

**Song Exploder**  
**Jeff Tweedy - *How to Write One Song***  
**Bonus Episode**

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.

Last summer, I got to go to the Solid Sound Festival in North Adams, Massachusetts, which is organized by the band Wilco. I performed some of my new songs and I got to interview Jeff Tweedy, the lead singer of Wilco, on stage as part of the festival. Jeff, in addition to being in Wilco and the band Tweedy, and putting out his solo albums, has also written three books. And this conversation was focused on his second book, which is called *How to Write One Song*. And even though it's called *How to Write One Song*, I think it actually contains a lot of insight about creativity in general, and life in general. I've recommended it to friends of mine who aren't songwriters. And as you'll hear, the conversation gets pretty personal for me, because I got so much out of the book, personally. It helped me with some of the blocks that I'd been facing in my own songwriting, at a pretty profound level. And when I was listening back to this recording, I'd kind of forgot about how much I put out there in front of Jeff and the thousand or so people who were there watching. But I'm glad the conversation was recorded, partly just so I could revisit it, but also so that I could share it here on Song Exploder. I hope you'll enjoy it, too. Here it is:

Thank you so much for being here. So, I make a podcast called Song Exploder. This is gonna be a little bit different from what that show is. That's a show about how a song gets made. But for this, I wanted to talk to Jeff instead of about how a song got made, about how his book, *How to Write One Song*, got made.

Jeff: (chuckles)

Hrishikesh: Part of the reason why I wanted to talk to Jeff about this is not just because it's really well-crafted and has a lot of wisdom in it, but because, yeah, it had a profound effect on me. I started making podcasts 10 years ago, which, not coincidentally, is also the time when I stopped making music. Um, I'd been making music for about 12 years professionally, to the extent that I could manage that. And then I ran into some really rough writer's block, and I didn't know if I was gonna make music again. I didn't know what I was gonna do.

I started making Song Exploder in that time. And then, after many years of being in that place, I started to slowly emerge and started to write again. And Jeff's book helped me a lot. So this is a special experience for me because I am going

to get to talk to the person who really made that happen for me.

Jeff: That's so sweet to know. I really, that I'm, I, I'm excited to talk about that. Thank you.

Hrishikesh: Great. Well, I, I first want to just ask, where did the idea to write this book in particular come from?

Jeff: Well, I was asked to write a book. It would never have occurred to me. The first book, the memoir. And the, the question with that book was: I'm only half done living as far as I can, I'm concerned, so, do I have enough life to write about? And um, we had a family discussion, and I think mostly my kids were like, yeah, you should do it. And I usually listen to them when they say I should do something.

So I, I learned how to write a book. You know, I didn't know how to write a book. I started a couple of different ways. And then I ended up writing *Let's Go (so We Can Get Back)*.

And, and I enjoyed the, when I finished it, I thought, oh my God, that is the best feeling in the world, finishing a book. That's like, that's honestly a better feeling than finishing a record. It's like so arduous and uncomfortable. But it's really rewarding to feel like you actually did it. You know, it's an accomplishment.

But when I was thinking about it after the fact and the book did well enough for my publisher and my editor to ask if I was interested in writing another book, I thought about the part of the book that I had the most, uh, fun writing. The part that I felt like I had the most to say, but wasn't necessarily the context to say it in. And that was about, the parts about creativity, and the parts about why it means so much to get to do what I get to do.

And, and then I had some reinforcement from my friend George Saunders, who, he, he was very, very complimentary about, in particular, those passages in the memoir that were about creativity. He thought that they were really insightful. Or, or I don't know, he just, he was just very, very generous and, and encouraging.

And so, I thought, well, where would I start if I was gonna write about creativity? You know, I'd say that I think the title alone is basically all I want to say. So everything in the book is an elaboration on it.

But it's very similar to the philosophy of life. How to live one day, how to write one song. You don't write songs, you write *one* song. You write through the song. It's the song that is given to you. And you honor it and finish it and, and, and move on to the next songs. Like, like we do all of our days and with all of our, our life.

And, um, and so that really grew out of the title after that point. Y'know, after I thought, well, how do you write one song, and then give yourself the permission to write another one, I guess? You know.

Hrishikesh: Had you –

Jeff: By the way, if you bought the book and you've written one song, you need to buy another book,

Hrishikesh & Audience: (laughs)

Jeff: To write another song. That was also part of the marketing plan. (laughs)

Hrishikesh: Had you ever done anything like teaching songwriting to other people before?

Jeff: No, uh, no. It's just something, I, I mean, I realized writing the memoir that it's the one thing I've thought about the most in my life. Not-- um, a lot of people that are musicians, I think, spend a lot of time thinking about, uh, gear. And I do that too, and how do you get to a certain, uh, place where you make a certain sound and, and things like that.

And, I guess, I've always been a little interior and a little philosophical about it. It's like, it's not like, you know, how, what did The Beatles do to sound like they did? It was more like, why did the Beatles sound like they did? Not based on gear, but like, what's the, I don't know. How do you, how do you do that? How do you give yourself permission to do that? It's always been the biggest question on my mind, I think.

Hrishikesh: Well, normally, you know, at, at a book talk event, there's a reading by the author. But one of the things that I really love,

Jeff: But I can't read, so.

Audience: (laughs)

Hrishikesh: (chuckles) Which makes it so, really exceptional, that you, you've written now multiple bestsellers.

Jeff: I realized that I can write at a 12th grade level and then doing the audio books, I realized that I read at, like, a fourth grade level. (laughs)

Audience: (laughs)

Hrishikesh: Well then you're in for a treat because rather than have Jeff do a reading, I have

taken clips from the audio book.

Jeff: Oh great.

Audience: (laughs)

Hrishikesh: Um, to play back.

Jeff: Heavily edited (chuckles).

Audience: (laughs)

Hrishikesh: I wanted to start with a bit from the book that comes towards the end. But really again, it, it, this is part of what hit home for me. Because, as you heard me describe, I had been in what I called writer's block.

*(Audiobook clip: "I guess now is the time to admit that I've always been skeptical of the term "writer's block." Not because I've never experienced a period when I've felt unproductive or uninspired, but because I recognized that it isn't really a block, it's a judgment.")*

Jeff: (chuckles)

Hrishikesh: I started to be like, Jeff, are you in my house? Are you in my head? And there were several moments like that, um, where I felt like you were writing directly to my experience and the, and the things that were preventing me from, from writing, um, which had, had come from, you know, a decade of making music and not getting to the place where I'm like, "Ahh, I've made it. I can sit back and, you know, everything is fun in the sun now." Um, and, uh, and then when I started making this podcast, talking to people like yourself, just like incredible songwriters, incredibly successful musicians, it sort of reinforced the feeling that like, oh, maybe this is not, maybe this really is not the path for me. I need to leave this to the people who are the geniuses, the certifiable auteurs. And uh, so I'm gonna play this other clip.

*(Audiobook clip: "Primarily you're going to have to respond to the merciless interrogations that your doubts and insecurities are gonna hit you with daily. Like 'Who do you think you are?' and 'Are you kidding me with this bullshit?'"*

So I'm, I'm wondering because it felt so personal to me. But there are also lots of moments in the book where you make reference to the sort of breadth of experience with songwriting that someone might have. You address folks who, you know, maybe, you know, don't play an instrument or maybe you play an instrument only a little bit.

I sort of managed to kind of skate past those things on the first listen. And just to think about how you felt like you were writing exactly for me, but I was wondering, were you imagining a specific audience when you were writing this? Was there somebody that you thought, "I'm writing for, for this person or this group of people?"

Jeff: Yeah. I think, as a songwriter, I've learned to think about myself as the audience. And what I would've liked to hear, uh, if I hadn't figured out how to give myself permission to write. Or, um, I think a lot of the music, musicians, the songwriters that I've responded to the most over a long period of time are the ones where I get the feeling that they don't see themselves as geniuses or something super apart from the rest of the world. I liked getting the sense that they're identifying something that they can admit makes them not so special.

I like the idea of, of really normal people doing extraordinary things. People that feel like that they're very, I don't know, *not* extraordinary, but able to summon this, this thing that I think we all have in us. Um, this creativity.

And a lot of people say, "no, I don't think everybody has that level of creativity", and surely there are levels of giftedness for certain aptitudes and songwriting, and things like that.

But we're all creative. We all improvise our conversations every day, we all improvise what we're gonna do when we're trying to get home from someplace and something goes wrong. We, we have the ability to think around problems. We have the ability to make shit up.

Audience: (laughs)

Jeff: Most, most of you are liars.

Hrishikesh & Audience: (laughs)

Jeff: When you need to be, a little bit. And that's not necessarily a bad thing. That's, that's a human part of your brain figuring out a way to construct a reality that, that is tenable. You know.

But I just think that I, I just like the idea that every— maybe I'm wrong— I just like the idea. So there's nothing gonna stop me from saying that I think this is the way people are. Because I think it's a better way to live. And if I'm, if I can keep myself believing that, then I'm one less person that doesn't believe that.

Hrishikesh: (chuckles) I'm gonna play one more clip here.

*(Audiobook clip: "For me, personally, the writing itself has definitely become the primary goal. Being fully engaged with the song I'm working on is what I look forward to the most in my life. Yes, I still have goals and desires. I want to finish albums, and be able to provide myself with new songs to perform. But the feeling I get when I write, the sense that time is simultaneously expanding and disappearing, that I'm simultaneously more me and also free of me, is the main reason I wanted to put my thoughts on songwriting down in book form to share with everyone so inclined.")*

You spend a lot of time in the book talking about getting to this state of, um, being able to ignore your ego. Really harnessing the subconscious.

Jeff: Yep.

Hrishikesh: And letting it come forward in a way that your normal, conversational, critical self might not allow. How did that kind of creative, uh, state that you described so eloquently here, and as so much of the book, were you able to access that at all and get to that kind of place when working in a medium like writing a book? Because to me, from the outside it feels very dis-- I mean, both things feel very distant, but is it something that you could incorporate in writing prose?

Jeff: I think the state of mind that I'm describing, people have described as a flow state. I think there's a, it works in sports, it, like I think it's a thing that people, certain people figure out how to do it, you know, just because they love doing something so much.

And then later on they identify that, when I'm doing this one thing that I love to do, time is different. I'm different. I'm not as burdensome to myself when I'm writing. I'm not as aware of the things that are upsetting me, and so therefore I want to spend as much time in that place as possible. And so I just kind of gravitated to that, maybe out of not being the happiest person sometimes, you know, and that was something I learned.

And then I guess just observing other people, just figuring out that, well, maybe not everybody has made that connection yet. That there's some, there's a place you can go.

I've actually talked, I talked to a physicist, on a different podcast one time. And he said, and, and I said, don't you ever disappear when you're working on a, on a problem or something? He's like, nope.

Audience: (laughs)

Jeff: I'm like, yes you do. He's like, "Nope. I'm always fully aware of where I am, and what I'm doing." I'm like, okay, well, it takes all kinds, I guess.

You know, but I just, I think you also have practices, like meditation and prayer, and, and exercise, other things that people do to get in a state of mind that's like that, where time isn't as, as oppressive. Um, where time does feel, um, like it just slips away, but it also feels like you have this expansive moment that you get to be in. So yeah, that's the part that I think that has led me to write a song every day, or try to write a song every day. 'Cause I just like, I'd like, I don't know. It really sounds like you don't like yourself when you say this, but I like not being weighted down by my, my identity, my ego in particular.

Egos are really, really, really, really helpful. They make us do a lot of shit that we wouldn't do if we weren't embarrassed of like, you know, if we weren't afraid of looking dumb and stuff like that. That, it's good for us, but they're also really, really damaging, and really, they really inhibit you from doing beautiful things too, you know? So, yeah, I just, I like being out of the room, not having that person that's inside of me in the room at the same time. He's here right now, on stage, for sure, but... (chuckles)

Hrishikesh: I feel like I have a better understanding having, from one, reading this book, but also just my own experience with, you know, music and being a fan of music, of how things can open up when you relax from some of the rules and relax from some of the "self" in that medium.

But that idea of sort of being "gone enough from yourself," is that something that you could also experience while, while working on this book? Did it feel like you had to also kind of put aside your, your critical mind?

Jeff: Oh, absolutely. I mean, honestly, I've written three books now and all three of them, when I did finish it and I had this really lovely feeling of having accomplished something, I did also kind of go, how did I do that? How did that, especially the last book, because I just wrote, I literally wrote it the way I write songs. I wrote a chapter every day for a long time and then just picked the 50 best ones. And, and it was just kind of like, wait, this is done? You know, which is a really good feeling, too.

But I wanted to go back to something you were asking about, um, did I picture other people, you know, where did I start from in terms of picturing an audience and what they wanted out of a book about songwriting. I wanted to start at the, at the most broad definition of a song that you could possibly imagine. That's, that was my goal, was to like have it be something that did not define a song in anything other than a moment that you felt like you could recreate. You know, and, just like, I used examples in the book, that we do things like this to make a, like... I know how to make my wife smile. You know? I think that's a song.

So I know how to, I know how to do that reliably. And that makes me so happy. And so I look at songs the same way. I think that there's a, a lot of songs that we play, I wouldn't play if it wasn't to have somebody to play 'em for, you know, because I know that I get to, I can make that moment happen again, or be a part of making that moment happen again. And that's, that's a song to me, you know. But I think you could fill a room with balloons, and that's a song. I don't know, just like, I just think that it should be, it's just a better place to start, than thinking, I need to write "A Day In The Life."

Audience: (laughs)

Jeff: You know, I need to write something that's gonna sit alongside "Baba O'Riley." It's like, good luck! You know?

Hrishikesh: (laughs)

Jeff: That's just not how it works. And yeah, so many of my favorite songs I've ever written, I was confronted with them early on saying, this is the stupidest shit I've ever written in my life. I hate this. But for some reason, I'm lucky to be dumb enough to just go, but I can't not finish it. Because then I'm putting myself in the position of making a judgment on it that I shouldn't get in the habit of.

Hrishikesh: I was wondering while you were, while you were writing the book. As I said, while I've been writing new songs myself, like this has been such an important reference for me. Did you have books or other things that you turned to, to help you with book writing?

Jeff: Uh, no. (chuckles)

Hrishikesh: (laughs)

Jeff: Not really. Just, I trust my editor, Jill Schwartzman. I trust Jill. She's, she's read a lot of books. And she says my book is not an embarrassment to the company, I'm happy. But I've read a lot of books, too. And I've listened to a lot of music and I really kind of figured that was the only experience I really needed. And then the other thing is I made a decision early on writing the first book that I wasn't trying to blow the doors off of literature. (chuckles) I wasn't gonna try and revolutionize the printed word. Uh, but I wanted it to sound like me. And so I read out loud a lot.

And if you read what you've written out loud, it, it's really easy to hear when things don't sound like the way you really want to come across, I think.

Hrishikesh: I have to say, I, I've read the book, but I also, I've listened to the audio book many



times and I, I do think there are parts of the book that feel extra special to me in the audio book form. So if you've read the book but you haven't listened to the audio book, I'd also encourage that.

And some jokes just feel funnier when you say them. I'm gonna play one of my favorite parts. I'm just gonna preface this: This is when you're, you're talking about a sort of...

Jeff: Daily schedule?

Hrishikesh: Yeah. Schedule your ideal creative day.

Jeff: This was Jill's idea. (chuckles)

*(Audiobook clip: "10 PM to 12 AM: Take a break, spend some time with the family. Do my crossword puzzle. Yes, I'm a crossword puzzle nerd, addict, but it sure beats the hell out of when I was an addict addict.")*

Audience, Hrishikesh, & Jeff: (laughs)

Hrishikesh: I have a specific question about this because I'm also a crossword addict. And I think I'm always trying to justify my crossword doing, you know, like, oh, I'm staving off Alzheimer's. I'm, this is not actually a waste of time. This is, I'm doing something good.

Jeff: Building dendrites.

Hrishikesh: (laughs) Um, have you ever found that doing the crossword has ever actually led to some creative idea for you? Has a song or anything else ever come out of the experience?

Jeff: No.

Audience: (laughs)

Hrishikesh: (laughs) Damn it.

Jeff: It's really not words. I mean, I mean, you learn a lot of words. You learn a lot of things doing crossword puzzles, but the structure of crossword puzzles, as you, I'm sure you know, is just based on a trick. You know, like it's, it's the words don't get harder, the clues get harder. Uh, so learning how to do crossword puzzles, is just a ba-- like it's accumulating enough words that you understand how the grid is put together.

I think, you know, and I'm a person. Let's see. I'm just gonna do a little bit of humble bragging here. Like, my longest streak, my longest streak was 1100 days. 1168. One thousand, one hundred and sixty-eight. 1168 days. My current streak is 393 because I forgot to do it one day during some part of a tour. Really bummed me out.

Hrishikesh: (laughs)

Jeff: I, yeah.

Hrishikesh: What bums me out is, this is the thing that I turn to, to fill, you know, I, I basically know how much time it's gonna take me, depending on what day of the week it is.

Um, there's a part in the book where you talk about how you are punctual. In fact early oftentimes, and that you give yourself this um, exercise in songwriting where you're like, I have 20 minutes before everybody else shows up for the bus. Can I write a song in that time?

Jeff: You can.

Hrishikesh: And um, you said a really beautiful thing --I did not clip it here-- about how even if at the end of it you don't have a song that you love, you have found a pleasurable way to pass the time. And now every time I take out my phone to do the crossword, I think I should be writing a song instead.

Jeff: No, no. You're doing something, you're not hurting anybody. That's the point. I think that's the main gist, is to find stuff to do that doesn't hurt anybody. Just like, please find something to do to stop hurting yourself, you know, too.

I honestly, I will say there have been many songs that I've written in, in that scenario where I, I know that I have to down in the lobby in 20 minutes and I'm sitting around with my bags packed and looking at everything and going, well I still have my guitar here, like, I'll try and write a song.

But very, a lot of my favorite songs have come about because of that. Just like that, like just open-ended permission. There's no way that you could write a great song in 20 minutes.

But it's like so often that's just the door that opens.

It reminds me of I don't know if this is in the book, but it's something I learned maybe talking about the book afterwards. In writers' rooms for comedy shows, they tell people, sometimes the prompt is write the worst joke you can imagine.

And everybody writes the same jokes that they've been writing, but they have permission to just show them to each other.

So it opens up a lot of creativity, you know.

Hrishikesh: One of the other bits from the book that I also love is, you know, while you're going through the exercises of getting somebody jumpstarted or breaking out of a, a mentality or something like that, you have this conversation that you recorded with your brother, and then you pull certain words and phrases from it, and then you rearrange it into a poem.

Jeff: Mm-hmm.

Hrishikesh: I'm just gonna play a little bit of that.

*(Audiobook clip: "I've talked to some who don't want to talk. They think talking might break the spell somewhere in the universe you don't worry about. Where I wasn't free, but I was getting well. And as you left, I started wondering if you would ever be able to tell. There's a difference between you and me from your point of view.")*

Hrishikesh: You know, again, I have the audiobook. So I've heard the actual conversation that you pulled this from and I saw on the page how you arranged it. I think it's so beautiful and I'm wondering when is that gonna be a, a, have you made that into a song?

Jeff: I forgot about that.

Audience: (laughs)

Jeff: But that's the beauty of doing the things that are described in the book is that's, that guy sounds smart.

Audience & Hrishikesh: (laughs)

Jeff: You know, like I, and I get to experience it in a way that...

Hrishikesh: Yeah, well, I'll put it out there. I think you should turn that into a song. Later, I was googling bits from that to be like, "Wilco, lyrics" and those phrases, and I was like, no, no, this song has not come. Not been born yet.

Jeff: Yeah. Now I, now I'll, I will take a closer look.

Hrishikesh: This was another, another piece of advice that really, that really hit me. This is a little passage from the book that just lives in my brain all the time now.

*(Audiobook clip: "But what's good? Isn't it a little strange that we enjoy doing a lot of things in life without the type of "good versus bad" judgment? Do you ever toss a Frisbee? Does it ever enter your mind to stop when you realize you suck?")*

And I think about it when I'm doing all of the things that I suck at and don't ever think about it. You know, now I sort of, I stop and think I kind of suck at this. And it doesn't bother me.

Jeff: Because nobody, nobody's gonna judge you if you suck at throwing a frisbee. I mean I am, but...

Hrishikesh: (laughs)

Jeff: It doesn't, it's lower, it's lower stakes. And I just think that people, a lot of times they wrap up so much of their self-worth in wanting to be really, really good at something that they just have poured themselves into.

Um, nobody really pours themselves into frisbee throwing unless you're a total jerk.

Audience: (laughs)

Jeff: I'm sorry. That's a hill I'll die on. And I base this on one experience with some Frisbee disc golf guys I ran into on a hike one time.

Hrishikesh: (laughs)

Jeff: All right. They're the the worst. But yeah.

I just think you, you should give yourself a break. I mean, that's basically like, if I'd just written the book as a pamphlet, it'd just be, give yourself a break.

Hrishikesh: How much was it on your mind that what you were writing was not just a book about songwriting? Like how much was it a present thought that you were also writing a book about how to live?

Jeff: Uh, I mean, I didn't really think about it, except that I mean, that there's an awareness that it's how I've lived. And, and again, starting from the point of view that you don't think that you're that unique or that much more special than somebody else, that gives you some confidence in sharing that maybe some strategy for living that I've discovered would be beneficial to somebody else.

And, and so yeah, I, I guess on that level I was aware from the very beginning,

that it's kind of a book about how to live. But um, yeah, I don't know. I venture into self-help territory a few times, I think.

Hrishikesh: In the book you, you reference uh, these techniques, a lot of which you've used over years. And you've had a long career writing songs. You've written so many songs. But I was wondering if you felt like, 15 years ago, if someone had said, here's the opportunity to write this book, would you have been able to assemble a collection of exercises and like this, or do you think you really needed the framework of having lived the life that you'd lived up to that point, to even start to put these words one in front of the other?

Jeff: Uh, no, I don't think so. I think that one of the advantages of getting older is having just more evidence that certain things work, and that certain things don't last forever. You just have more information, you have more data, you know? And 15 years ago, I would have probably, would've already had a lot of this practice in place, but nowhere near as much confidence that it's a sustainable enterprise, you know, or that it has some sort of durability. That comes with time.

The thing that fascinates me about getting older is, every day of your life as you get older, I'm sure everybody knows this, when they think about it. But every day of your life is a smaller fraction of your whole life. Every day.

And that, that always blows my mind. And always keeps things in perspective, you know, that, that, that's why things seem so much like the end of the world, when you've only had a little bit of world that you've experienced. And as you get older, um, it's just another little sliver of this thing that you've gotten to, to, that you've endured, you survived to get to that point.

But this also comes from migraines and comes from addiction and other things. Just go like, oh, they, yeah. I actually do know pretty confidently, panic issues and stuff like that, that I am gonna feel normal again. You know? So, I don't know. Songs help.

Audience: (applause)

Hrishikesh: My conversation with Jeff Tweedy continues after this.

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Hrishikesh: One of the other things that I, you know, turned to to get out of the place that I was and get someplace better besides your book was therapy. And there are parts of the book that veer dangerously into my therapy sessions.

Jeff: (laughs)

Hrishikesh: Like this really beautiful but also haunting question.

*(Audiobook clip: "In the end, learning how to write songs is in large part about teaching yourself to fail and being okay with it. But you have to stop thinking that you're going to make something great or something that might make you famous. You have to stop thinking about anything other than what happened when you were a little kid and you laid on the floor and you drew. And you lost yourself in that drawing. And in the end, you absolutely loved that drawing because you made it yourself. And the drawing got hung up on the fridge regardless of how good it was. Because your mom loves you and everybody loves you. Why can't you be that kind to yourself?")*

Audience: (applause)

Jeff: I forgot about that part.

Hrishikesh: It's a hard question to be asked. And I want to go back to what you had said about you, you being your first audience. That, you know, writing songs that you'd wished you, you could hear and, and you were writing a book that you wished you could read. And, and I wanted to go a little bit deeper into this kind of territory of talking to yourself with compassion like that.

Is that a sentence that you needed to hear at a certain point in your life that you had not heard? Like was there, is there a before and an after version of, of Jeff where you didn't have that question?

Jeff: Um, for sure. I mean, we need help. A lot of people, like myself need help. We need help from other people to help us identify things.

Like in therapy, in the hospital, it was 20 years ago now, that I was in the hospital. I still think about it every day and I still acknowledge that one of the biggest changes in my life was that I was doing a lot of things in my life for a long, big portion of my life without being aware that there was a choice to be made. And when, and you don't make good choices when you don't know that there's a choice to be made.

And, and so as you get better at knowing yourself, you are able to identify that there's a choice to be made and you have a better, a better shot at making a good choice.

You know, this is therapy, by the way, all of this. Pay attention, everybody. I'll ask you about your mother in a minute. (chuckles)

Um, but no, I think it's, I think that that's really, really key. And then the end goal, in my opinion, my assessment of it is to be able to tell yourself which part is your fault, and what part isn't your fault.

Because I think it's, for a lot of us, we don't know and we tend to blame ourselves for all of it, but there's a lot of shit, I'm telling you, it's not your fault. I feel so much better being better, at being better able to distinguish what's my fault and what's not my fault. And, and acting accordingly from that point on, you know. Not to say you don't take some responsibility for the things that aren't your fault, and correct. But you, but you also, I think you treat yourself better when you, when you are aware that not everything that happens to you is your fault in, or, you know, all the, all your whole life.

Hrishikesh: I think there's this need to sort of step outside yourself, like, like what you're talking about there, where everybody loves you, why can't you be that kind to yourself? Um, where, uh, I think it's very easy to give that kind of love to other people, um, and not turn it inward. Actually, I've been in the, I have been tracking a record the, for the last week and a half before coming here. And two days ago was the first day that we listened back to all of the takes. And, um, the producer and engineer who I was working with said, "Okay, we're gonna listen to this stuff, but the, but the way we're gonna listen to it is, um: You didn't write this. Your best friend made this. And they're just saying, 'Hey, I'm really excited to play this thing for you. Can you just listen to it?'" So we weren't gonna take any notes or anything and like try and listen to, try and listen to it without that kind of judgment. And uh, it's very hard to have that, despite how easy it is to have that with other people.

Jeff: Yeah. I mean, it's really almost impossible. But that's where I think that the, some of the tricks I think that are helpful are described in the book. Like, I think that's one of the, one of the reasons I make so much and put it away and forget about it, so that I can come back to it with some sense of discovery, or like a little bit less investment in it being great or you know, like you just feel like more objectivity about like, I could listen through stuff I have on my phone that I tracked, like just guitar parts or like a song I wrote three years ago. I have no memory whatsoever of writing it. And most of the time it's just like, What was I thinking? You know, that, I don't even really hear a song there anymore. And then sometimes it's like, oh wow, this is like, you know, this is gold. I can't believe that this has been sitting here on my phone and like now it's ready for me. Now I'm, I, I'm, I understand it now.

Hrishikesh: I think perfectionism is probably at the root of a lot of what was my hangup.

And so there's an, another section here that really, I thought, beautifully articulated the thing to try and let go of.

*(Audiobook clip: "The craftsman part of me understands that as a song crafter, I could probably be okay looking at it as if I were building tables, but I personally think that I'm where I am because I aspire to make trees instead of tables. Because there's something higher in my mind about doing so, and that I've accepted the fact that it's also impossible to make the perfect tree.*

*There's no perfecting it. There's no reaching some conclusion that you've made the tree.")*

Yeah. That really, like, put a dent in my brain.

Audience & Jeff: (laughs)

Hrishikesh: In a great way. And I've been trying really hard to hold onto that idea. But I wanted to go one step past this. Because the scope of the book is, you know, writing one song, and maybe going through that exercise multiple times, but still, the focus is one song, but you do make references here and there to the idea of, like, what will come next. The point where you're gonna have to make an album, and things like that. And when you have successfully had the process of seeing your songs as trees, these things that can be judged for, just on their own merit and their own beauty.

Jeff: Well, a tree can't fail.

Hrishikesh: Right.

Jeff: That's really the point.

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

Jeff: A tree is gonna be a tree and do the tree things it needs to do, without anybody saying it's failed at its job. You know?

Hrishikesh: Yeah. What is it like for you then, when you have 50 songs in front of you and you're trying to whittle down what the 10 or the 12 are that are gonna make an album or even maybe, you know, some subset that you're just gonna record. How do you introduce judgment when you've worked so hard to erase judgment to get to the point of creation?

Jeff: Well, I'm not gonna sound as confident about talking about this because I don't have as much confidence about my judgment when it's come down to putting 12 songs together to make a record. I go back and think, like, how is that left off? And we're putting together a set for tonight of all deep cuts, and things that were left off records that made me go, how did that get left off of that record, that's so much better than so many of the songs on that record. Um, so I don't really feel



like, I just, I feel like you just do your best. I feel like it's pretty intuitive. A lot of times for me, it's, it's more interesting to me what the band is responding to. What other people are responding to in the room. What the immediate audience, the first people you see responding to it. You know, your band mates and, and, uh, Tom Schick, our engineer and Mark Greenberg and people that are hearing these things right as they're happening. Um, I feel that. You feel the, the energy of different songs, and you, like, start to think that those fit together. That's gonna be great.

I mean, in the end, I kind of err on the side of putting almost every, I mean, how many, I put out so much music and, and a lot of people would maybe stop. (laughs) And just say, maybe you should take more time deciding what's better. But that feels wrong to me. I don't know. I think I'd rather just keep moving than, um, spend time with a focus group or something.

Hrishikesh: Have you been surprised at all by how this book has been received?

Jeff: Oh, it's been very, very rewarding, uh, meeting people at, you know, like on the book tour, but the book was, I think this book tour was virtual 'cause it was during the pandemic.

And then meeting people on the more recent book tour that have read this book, and then meeting other musicians. When I hear that it has helped somebody, I mean, I mean, I, I don't know what else it was, was the point. And that makes me feel really, really good. You know, I like, it's like, it's a very, very, uh, I don't...

I always try and picture what, this is actually another thought about why I wrote the book. I always tried, I tried to picture what kind of book would've been really nice to have when I was a kid. And there weren't many books that came at songwriting from a creative point of view. There were song writing books that were based on music theory, and there were a lot of music industry books and things like that when you go to the library and try to look up books and there were just no books that just said, no, you can do it. (laughs) No, you don't need to know anything. At all. You know, do you like songs? Good. There, you write songs, then. Okay, go. That didn't exist. And you know, it's the same way trying, you know, try and keep that kid in my mind.

Hrishikesh: I, I know you've had so many people in your life respond to your songs in ways that have been very profound and, deep, and um, it's amazing to me that, that you've managed to do that in another medium as well. I guess I, I'll close with I'm gonna steal a, a bit from the book again. It's out of context from how you used it, but I, I also, once again, feel like it, sums up how I feel for the book. And you.

*(Audiobook clip: "It's hard to express sometimes because I think it might turn people off. The*

*overwhelming gratitude I feel for it all.”)*

Hrishikesh: Thank you so much.

Audience: (applause)

Hrishikesh: And thank you all for coming.

Jeff: Thank you Hrishi.

Hrishikesh: To learn more, visit [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net). You'll find links to buy *How to Write One Song*. The book is great, and as I mentioned during the interview, I really loved the audiobook. So if you like listening to stuff, check that out. And if you want more, there's a Song Exploder episode that Jeff did about the Wilco song "Magnetized." We'll link to all of that. Thank you so much to Jeff and everyone who put together the Solid Sound festival, for inviting me there and for recording this conversation, and letting me share it here.

This episode was produced by me and Mary Dolan, with production assistance from Tiger Biskup. 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.