

Song Exploder
Goo Goo Dolls - Iris
Episode 295

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.

Goo Goo Dolls formed in 1986 in Buffalo, New York. And by the time 1998 rolled around, they'd already had a pretty successful career. They'd released five albums, and one of their songs, "Name," from 1995, had become a Top 10 hit.

But things really changed for them when they made the song "Iris." It originally came out on the soundtrack for the movie City of Angels, which came out in 1998 and starred Nicolas Cage and Meg Ryan.

"Iris" spent a record-breaking 18 weeks at number one on the radio, and became one of the best selling songs of all time, with over 14 million copies sold, and over 4.5 billion streams.

So for this episode, John Rzeznik of Goo Goo Dolls came over to my place and he told me about how he wrote the song. He told me how the Grammy-winning producer Rob Cavallo helped them expand their vision, and how the version of the song in the movie isn't actually the version that everybody knows.

("Iris" by GOO GOO DOLLS)

(Vocals: "And I don't want the world to see me / 'Cause I don't think that they'd understand / When everything's made to be broken / I just want you to know who I am")

John: My name is John Rzeznik.

Hrishikesh: And who else is in the band with you?

John: Robby Takac. It's just me and him. We are the band, and, uh, Robby and I make the records.

Hrishikesh: And how did you two first meet?

John: Oh, I met him in college when I was 19. And we were playing hardcore music.

Hrishikesh: And how did it go from you guys playing hardcore to the sound that it became? Because that's a pretty big shift.

John: Yeah, I think a lot of it had to do with being exposed to a lot of different music that I'd never really heard before. And, and also, you know, when you play in a hardcore band, there's no girls there. (laughs) And you know, we forgot, rule number one: why do you play in a band? You know? Well, you know, to meet girls.

Hrishikesh: (laughs)

John: Why? Because I suck at sports. (laughs) Okay, you know, and I had met a girl who eventually became my first wife.

And it was bizarre because I was truly so smitten. It was like all of a sudden, you know, my little love bubble started showing up in my music. You know, you're in love and, uh, it changes you chemically.

Hrishikesh: Okay, so let me fast forward a little bit to right before you started working on "Iris." What was happening in your life at that time?

John: Well, that girl and I were getting divorced. (laughs) I know. It's like, it always ends the same way. You know, and I'm like, going through a divorce. I moved out here, and I moved into a hotel called the Le Parc, over in West Hollywood. And, um, I was just so frustrated with everything that was going on. There was so much change going on in my life, my personal life, my professional life.

Hrishikesh: What was happening on the professional side?

John: Well, I wrote this big hit song with "Name," the song "Name."

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

John: And everybody went, (*applauds*) "Yeah, John, you wrote a big hit song. Do it again." And it's like, uhhhh... you know?

Hrishikesh: Hmm.

John: I stopped writing. I felt like I couldn't write.

And then I got a phone call from my manager, and he said Danny Bramson, there's this guy Danny Bramson who's a music supervisor at Warner Brothers. And he invited me over because he wanted me to write a song for a film called *City of Angels*.

Hrishikesh: What did they tell you about the film?

John: So, it's this story about this angel, who has immortality. But he's lonely. And he sees this woman and he just wants to know what it feels like to feel what all these humans are feeling. 'Cause he's just going around watching them. And so he makes this leap and he gives up his immortality for her. For love. And, you know, and then he winds up, you know, getting spanked by it. And at that point in time, I could really relate to that story.

Hrishikesh: (laughs)

John: And uh, basically, it's a remake of *Wings of Desire*, which is great. Great, great movie.

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

John: So he's like, "I'm gonna show you the scene of this movie, and I want you to see if you can come up with something for it."

Hrishikesh: Did he happen to tell you why he wanted you specifically to write a song for the film?

John: I don't know why he wanted me. But it was an opportunity that, however it came about, I was lucky enough to get it.

So I saw it, and I went back to my hotel, and I went to some video shop and I got *Wings of Desire* and I put it in the thing, and I'm watching it. And I thought, where am I gonna write this from? And then I said, well, what would I say? What would I say to that woman?

I had a guitar, and because I detune and use alternate tunings, I'd gone a little too far and I'd popped two strings off the guitar.

So I had four strings on this guitar left.

And I detuned the low E to a B.

The other three strings to Ds.

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

John: And I'm just playing.

(guitar chord progression)

And I'm just running this like, basically the shape of a power chord. But very simple.

Hrishikesh: So you're in your hotel room, and you're thinking about this scene. Do you remember what the first lyrics were that you came up with? What was the first jumping off point?

John: Can I, is it okay if I grab that guitar?

Hrishikesh: Yeah. Yeah.

John: This is a cool guitar.

Hrishikesh: Thank you.

John: But I do this when I write songs, I'll be like, (*strumming guitar and vocalizing*). You know what I mean? I'll do, I'll, I'll do like the, you know when people do their impersonation of Bob Dylan?

Hrishikesh: (laughs)

John: It's always like (*strumming guitar and vocalizing*). You know. So, that's how I get melodies.

And I always find melody first. What sits on top of the chords? And what does it make you feel? And then sometimes a word will come out. You're sitting there going, "Yeah, da da, yeah, da, da..... And I *don't* want to *be* like, ah, I don't want to *be* like ya, I *don't* want the *world*..."

(*"Iris" by GOO GOO DOLLS*)

(Vocals: *"And I don't want the world to see me / 'Cause I don't think that they'd understand / When everything's made to be broken / I just want you to know who I am."*)

"I don't want the world to see me, 'cause I don't think that they'll understand. When everything's made to be broken, I just want you to know who I am." So it was, you know, I'm this other-worldly being who wants to be a human. You know, I don't think he planned for all the pain that came along with being human. Really being human. But I just love that concept of like, yeah, I'm so in love with you. I will give up everything for you. You want to *feel* so bad, even if it feels bad.

And this helped snap me out of the writer's block. To have the script and a film, instead of just trying to, like, pull stuff out of thin air, it was like, oh, okay, yeah. I found my subject matter.

So I took it back to Danny and I played it for him on the four string guitar.

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

John: And then Danny was like, "Yeah, let's go do this."

So then I went over, there was a place here in LA called Swing House, which is like a very, very classic old rehearsal spot, and, uh, one of the guys that worked there set up the drum machine and microphone and we recorded it.

Hrishikesh: Can we listen to the demo?

John: Sure, sure, sure.

(demo instrumental)

Hrishikesh: That beat is not what I would have expected.

John: Yeah, we couldn't figure out the math on the drum machine. That's why it's so disjointed.

(demo vocals with instrumental: "And I'd give up forever to touch you / 'Cause I know that you feel me somehow / You're the closest to heaven that I'll ever be / And I don't want to go home right now")

You can see the tuning isn't completely there yet. So I had to add the top two strings and I tuned those to D.

Hrishikesh: (laughs)

John: So you got five D's and one B.

Hrishikesh: (chuckles) I really appreciate how committed you were to that D-string.

John: Oh yeah. Very committed.

(demo vocals with instrumental: "And I don't want the world to see me / 'Cause I don't think that they'd understand / When everything's made to be broken / I just want you to know who I am")

And I took that demo to a producer named Rob Cavallo. And then we went in the studio. You know, he did some tweaking. And Rob Cavallo fixed the drum pattern and came up with the proper beat.

(live drums)

And it has that sort of 6/8 feel to it. But I don't think those side sticks made it to the final. I, oh my God, I lose it every time I hear a side stick, I just like, ugh.

Hrishikesh: No, they're definitely in the final version of the song.

John: Oh, they're on there?

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

John: I hate this song now. No.

Hrishikesh: (laughs) And were you thinking about a specific drum sound that you wanted?

John: I looked at it as an opportunity to, like, take the next step. So it should feel epic. It should feel a little bit bigger and a little more muscular than what we had done before, you know. Because we'd mostly worked in Buffalo and, you know, we were a punk rock band when we started. But then you come to a city like Los Angeles where your resources are unlimited. So they rented this beautiful set of drums, and all the gear, and I got, it was the first time in my life I got to play like five guitars and go, "Oh, I like that one."

(acoustic guitar)

So we tripled it.

(tripled acoustic guitar)

And the bass.

(bass)

(add mandolin)

Hrishikesh: Who's playing that mandolin?

John: That's Tim Pierce playing. One of the greatest session players in the history of recorded music.

Hrishikesh: Do you know whose idea it was to bring him in?

John: Rob's. This is where Rob turned us on to some crazy stuff.

(piano)

Jamie Muhoberac is a crazy talented keyboard player. Another amazing, interesting guy that Rob Cavallo introduced us to.

Hrishikesh: And can we listen to your vocals?

John: (laughs) Oh God. Yeah, sure.

(Vocals: "And you can't fight the tears that ain't coming / Or the moment of truth in your lies / When everything feels like the movies / Yeah, you bleed just to know you're alive")

Hrishikesh: Was it a hard song to record?

John: Oh yeah, that note is crazy high.

Hrishikesh: Yeah, the high note in the chorus?

John: Yeah. But I remember taking a singing lesson before I went in. I'd never taken a singing lesson. And I went to some guy here in LA and did all the warmup with me. And I'm like, "Oh, okay, cool." And then I just went back to the studio with all this, like, confidence. I'm like, "I know how to sing now. I took a singing lesson, there we go." And you know, then I just went in and did it.

(Vocals: "And I don't want the world to see me / 'Cause I don't think that they'd understand / When everything's made to be broken / I just want you to know who I am")

Hrishikesh: My conversation with John Rzeznik continues after this.

Hrishikesh: One of the things that I think is interesting about the song just structurally,

John: Yeah.

Hrishikesh: Is that you have a really long instrumental section.

John: Yeah.

(instrumental)

Hrishikesh: What inspired that?

John: I tend to get a little dramatic (laughs) in my music, and I like a lot of dynamics.

(more instrumental)

Whatever feels right. You know, bring in Tim Pierce again. Tim also played that crazy guitar solo, too.

(guitar solo)

Then Rob was like, "We're gonna put strings on this." And Robby and I were like, "Wha, wha-?" You know, we were very reluctant to do it. So Rob's like, "No, no, don't worry about it. We're gonna try it, it's gonna be cool." And then we were like, "Well, okay, but if it freaks us out too much, we reserve the right to say no." Okay, fine. And then we met the king, (laughs) David Campbell, one of the greatest composers, string arrangers, and Beck's dad.

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

John: So they got an eight piece ensemble. And Robby and I were in the control room and we were kneeling in front of the glass watching the players.

And when they came out and started playing,

(strings)

Robby and I were like, "Uh oh, uh oh... it's kind of cool." And then I'm like, "You know, if we do this, there's no going back to what we were doing." And he's like, "Yeah." And then we were both like, "Fuck it, let's do it."

(strings)

(add vocals: "And I don't want the world to see me / 'Cause I don't think that they'd understand / When everything's made to be broken / I just want you to know who I am / I just want you to know who I am / I just want you to know who I am")

So, in the spirit of moving forward, you know, we did it. And it worked and we took a lot of shit for it. But it worked.

Hrishikesh: I guess I'm surprised to hear that you took shit for it because at that point, on your previous album, you had a ballad that was like, a big hit.

John: Yeah. "Name."

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

John: "Name." Yeah. But that was more ragged and worked in that sort of world that we were living in, of like, Soul Asylum, and The Replacements, and REM.

Hrishikesh: And this was more produced?

JOHN. Yeah. Yeah, and, and it was a little scary. It was a little scary, because it was a very, very *fine* recording. A very *fine* recording engineer. And it was also like, "Oh my God, are we, are we sellouts?" You know, because that was a big deal back then. Now, everyone is trying to sell out as hard as they can. You know, there is no such thing as selling out anymore. Which is interesting.

Hrishikesh: I wanted to ask you about the title, because the name "Iris" is not in the song.

John: No.

Hrishikesh: And it's not in the movie, either.

John: No.

Hrishikesh: Where did the title for the song come from?

John: I was seeing a girl when I was living out here. And we were having coffee and looking at the *LA Weekly* and Iris Dement was playing.

Hrishikesh: The singer?

John: Yeah. And I just said, "Iris... That's a beautiful name." You know? Iris. And they were like, yo, you gotta name this song. And I was just like, "It's called 'Iris.'" And they're like, what do you mean? "It's called "Iris." Just leave it. Leave it"

Because I was listening to, uh, *Melon Collie and the Infinite Sadness*.

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

John: And it was like, the Billy Corgan thing, you know, "Bullet with Butterfly Wings." Or whatever, you know, and you're like, huh. Yeah man, I gotta have one of those cool names for my song that's not in the song, but you just call it that! You know, I mean, that was a thing for a while.

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

John: But I just loved that name.

Hrishikesh: So after you finished the recording, how was it received when you handed it in? Because you were writing this for the soundtrack, but also for the scene in the movie, right? It had to play in the actual film.

John: Yeah. Right. I was definitely writing the song for the film. But the director got the song.

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

John: And he didn't like it. He didn't like it. And he was like, "This is, this is too big. It's too dramatic. It's not working. Can you record a completely stripped down, just you and an acoustic guitar playing it?"

And I bitched and moaned about it because I was, you know, full of my own shit. You know, so, I was in the studio with a guy named Jack Joseph Puig.

(acoustic guitar)

You know, and he set up this beautiful microphone and gave me this beautiful guitar and we just like, started playing.

(acoustic version with vocals: "And I don't want the world to see me / 'Cause I don't think that they'd understand / When everything's made to be broken / I just want you to know who I am")

It flowed. And I softened my position on the whole thing, and I'm like, because I was told, and this was great advice:

I was told, "Listen, you were hired to do this. To support the vision." And that humbled me. And I was like, "Okay, if this is more closely related to his vision, I'll do it. Of course. Okay, fine."

And nobody remembers that version, I don't think.

Hrishikesh: Because you only hear it in the movie.

John: You only hear it in the film, yeah.

Hrishikesh: But then, the full band version that you did, that came out on the soundtrack. Were you surprised that that ended up being such a big hit?

John: So, Danny Bramson was talking about the soundtrack, and I was like, "Who else, who's gonna be on this?" And he was like "Well, U2, Peter Gabriel, Alanis." And I was like, I just wanna be on a record with those guys, you know?

Yeah and this song was very, very much the dark horse. I mean, you know, come on, you're going up against U2 and Alanis and Peter Gabriel.

But the soundtrack came out on Reprise Records and that radio team decided they were gonna work it.

(mandolin)

Hrishikesh: And was there a specific moment where you realized that the song had become a huge hit?

John: Ah, yeah. You know when it dawned on me, okay, I remember this. A guy, (chuckles) a guy came up to me, I don't know where I was. I was just doing something and a guy just walks right up to me and he's like, "Hey man, you're that guy from that band." That's always how people approach me.

"Excuse me. You're that guy from that band." And then he says, "Man, I gotta tell you, I love that song "Iris," man. But they gotta stop playing that shit on the radio, man. It's just on there so much. Every time I turn it on, any radio station, I gotta hear that song. I'm getting sick of it."

Hrishikesh: (chuckles)

John: Then I was like, all right, it worked.

Hrishikesh: (laughs)

John: You know, cool, man. (chuckles)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Iris" by Goo Goo Dolls, in its entirety.

("Iris" by GOO GOO DOLLS)

To learn more, visit songexploder.net. You'll find links to buy or stream "Iris," and you can watch the music video, and also the scene in the movie that uses the acoustic version.

This episode was produced by me, Mary Dolan, Craig Eley, and Kathleen Smith, with production assistance from Tiger Biskup. 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 our shows at radiotopia.fm.

And if you'd like to hear more from me, you can sign up for my newsletter, which you can find on the Song Exploder website. And if you want to support the show another way, you can get a Song Exploder t-shirt at songexploder.net/shirt.

I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. Thanks for listening.