

Song Exploder
Hot Chip - Boy From School
Episode 314

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.

Hot Chip is a band from London made up of Alexis Taylor, Joe Goddard, Al Doyle, Owen Clarke, and Felix Martin. Their second album, *The Warning*, came out in 2006. It was nominated for a Mercury Prize, and named one of the best albums of the year by NME and Pitchfork. And later, NME would include it in their list of best albums of all time. For this episode, I talked to them about one of the songs from *The Warning* called "Boy From School." You might have heard it in the second season of the show *Beef* on Netflix—the band's also in the show—or you might have heard it on *The Simpsons*. You could have also heard the song in my car all the time in 2006. So I was very excited to talk to Alexis and Joe from Hot Chip about how "Boy from School" was made.

("Boy From School" by HOT CHIP)

(Vocals: "We tried, but we didn't have long / We tried, but we don't belong")

Alexis: My name is Alexis Taylor.

Joe: And my name is Joe Goddard.

Alexis: We became friends at school; we were like 11 and 12 years old, I think. We grew up playing football and talking about bands that we'd read about in the NME, and went to loads of gigs together, hundreds of gigs. We all used to congregate at Joe's house, usually on a Friday after playing football, after school. And we realized that we both liked making music. And we would play songs on the guitar and listen to music, or watch films... and stay up late and have a fun time.

Joe: I lived close to where we all grew up and went to school, at a place called Elliott School in Putney, which is uh, close to this house. So Alexis and I would go home from school and make music in this bedroom really, really very frequently.

Alexis: Joe was making music in a band with other people, and I was making music in another band. But then at some point, Joe asked me if I wanted to record songs of mine that were like solo guitar and vocal songs, record them on his four track. So he was really acting like a producer from quite a young age. And he did that, but then also wrote his own songs. And we would play songs together.

And I think initially, they were separate songs from one another, like "a Joe song"

or “an Alexis song.” And then at some point we started to write songs together, and finish each other's sentences, or like, write a second section for a song or something like that. Or just sing together. And that was kind of the beginning.

Joe: We really had no training in, like, engineering and making records. We were really making it up as we went along. I had a very small amount of equipment, and we were using a computer, but in a, quite a rudimentary way, doing it all in this bedroom. “Boy From School” was one of the first things that we made for our second album, The Warning.

Alexis: We were just absorbing lots of influences, from dance music, from four-to-the-floor house music and disco and DFA and other things that we were listening to at that time.

Joe: This was the moment in time when Basement Jaxx released their first album, which was, for a kind of indie fan, was a good way of getting into house music. So I was going clubbing and this kind of, like indie version of dance music was exciting to me.

Alexis: But even in the process of writing “Boy From School,” the first iteration of it that was recorded and written at Joe’s house, was more gentle and slow, and was a ballad.

I remember leaving the room that me and Joe were working in and going for a break into his brother's bedroom, where there was like no one in the room and just using that as a place to write something. We’d been to university by this point and started working jobs. And something about, like, being in that room was quite evocative of many years spent hanging out with Joe. It made me think about the school days.

And those school days weren't that far behind us, but, something about, like, continuing, having a friendship with Joe and always making music with him, and it often being in that house, connected me to the school days quite closely as if we hadn't, like, gone that far away from... from our beginnings.

(first demo - Alexis vocals: “And I was boy from school / Helplessly helping all the rules”)

It began as a Casio-based track.

Joe: So when Alexis wrote this very gentle, delicate song, I remember feeling like, maybe this is a moment when we should try to be kind of embracing a different groove and trying something a bit more uptempo. Like, let's try changing the context of this song entirely.

It's such a lovely song, but to me it felt like an exciting thing to suggest going with something that we hadn't really ever done before. Like, uh, having a go at a kind of style of music that felt kind of novel for us to do at the time.

Alexis: And this moment of Joe suggesting changing it from the ballad to the disco-based track was quite a big moment. And, it's not an obvious link between the kind of lyrical content, slightly nostalgic words about your experiences at school, trying to summarize a relationship. Like, that doesn't necessarily sound like the subject matter of disco music. So I think it was a bit of a leap for both of us to see, like, will this work?

That original, like, sort of version, it was on this Casio, the MT-70.

(Casio pads)

I think that that keyboard was particularly good at sparking ideas for Joe and for me.

Joe: It's a really simple, inexpensive instrument, that I guess was like mass-produced by Casio in the eighties. It doesn't have a lot going for it in terms of like synthesis power, but essentially it was like the most important instrument for all of our songs at that time. And even when we decided to make this kind of uptempo version, it's used for almost all of the sounds on the song.

(more Casio)

I remember Alexis playing the bassline with this kind of lolling rhythm.

(add Casio bassline)

Within like, you know, the next two or three hours, we put down like most of the major elements.

(Vox electric piano riff)

Alexis: I remember that riff is on the Vox electric piano that sounds a bit like a clavinet and plays all the way through. The effect you put on it, Joe, gives it a kind of auto-wah kind of sound, like, that's done immediately after it's recorded. So you, the processing is a big part of the production.

Joe: Yeah, so I did a lot of experimenting with effects on each of those little parts. And so I just spent hours and hours cutting up these little bits of audio and moving them until they were perfect and kind of, playing with the delays on these notes. Because we wanted the groove of this thing to just be super, kind of tight and

funky and mechanized.

(instrumental groove)

So it was a matter of, like, moving stuff around until it felt right. And then looping that.

Alexis: And he was always, and still continues to be, somebody that wants to keep working hard to perfect something.

(kick drum)

Joe: Previous to this, I'd just been using drums from our Casio keyboard and cut them up. But, at that time, I was learning about taking drums from other tracks.

So, I sampled a kick drum from this uh, DFA remix of "Deceptacon" by Le Tigre, really great remix.

("Deceptacon (DFA Rmx)" by LE TIGRE and THE DFA)

(Vocals: "Who took the bomp?")

One of my favorites at the time.

You know, that, we discussed this with James Murphy and Tim Goldsworthy from the DFA, many years ago, and they told me that they had taken that kick drum from, "Is It All Over My Face?" by Loose Joints, the Arthur Russell project.

("Is It All Over My Face?" by LOOSE JOINTS)

(Vocals: "Is it all over my face? You've caught me love dancing")

We would just kind of record like some clapping in the room.

(claps)

And, we didn't have, like, a full drum kit in my bedroom. But we had a hi-hat.

(add hi-hat)

Because we thought it was an element of the drums that's good to do for real. To be able to introduce your own kind of groove, with your own kind of style.

Alexis sang the words to the song, like right then and there in that original

session.

(Vocals: "And I was a boy from school / Helplessly helping all the rules")

Alexis: "And I was a boy from school. Helplessly helping all the rules."

I was somebody who wasn't rebellious. I couldn't help but go along with things in a kind of fairly by the book way, which I suppose meant I'm not a rebellious teenager.

So, I think something about all of the time spent at Joe's house, and then being in that room made me just look back on the school days fondly and with some wistful feeling.

(Vocals: "And there was a girl at school / Blaming all the words she'd learned from home")

The next line was about a girl at school who I had a crush on and then went out on a date with and really liked. And then I was talking in the next line about her seeming quite grown up. Like she had absorbed a lot of mature behavior from like a family situation she was in. And it felt like she didn't remain young for very long, but had quite a lot of growing up very quickly. That was my sort of perception of her.

(Vocals: "Nothing could keep her a child / Long hours, don't you know we tried?")

You know, those school days in general and the girl that I was singing about and all of that love, it's a nice place to go back to.

Hrishikesh: More with Hot Chip after this.

Joe: For all of those years of making records together, we never had, like, a vocal booth. So, when Alexis is singing, he's just in the room with me, with headphones on. So I'm listening only to his voice without being able to hear the music.

(Vocals: "Now I find you on the street")

And then I learned those words and sang just in unison with him.

(Unison vocals: "Breaking rules, hopelessly we meet")

And it would be the same when I would record vocals and then Alexis would just be kind of listening to me.

(Joe vocals: "Lives are found, but loves are lost" / Alexis and Joe vocals: "Say goodbye to everything, nothing caused")

Alexis: I don't think we felt super confident about singing. We weren't people who sang with great skill and expertise and confidence. You know, it's not like we harmonized in a dressing room, practicing all of these things and perfecting it. We're doing our best. But we certainly weren't these like super slick, pro singers.

So, I can also hear that in the recording. It sounds really nice to me, but, um, it's not super impressive like some people's vocals would be. I'm not saying that as a criticism of it. I really like it, but it feels like people who haven't had vocal training, in the best possible way. Like they're naturally themselves.

Joe: You know, Alexis would be singing the verse to a song, and I'm listening to him, recording takes and that would spark, in my mind, like ideas for the next section of the song.

(Vocals: "We tried, but we didn't have long / We tried, but we don't belong")

The chorus that Alexis had written was very beautiful. And there'd been a kind of strong like Beach Boys reference. 'Cause that was a band that both of us were really, really, really passionately kind of in love with. So, it has a lot of layers of vocals that we both kind of added.

(Vocals: "We tried (ahhh), but we didn't have long (ahhh) / We tried (ahhh), but we don't belong (ahhh)", We tried (ahhh), but we don't belong-long-long-long... ")

Alexis: I was thinking about the relationship with that girl at school and how even though you're very young and it's not like a proper relationship, it can still make you feel those first feelings of connection with somebody in a romantic way, being with somebody and what you can feel like when that doesn't work out.

It's essentially talking about loss and it's also talking about friendships being lost between different people as their lives develop as they grow older. Things not fitting together as you had hoped they would and what you feel like after that.

(Vocals: "Say goodbye to nothing, everything caused")

(glockenspiel)

Joe: We had this kind of funny children's Glockenspiel that we would take to the live

shows from the really early days. It felt important to us to kind of bring a range of slightly unusual instruments with us. And I think that's there in a fair amount of, like, Hot Chip music, is a kind of a childlike quality.

(more glockenspiel)

And I remember that we had an auto harp.

(auto harp)

It's a really super cool instrument. Like super annoying to tune 'cause there are tons of strings, but like a really, really lovely sound. We had these things kind of scattered around my bedroom floor, you know?

Alexis: That really felt like how we made music back then. It was like: "What do we have around us?" Joe had a lap steel guitar.

(lap steel)

I definitely can't really play the lap steel guitar very well, so, it's as good as it could be and it's a bit fumbly, but it's something that was there in the room. And, again, like, if you've grown up listening to Pet Sounds by the Beach Boys, you're kind of fascinated with the idea that they put together different instruments that don't normally get put together.

So we absorbed something from their productions and then felt like it was normal to go, and now we put lap steel,

(more lap steel)

Now we put auto harp,

(add auto harp)

Now we put Casio.

(add Casio)

Just put these things together because we know we like it when all these sounds blend together. And then, there was more writing that Joe did for, like, the other section of the song.

Joe: Just responding to the kind of emotion of Alexis's chorus.

(Vocals: "I got, I got lost / You said this was the way back / I got, I got lost / You said this was the way back")

Alexis: The track sounds quite sorrowful at the end. Like, those vocals are quite exposed, the high range that we're singing in,

(Vocals: "We tried, but we didn't have long / We tried, but we don't belong")

Things are sort of falling apart around that. So it sounds like the musical equivalent of something coming to an end after the words have talked about something coming to an end. "We didn't have long."

Joe: I feel like it works really nicely as an ending, but from my perspective, now being an older person, I would generally now, like finish a track with drums and things so that a DJ can mix out of the record into something else.

I feel like I'm kind of more encumbered by the constraints of, like, genre now. Now that I understand and know more about making music. So it's nice to just think back to being a person that, that really didn't really, like, know that much about those things and wasn't really thinking about those constraints.

Alexis: I can remember hearing it in a club in Sweden, walking through a really busy dance floor and the song was playing. And that's my only time I think I've ever heard it in a club. And it felt (a) really exciting to hear it. And (b), I remember thinking, we made a song that isn't exactly like most club music, but it still managed to get played. So I sometimes feel like we kind of got away with something because it doesn't sound like other dance tracks.

It sounds a bit more gentle. So it's nice that it could sometimes get played in nightclubs.

Joe: And, it's probably the song that people have emotionally, like, connected with the most out of any song that we've written.

Alexis: Just the other day, we were playing it in Sydney at the Sydney Opera House and I could see somebody really actually crying during the song and looking pretty distraught and I dunno what it was that they'd gone through, but what the song makes you think about, that's beyond the song, that's your own experiences. But there's an emotional core to it that I think is quite real.

(Vocals: "Ahhh, ahhh, ahhh, ahhh")

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Boy From School," by Hot Chip, in its entirety.

(“Boy From School” by HOT CHIP)

Visit songexploder.net to learn more. You’ll find links to buy or stream “Boy From School,” and you can watch the music video.

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.

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I’m Hrishikesh Hirway. Thanks for listening.