

Song Exploder
Cheap Trick - Surrender
Episode 214

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. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway.

("Surrender" by CHEAP TRICK)

Hrishikesh: This episode doesn't contain any explicit language but I still wanted to flag it in case there are any parents out there who listen to the podcast with their kids, and if your kids are not old enough to know what an STD is yet then you might get some questions you're not ready for. So just a heads up.

("Surrender" by CHEAP TRICK)

Hrishikesh: The song "Surrender" by Cheap Trick was released in 1978. Rolling Stone called it the ultimate 70s teen anthem, and included it in their list of the greatest songs of all time. It's been in a bunch of movies and tv shows - including *South Park*, *Scrubs*, *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, *New Girl*, and *Guardians of the Galaxy*. Cheap Trick formed in Rockford, Illinois in 1973. They've released 20 studio albums, they've sold over 20 million records, and in 2016 they were inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Rick Nielsen is the guitarist in the band. He wrote "Surrender," and for this episode, I talked to him about how the song was made.

("Surrender" by CHEAP TRICK)

Rick: My name is Rick Nielsen from Cheap Trick.

(Music fades out)

Rick: Everybody I knew thought their parents were weird or, even if they're not weird to certain people, they're weird to the kid. "Oh, my parents are weird, oh they wore that, or they did that or whatever." My father is an opera singer, my mother is an opera singer. My parents bought a music store in Rockford. My dad was a choir director at Trinity Lutheran church, but he also sang at Temple. I think they enjoyed the religious stuff for the music. So it was probably 1973 and I was in my apartment in Rockford in the kitchen. I had the idea for the chorus, "Mommy's all right. My daddy's all right yeah, they just seem a little weird."

(Guitar)

Rick: I got a stream of consciousness and it was like, "And what are your parents doing? They tell you this, they tell you that." It was like getting me back to being a 14 year old.

(Vocals along with guitar: "Mother told me, yes, she told me / I'd meet girls like you")

(Guitar)

Rick: When I first wrote "Surrender," Robin was the singer. I just have a crappy voice so I was always looking for somebody that could interpret what I was writing and could be the way I am in, in my writing. You know, he's kind of like a good singing, or a great singing, Johnny Rotten. He's got that snarl to him.

(Vocals: "She also told me, 'Stay away / You'll never know what you'll catch'")

Rick: My parents didn't talk to me about the birds and the bees. I'm an only child so I know my parents had sex, once. But the good parents would let their sons and daughters know about this thing called syphilis or this thing called gonorrhea, if you're going to be doing something, you better be careful.

(Vocals along with guitar and bass: "She also told me, 'Stay away / You'll never know what you'll catch'")

(Guitar fades out)

Rick: Cheap Trick started in 1973. "Surrender" was on *Heaven Tonight*. That was our third album. But we actually, we recorded on our first record but Jack Douglas, he was the producer of our first record, he didn't think it was the right time to put it out. You know, we played and rehearsed and wrote songs constantly during that period of time. You know, we weren't selling a lot of records but we thought we were making good records, and we were just happy to be in the studio.

(Drum fill)

(Guitar along with bass and drums)

(Bass along with drums)

Rick: This is Tom Petersson on bass.

(Drums)

Rick: Well that's Bun E. Carlos, on the drums.

(Drums)

Rick: I think it was the first time that I wanted to modulate. So the song starts at B flat,

(Guitar along with bass and drums)

Rick: and then the first two verses are in B,

(Vocals along with guitar, bass and drums: "Father says, "Your mother's right / She's really up on things")

Rick: and the third verse is in C.

(Vocals along with guitar, bass and drums: "Whatever happened to all this season's / Losers of the year?")

Rick: It was to make the song more exciting as a, you know, you can't do that with every song. But this was the right song for doing something like that and we did it.

(Verse vocals: "Then I woke up, Mom and Dad / Are rolling on the couch / Rolling numbers, rock and rollin' / Got my KISS records out")

Rick: My parents are losers, then here I wake up and there they are. Got my Kiss records out. I mean, oh my God! That was like the ultimate slap in the face. Young hell-raisers in my brain, you know, loved them. And it was kind of the most disgusting thing to be associated with your parents. And they're listening to KISS, oh gee. You know, it was like, I can't even figure out who to disbelieve and who to hate, it's like, Oy, yoy, yoy!

(Vocals along with guitar: "Mommy's alright / Daddy's alright / They just seem a little weird / Surrender / Surrender / But don't give yourself away / Aye, aye")

Rick: I would have Robin sing close to the top of his range so that way he could be more aggressive.

(Robin's vocals: "Aye / Away / Away")

Rick: He was a real singer so he could sing the bad boy parts and he could sing the good boy parts. And Robin did his own backing vocals but I'm in there somewhere too. Because if it was just a bunch of Robin's, it would sound too nice. And if it's just a bunch of me, sound too crummy. And just a bunch of Tom's, it'd sound too low and weird. But together, it makes it more aggressive, it makes it more believable. It sounds like Cheap Trick.

(Group backing vocals)

(Keyboard joins then fades after vocals fade)

Rick: Yeah, you can hear the awful [Rick mimics the keyboard line]. I was trying to figure out what keyboard we used on that, because about '85, I finally took it and smashed it. Threw it off the stage and smashed it [laughter].

(Keyboard)

Rick: I left at the end of the recording because we had to get on tour. And they were going to play me roughs over the phone. They said "Hey, Rick, take a listen to this!" As bad as that sounds, it sounded worse. I got back on a plane, went back. I didn't mind it when it was like in the mix but when you have that instrument, you know, way out front, you can make anything sound awful.

(Keyboard ends)

Rick: I think the definitive version of "Surrender" is the *Live at Budokan* version because it is live and it's more fun.

("Surrender (Live from Budokan!)" version)

Rick: When we got to Japan the album, *Heaven Tonight*, had just come out, so nobody had really heard it there. But we played "Surrender" there and it went over great.

(Live version)

(Live version fades out)

Rick: I didn't have a big plan for it. When you write songs, sometimes they just kind of spill out and that one kind of spilled out and who knew what was going to be popular? You know [laughter], I've written 400 songs that nobody's ever heard that I think are good so that's a good one.

Hrishikesh: I want to ask you about the chorus, "Surrender, but don't give yourself away," who's saying that to whom?

Rick: It's me, or whoever's singing, singing to his peers, singing to his classmates, singing to his friends. You know, I wish I could have done a few things a bit different growing up. I was thrown out of band. I was first chair on two instruments, Straight-A student in 7th grade, when my parents had the music store. One day I went up to the band director and I said, "Mr. Bissell, you're an incompetent drunken fool who doesn't deserve to teach music to me or anybody else." Boom. I was thrown out that minute and I was banned from the Rockford School system music program for life. I didn't heed my words. I should have done it a little more tactfully. You know, instead of fighting all the time with your parents and getting nowhere, give in a bit, don't cave on it, but you know, "What are you going to do tonight?" "Well, I'm going to take your car, I'm going to go drink beer." You know, lie about it, you know, you don't need to tell them what you're really planning on doing so don't give yourself away.

(Guitar)

Rick: My parents, I think they were just happy I had a job and happy that I was happy doing what I was doing. And my dad always thought I was too loud and so did a lot of other people, but I think they liked that it wasn't cookie cutter kind of stuff. I was being me. And the band was being us.

(Keyboard joins)

Rick: We were never trying to be something that we weren't.

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Surrender," by Cheap Trick, in its entirety.

("Surrender" by CHEAP TRICK)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net to learn more. You'll find links to buy or stream "Surrender," and you can watch the video of Cheap Trick playing the song live in Japan.

This episode was made by me with editing help from Teeny Lieberman and Casey Deal. Artwork by Carlos Lerma, and music clearance by Kathleen Smith. 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. You can follow me on Twitter and Instagram @HrishiHirway. And you can follow the show @SongExploder. You can also get a Song Exploder t-shirt at songexploder.net/shirt. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway. Thanks for listening.