

**Song Exploder**  
**Thompson Twins - Hold Me Now**  
**Episode 310**

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.

Any song from the 1980s that you hear on Song Exploder was most likely one that I first heard through my sister, Priya. She is the older sibling, and her favorite songs from her childhood were the soundtrack to my earliest memories. That's definitely the case with "Hold Me Now" by Thompson Twins.

Thompson Twins originally formed in 1977 in Sheffield, in the UK. "Hold Me Now," their iconic hit, came out as a single in November 1983, and eventually on their 1984 album, *Into the Gap*. That album went to number 1 in the UK and went platinum in the US, and the song spent 21 weeks on the Billboard Hot 100 chart. So for this episode, I talked to the founding member of Thompson Twins, Tom Bailey, and he told me how he and his bandmates, Alannah Currie and Joe Leeway, made "Hold Me Now."

*("Hold Me Now" by THOMPSON TWINS)*

*(Vocals: "Oh / Hold me now / Whoa / Warm my heart / Stay with me / Let lovin' start, let lovin' start")*

Tom Bailey: Hello. I'm Tom Bailey from the Thompson Twins. Thompson Twins has gone through several histories with different lineups. And by the time we got to writing "Hold Me Now," my co-writers were Alannah Currie and Joe Leeway.

This was our fourth album we're talking about. And on the previous one, on the third album, which was very, kind of, purist, synthesizer and drum machine-based, we had dropped from a seven-piece—a rather shambolic, experimental, seven-piece band—down to three writer-producers.

It had become the pattern that, after rehearsals with the seven-piece band, everyone would go home, apart from Joe, Alannah and myself. We'd stay, brew coffee and talk till four in the morning. You know.

But I, what I really enjoyed was the debate; the bouncing of ideas between the three of us. So we kind of decided to make a stylistic shift, as kind of designer-producers, rather than a band. And we did this weird thing of saying, "It's not just about music anymore, it's about image and video and stage performance and blah, blah, blah." So, each of us divided those jobs between us. And I took responsibility for music, because I'm a multi-instrumentalist. Hubris

plays a part here. (laughs) You're thinking, "I can do it, man."

Alannah was very much a part of the writing part, because she was a lyricist, but she then took over the visual image of the band. And Joe, I met him at college when he was a drama student, so theater was his thing, and he wanted to work on the live show. So we had this weird, almost formal division of labor. And it made it actually very efficient, and kinda weirdly interesting to have departments.

Hrishikesh: And so, going into this fourth album, what was the mindset for the three of you?

Tom Bailey: Well, I think we realized that we'd had significant success with the third record, and it suddenly took us around the world. So we took it really seriously.

We used to do this thing where we left town. If we stayed in London, there were just too many phone calls; too many parties; too many clubs to go to. So nothing got done. So we realized that, to be efficient, we'd say, okay, next month we're gonna go away for three weeks. We're just gonna work hard and write a lot of songs. And it worked for us. So, we decamped to a room in this house somewhere.

And I'd written some music, some chord sequence. Just fooling around on the piano, I, I seem to remember, yeah.

*(arpeggiated D major chord on piano)*

It's in D.

And then B,

*(arpeggiated B major chord on piano)*

And C,

*(arpeggiated C major chord on piano)*

And then a minor.

*(arpeggiated a minor chord on piano)*

Which is the basis of the whole song, musically.

And you know, the right chord sequence drags you right into the internal kind of emotional basis of a piece of music, and it becomes an addictive place to visit. You sleep on it, and in the morning you wake up and it's the first thing you think

of. "We've gotta go back to that chord sequence."

Alannah and myself, you know, we, we'd been lovers. We'd had a big argument. And then we kinda realized, "Hey, we don't want to give up on either our relationship or this good thing going with the Twins," you know? So, we just said, "Let's make up. Let's kiss and make up." And that's the basis. That's the core of the song, in a sense. Realizing that that's a better thing to do.

Hrishikesh: How did you go from having that argument, to then saying, "Hey, this might be good material for a song"?

Tom Bailey: I suspect that that wasn't a conscious decision. It's just that that was the, the atmosphere of the moment. When we happened to be on a writing schedule, we were locked in a room together. We'd had this argument; we'd made up. And so, that was the feeling that we brought into the room.

And I think we'd reached the point where we had some emotional maturity to be explored, as well.

Hrishikesh: Hm.

Tom Bailey: And so, love songs that weren't just throwaway items were perhaps on our menu. So, at that stage I made a cassette.

*(demo chords)*

Alannah would go off into a darkened room (laughs) and think about writing lyrics, and come back and say, how about this? And how about that?

I have to say, there's an interesting thing that went on with us, as a writing duo, Alannah and I, because she would write lyrics that I would have to sing. So, although she could be very personal in her viewpoint, it had to be universal to make sense, me singing it.

And I think that's a little bit of a clever trick that we didn't even realize we were using. It made the songs more universal.

*(Vocals: "I have a picture / Pinned to my wall / An image of you and of me and we're laughing, we're loving it all")*

Alannah recently reminded me that, in fact, there was never a picture on the wall, but what there was, was a picture that the two of us had taken in a photo booth. You remember photo booths? (laughs) You get in this little thing, pull the curtain, press a button and put some coins in, and you get four, like, passport

photographs, don't you?

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

Tom Bailey: And have a souvenir of, you know, a day out.

She had one of these pictures of the two of us, taken in a photo booth, that she cut out and stuck in the book that she wrote lyrics in. So that was the picture on the wall, on the opposite page to the very page she was writing the lyric on.

*(Vocals and guitar: "But look at our life now / All tattered and torn")*

Hrishikesh: One of the things that was so fascinating to me about this song is that, I'm looking at the lyrics from her point of view. But you're singing the lyrics. You're singing lyrics essentially about yourself.

Tom Bailey: Yeah, she's putting words into my mouth. (laughs)

Hrishikesh: Yeah. (laughs) She's forcing you into empathy.

Tom Bailey: That's right. How about that for therapy?

Hrishikesh: (laughs)

Tom Bailey: Well, I did have some input into the lyrics, I'm sure. Because that would be our normal practice, she'd come with ideas and say, "What do you think about this?" And I would say, "Yeah, but what, what if we say this on, on the third line, and have you got a fourth line yet?" "No." "Well, how about that?" So we would contribute freely to each other's ideas.

*(Vocals: "We fuss and we fight and delight in the tears that we cry until dawn")*

We fuss and fight, but we delight in those tears. Sometimes we look for trouble in relationships and we create trouble in relationships in order to find out, maybe, if the relationship will endure and get through these problems. So for me, it has a lot of strong meaning.

*(Vocals and guitar: "You say I'm a dreamer / We're two of a kind / Both of us searching for some perfect world we know we'll never find")*

It's a little bit combative, isn't it? It's saying, "You're accusing me of being a dreamer, but actually we're both that way." It's kind of sending the criticism back. So at this point, we're still arguing.

Hrishikesh: Listening to your vocals on this song makes me think about the extent to which a singer has to also be sort of an actor; really embodying the emotions of the words that you're singing.

Tom Bailey: Yeah. It's part of the job. I'm singing to a microphone, and essentially singing to myself. But I know that what it's really aiming at is a lot of people on the other side of this process. Therefore, I do have to inhabit the spirit of the song, the character of the singer, and what have you. So, I inhabit a different set of, kind of, psychic clothes. (chuckles)

Hrishikesh: Hmm. Well, in some ways I wonder if it's easier to step into that role of, like, inhabiting the words, because of the fact that you had that songwriting collaboration with Alannah, where a lot of these words were things that she had written for you to sing.

Tom Bailey: Yeah. It's something we discovered. I realized that was happening. We had this lucky arrangement.

*(Vocals with synth and guitar: "Oh, oh / Hold me now, woah / Warm my heart / Stay with me / Let lovin' start, let lovin' start")*

Hrishikesh: The story of "Hold Me Now" continues after this.

---

Hrishikesh: How much time passed between the writing process and you actually going in to record the song?

Tom Bailey: We must have made a fairly good demo sounding version of "Hold Me Now." Because someone played it to a fairly senior member of the Top Of The Pops team at the BBC, which is the big, you know, then was the one TV show you had to get on to have a hit record in the UK.

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

Tom Bailey: And they freaked out. They said, "This is fantastic." That triggered a lot of activity with our management saying, we've gotta finish this before Christmas. Because we want it to be out there in Christmas week when everyone buys records. We won't get the album ready by then, but we can certainly get this single out there.

So then we booked RAK Studios, where I'd worked before. And our producer Alex Sadkin wasn't available. We'd done the previous album with him, and he was the producer who was eventually gonna go on and make the rest of the album with us.

But as I say, he wasn't available. So, you know, full of hubris, I said, no, I can produce it. (laughs) And it was my first kinda high-pressure production job. I'd always done production with other people. But I guess I had a clear vision of what I wanted to achieve.

*(drum machine kick)*

We used a Movement drum computer, which is a very early British drum machine. Didn't stand the test of time for most people. But I got one of those very early, and it became my toy, so that's what I used on that record.

*(add snare)*

It would come out of the machine sounding fairly boring and we'd be tweaking this, that and the other. Phil Thornalley, the engineer, was very good at that kind of thing.

*(add distorted snare)*

I would very often use something called a noise gate. A noise gate is something that opens and allows a sound through, a signal through, and then closes again. And whatever triggers the opening and closing, you can program in a rhythm.

*(add gated synth)*

So, "da da-da-da-da-da, da da-da-da-da-da." That's a synth chord being just held down, and the gate would allow the sound to go through in that rhythm. So we used that as a way of making it sound mechanical. Which was a fascinating fashion of the moment. We liked the rigidity of the machine-driven rhythms. And yet, on top of that, to make it sound human and interesting, we would often have very, kind of, loose percussive ideas.

*(add additional percussion)*

Like, party-style percussion, you know, people banging cowbells and shaking tambourines and stuff, to add the sense that something fun was going on over this industrialized (laughs) interpretation of rhythm.

Hrishikesh: Who's playing all of this percussion?

Tom Bailey: All of us, mostly Alannah. Her use of a big bass drum and the castanet is very kind of a signature Alannah Currie percussion.

*(congas)*

This is Joe playing the congas.

Hrishikesh: Was that an instrument that he'd often play in the band?

Tom Bailey: Yeah. That's how he joined the band, in fact. I mean, he worked for us as a roadie, as a stage hand, initially, and then one night, after a show in fact, he confessed to me that he had fantasies about playing congas as part of the show. So we bought some congas the next day, and he joined. (chuckles)

*(drum machine)*

And then, I specifically got a drummer in, just to do the hi hat.

*(add hi-hat)*

Just kind of humanize the drum machine. And in this case, it was Boris Bransby Williams, who went on to be in The Cure. And, after the release of "Hold Me Now", and that album, we toured the world, with him as our drummer as well. So he was kind of, effectively, in the band at the time.

*(full drums and percussion)*

*(synth bass)*

We discovered a great bass sound on the Oberheim OB-X8, which is the only synthesizer I used, really.

I'm using the pitch bend all the time to articulate ways in and out of notes. So it sounds like it's a real instrument. And, interestingly enough, as I'm laying down the bassline and playing back part of it to see if it's okay, the studio control room door opened. And in walked a publicist who said she would swing by. And her date for the evening was Bill Wyman, the bassist of the Rolling Stones, (chuckles) as I'm recording bass. He came in, listened to them, and at the end of the track, he said, "Sounds all right to me."

*(add drums and percussion back in)*

Hrishikesh: (laughs)

Tom Bailey: (laughs) So I think I got the, the nod of approval from one of the great bass players.

*(marimba)*

So that's Alannah playing an orchestral marimba, which was one of her favorite percussion instruments. Down the line, actually, that became something that, because she loved it so much and we had these marimbas and she liked doing it live as well, marimbas ended up on a lot of our songs.

*(Vocals: "Oh, oh / Hold me now / Oh, warm my heart")*

But "Hold Me Now", it's a song where the verse and the chorus use the same chord sequence over and over again. The only change from that is in, after the second chorus, there's a kinda middle eight that goes into a different key temporarily.

*(middle eight key change - synth arpeggios and pads)*

You know, which is a relief from this relentless four-chord sequence that's been going on throughout the song. So it shifts the mood quite significantly. And obviously there's all those rising arpeggios. We're going up.

*(piano arpeggios)*

That's me playing the, the Yamaha Grand. And once we'd mic'd the piano up, then suddenly I start improvising around the opportunity. 'Cause I love playing the piano. (chuckles)

*(improvised piano)*

Mm. (laughs) I haven't heard it that way, haven't heard it that way for 43 years or something.

Hrishikesh: And how does it feel to listen to it now?

Tom Bailey: It takes me right back! It's a weird thing. It's, it is like reading a diary, a musical diary that completely conjures a memory.

*(Vocals: "You ask if I love you / Well, what can I say? / You know that I do and that this is just one of those games that we play")*

With everything that we added to it, it felt, yeah, we, this is getting better and

better and better. And there's an excitement, and almost a sense of disbelief that you're creating something.

I have to admit that, although I know that we had great ideas, no idea in that room at that time, that 40 years later, it would be our most prominent success. It just felt like something we were doing that month. Yeah. We were lucky.

*(Vocals and instrumental: "So, I'll sing you a new song / Please don't cry anymore / I'll even ask your forgiveness, though I don't know just what I'm asking it for")*

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Hold Me Now," by Thompson Twins, in its entirety.

*("Hold Me Now" by THOMPSON TWINS)*

Go to [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net) to learn more. You'll find links to buy or stream "Hold Me Now."

This episode was produced by me, Craig Eley, Mary Dolan, 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. Special thanks, as always, to my older sister, Priya.

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](http://radiotopia.fm).

If you'd like to hear more from me, subscribe to my newsletter. You can find it on the Song Exploder website. You can also get a Song Exploder t-shirt at [songexploder.net/shirt](http://songexploder.net/shirt).

I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. Thanks for listening.