good memory. I'm 82 now. It was a very important time in my life. I mean, to live and love Joni Mitchell was incredibly special to me.

And as a musician, of course, I'm on the road a lot. To be able to write a song about my actual home where I lived was very comforting for me.

And it was easy to remember, because, you know, that's when I first put my voice together with David and Stephen's, in Joni's living room, with Joni as the only witness to the beginning of Crosby, Stills & Nash.

(instrumental out)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Our House," by Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young, in its entirety.

("Our House" by CROSBY, STILLS, NASH AND YOUNG)

To learn more, visit songexploder.net. You'll find links to buy or stream "Our House."

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

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I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. Thanks for listening.