

Song Exploder
A-ha - Take On Me
Episode 301

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.

When I was a kid, the first song where I ever thought, "This is my favorite song," was "Take On Me" by A-ha. Looking at it now, it's like, of course that was your favorite song. It is an undeniable, iconic hit of the 1980s. It came out in October 1985 with an equally iconic music video that helped define the age of MTV. It hit #1 in the US and in countries all over the world. And it's still massively popular today. It currently has over two-and-a-half billion streams on Spotify. So, with all of that, it's easy to imagine that this was all inevitable.

But actually, the song took so many steps and missteps before it became the hit that everybody knows. I talked to Paul Waaktaar-Savoy from A-ha, who wrote the original bones of the song back when he was a teenager in Norway, years before it came out. The song actually came out and flopped TWICE in the UK, before it found a foothold in the US. So for this episode, Paul took me through the whole history of the song, and all the different versions that existed. And he told me how he and his bandmates, Magne Furuholmen and Morten Harket, pushed and pushed and persevered. "Take On Me" was their first single as a band, and it made them the most successful Norwegian pop group of all time.

(*"Take On Me" by A-HA*)

(*Vocals: "Take on me (Take on me) / Take me on (Take on me) / I'll be gone / In a day or two"*)

Paul: I am Paul Waaktaar-Savoy, which is a mouthful.

A-ha has three members: Magne Furuholmen, who plays keyboards; Morten Harket on lead voice; and myself, Paul Waaktaar-Savoy, on guitar.

Hrishikesh: You and Magne started playing music together years before A-ha actually began, is that right?

Paul: Yeah, he lived down the street from me from when we were, like, 12 or something, so we've been in a band for a long time.

We had made a pact at 15 or 14 that we were gonna go to England and try to get a record deal.

I mean, Norway back then was really, I think they played one hour of pop music a

week on the radio. It was very limited exposure to anything.

So we just knew that if we were gonna try to get a career outta this, we had to leave Norway. Even though no one had done that before.

And it was sort of like a laughable thing to say. But we, you know, at the same time we thought that would be an amazing adventure.

Hrishikesh: And the two of you were in a band together in high school called Bridges?

Paul: Yeah. We did two albums with Bridges. But Bridges was sort of very introverted. Lots of songs that everybody said, well, I have to hear it 20 times before I get it.

And Bridges sort of, uh, disintegrated. It was just me and Magne left.

But I think as we got closer to going to England, we started to get the urge, like, well, we gotta have some songs that really sort of, you can *get* with the first couple of listens.

So we were definitely feeling that, you know, we had to sort of, um, make it a little bit easier on people, on the poor listener.

Hrishikesh: (chuckles)

(first demo - instrumental)

We had a rehearsal space in a kindergarten up the road. And it was done on a four track. The verse came to me on acoustic guitar, as I always wrote on. And then taking that to Magne, we sort of played it around just the two of us. He came up with the keyboard riff.

(cont. demo - keyboard riff)

(Vocals: "Girl in the air / Two waving hands and / Somewhat near / Two eyes calling me / Do let her be / Her name is Miss Eerie / Couldn't make a sound / Just kept falling down, down")

I played guitar. Magne played keyboards. I played bass and there's Magne's neighbor there singing loud backing vocals, (chuckles) and the Bridges drummer.

And I had a sort of a throwaway chorus. I always hated it. It sort of went around itself in a four bar loop and you couldn't get out of it, and it's just sort of, like, annoying.

(chorus vocals: "P-E-O - Don't you go five days in a row / P-L-E - You got the sweet Miss Eerie /

Do let her be / Do let her be...")

Hrishikesh: That song was called "Miss Erie," is that right?

Paul: Yeah.

Hrishikesh: Where did that name come from?

Paul: That was, I mean, it's embarrassing, but I probably, we were inspired by, like, *Aladdin Sane*, by Bowie, which is "a lad insane".

So I wanted to do my "misery," "Miss Erie," you know, it's like one of those teenage over-reach... (chuckles)

Hrishikesh: And so, how did Morten end up joining the band?

Paul: Well, Morten first heard us when we played a show in his school. And he was a fan, one of our, maybe the only fan we had. (chuckles) So he was always interested in doing something with us. He just thought we needed a better vocalist, so not me, (chuckles) in other words.

You know, Morten had an amazing voice. Uh, funny, the first time I heard him, when we sort of auditioned him, he was playing in a blues band and he just had a show the day before, so his voice was like, so raspy, like a Joe Cocker type of thing. He was like, completely busted. So I thought, like, well, that's cool. Let's go for this guy, you know. (chuckles)

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

Paul: The next time I heard him, I was like, you know, he sang like an angel.

But he could do so much with his voice and that really changed my writing. Because before that, I would be writing to my own voice. So I had to be sort of limiting the octaves. But with Morten, it's like writing for a totally different instrument. So it was very inspiring.

And, just from the get go, he was such a fan of that song, especially the riff. He was just like, that was it.

And then, my parents had a little cabin outside of Oslo in the forest, so we borrowed that four track recorder and tried to come up with a demo tape that we can present when we go to England.

Hrishikesh: Besides Morten joining the band, were there other ways that you were changing

things up?

Paul: Uh, instead of guitars, we replaced it with the synth because that was really what was happening. And we wanted to be part of the new sort of sound.

So, the first version we did with A-ha, with Morten, that was called "Lesson One."

(*"Lesson One" by A-HA*)

(*Vocals: "Come on / Say after me / I'm happy, happy as can be / Hip-Hip-Hooray / Slowly learning that life is okay / Say after me / It ain't no better to be safe than sorry"*)

It was a totally new lyric and new approach.

(*cont. vocals: "So here's a kid lesson / My number one / All's good that starts well and moves with the sun"*)

Hrishikesh: You can still sort of hear the DNA of the first chorus that you said you didn't like in this chorus. Did you still, also, not like this one?

Paul: It was like a sugar rush. It was too, kind of, bubbly.

Hrishikesh: Hm.

Paul: And it didn't really give you goosebumps. It was catchy, but it didn't really grab you, in the way that I like a song to do. It has to have a more like a, you gotta feel that sort of spine tingling.

Hrishikesh: So this is October, November, 1982?

Paul: Yeah, I think so. Yeah.

Hrishikesh: What happened next, after you finished recording in the cabin?

Paul: Then we decided, okay, that's it.

Now we have eight songs. We got a cassette. So now we can go to England and we can start doing the rounds, you know, the record companies and stuff like that.

Hrishikesh: It's one thing to say: "We're gonna move to England,"

Paul: Mm-hmm.

Hrishikesh: "And start a music career there." But I'm just curious, how do you actually actually figure out how to move to England and,

Paul: Yeah.

Hrishikesh: Even get started?

Paul: We thought it would be a lot easier than it turned out to be, let's put it that way. (chuckles) We booked this sort of package tour. Is that what you do? Like, we didn't do the return flight, we just went to England. 'Cause that was the cheapest we could get.

Hrishikesh: Mm.

Paul: And then it was like, oh, okay, what do we do now? You know? So we knew nothing. We knew no one.

We bought, like, a Melody Maker or Music Express.

Hrishikesh: These are music magazines.

Paul: Yeah. Back in the day. They're probably gone now, but, you know, there'd be some ads there and stuff like that. But it was very hard to, to actually figure out, how do we do this? How do we get through the reception at any record company? You know, you just can't, you know.

It was very inspiring too, though, coming to England. You could, for the first time in our lives, suddenly, you have pop music coming out of every shop, every cab, every, you know, it was just everywhere, going to places like Hammond Palace, which was like a really cool club. So you did sort of want to compete at that level.

And it took us about two weeks to realize that demo sounded pretty thin and not really hip enough. So after about a few months, we did the last money we had and booked two or three days in this studio. I think we recorded like, four songs. Not "Take On Me," but four other songs.

And as luck had it, the owner of that studio loved the demo. John Ratcliff. And he was signed to EMI, and his A&R guy, Terry Slater, had quit EMI and he looked for a, a band to manage. So they became our managers.

Hrishikesh: How did that change things for you guys?

Paul: You know, for the next couple of years, we were able to use the downtime of that studio. From four in the morning till the new session came in at 10 the next day.

So we'd be sitting around there like tired, ready to keel over waiting for that band to get finished and then hop in and use those hours to do a new song.

(second demo - drum machine kick)

They had a drum machine. And I'm terrible with every machine and every software ever made, but the LinnDrum — I just took to it.

(drum machine loop)

So we would just sort of lay down the drums first, imagining what the rest of the track would be.

(second demo - full instrumental)

Hrishikesh: Is this something that you made in John's studio, then?

Paul: Yeah. This is Rendezvous Studios. Eight track.

And Magne had a, you know I hear that, "doo doo doo doo doo-doo, doo doo doo doo doo-doo". From there on in, that became really part of the groove.

But you can see we're trying to, figuring out what the bass is doing. And my bass drum pattern is just sort of trying to find the right thing. The song is pretty much sketched out at that point. But the chorus was not happening.

And then, Terry said, he had worked a lot with Queen and all these different artists, and he would say, like, well, "Whenever you got a falsetto, you had a hit." "Falsetto, you had a hit." So that was one of his sayings. And I thought like, well, hell, we got the best freaking falsetto singer right here.

He can sing super low. He can sing super high. And where most people have, like, a sort of whispery, sort of weakish falsetto, he can't really do that. The, the way he does falsetto is like full on. It's like a trumpet.

But I don't really love when that sort of money note come in straight, "Here comes the chorus," and everybody goes up. And, you know, so I never really liked that kind of songwriting.

So I thought, you know, Morten has a really nice register. So I thought like, okay, maybe we should start it with the lowest notes and then bring it up to the falsetto where you can guarantee to get a hit. (chuckles)

Hrishikesh: (laughs)

Paul: And "Take On Me", of course. That's the, we're Norwegian and like, people would tell me, you can't say "Take On Me." That's not real English. But it just felt like that song couldn't be called anything else. It just had to be. "Take Me On"? No, I don't like that.

In a way we were trying to take on the world and we were just saying like, "Well, take on us." You know, "get a load of this." So this is the first time where you had the new chorus.

(second demo - new chorus)

(Vocals: "Take on me / Take me on / I'll be gone / In a day or two")

Hrishikesh: My conversation with Paul Waaktaar-Savoy of A-ha continues after this.

Hrishikesh: Okay, so you had written the song, you had recorded this 8-track demo; what was your next step?

Paul: Next for the song was to try to find a producer.

We were signed to Warner in the US. Andrew Wickham was our A&R guy and it was really his job to find suitable producers. And the producers was very, very hard to find. This was the eighties, where the producers was like gods. But we didn't know one from the next, really.

In the end, they managed to get Tony Mansfield. It was exciting, but it was also a little bit tricky because we were used to working very fast. But he had gotten a Fairlight, which he loved. And everything had to go through the Fairlight.

Hrishikesh: Could you explain what a Fairlight is and why, when you worked with it, everything had to take longer?

Paul: It's really a sampler, uh, mixed with an 8-track recorder. And he would take the parts that we sort of insisted on taking, but he would love to also kind of make his own parts.

That's when we actually found the bassline for the verse.

(cont. second demo)

(Vocals: "Talking away...")

(hums along with the bassline) That was his thing. And then the replies on the chorus, that was Tony Mansfield's idea.

(Vocals: "Take on me (Take on me) / Take me on (Take on me) / I'll be gone / In a day or two")

But on this middle eight, on this version, you would have all these kind of orchestra bangs.

(synth orchestra hits)

I feel like, the first time people got samples, that's what they did. And it ate up a lot of time.

Five guys staring at a computer screen, I mean, everything takes a long time. We would never use a computer before. So when we had 7 songs instead of 10, the money was spent.

Hrishikesh: For the whole album?

Paul: Yeah. And we were there on a tourist visa. So it was a lot of pressure on the whole thing. You know, recording the album and stuff like that. It is sort of like, you felt like you were on this borrowed time, and the budget was spent. You know, it was a very tense time, you know, we tried to get it going before they really threw us out.

When we signed the deal with Warner Brothers, we ended up signing with the Warner in America. But Warner in England, they were also interested. And I think they were always a little bit pissed off with that, that we didn't go with the English company.

Hrishikesh: Hmm.

Paul: So for years, we were sort of struggling a little bit with them not feeling like they needed to do so much for us, since we didn't sign with them.

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

Paul: So when that first single came out, they threw out a few of the ugliest posters we've ever seen, just around where we lived. And that was it. There was nothing.

In the English charts back then, maybe it is still like that, but it was like, you had one or two weeks to get it onto the charts. You needed to have *something*, a TV show, something. And we didn't have any of that. So you couldn't expect it to just take off like that.

So that is the first version that came out and bombed.

Hrishikesh: Okay, so you have spent the whole budget and then this version of the song comes out in 1984, and it flops. How were you able to convince anybody to give you another chance? Or maybe even more so, I'm curious, for your own sake: How were you able to feel like that wasn't the end of the road for the song? Like, it had its chance, it didn't happen, and that was that.

Paul: Yeah, that's the good thing about being young. You don't feel, (chuckles) you know, you just sort of, brush it off your shoulders, you know. We were a hundred percent confident. We were like, there's not a doubt in our minds.

So, it must have been the A&R guy, Andrew Wickham. He must have felt the same thing. And the producer, Alan Tarney, who actually did the final version, he was almost saying yes, before we went for Tony Mansfield. And I think Andy Wickham got back to him and said, "This is what they ended up with, but I know it could be better."

So he finally agreed to have another go.

Hrishikesh: Alan Tarney. So this is how you end up with him as the producer?

Paul: Yes. But it took some time, you know, it was very touch and go. 'Cause the, you know, they've spent this much money on the half-finished album. Are they gonna pour more money into it and risk losing more money? So, from Norway? Hey, no one comes from Norway and makes it. And so it was a risk for people. But Alan Tarney had a little spot in between making a, this other album, so we could do five days.

I remember the first day, he had a, some sort of meeting or a doctor's appointment and so Magne and I just put down a couple of parts to sort of sketch out the song.

(“Take On Me” by A-HA - synths)

And already then, it just sounded like, wow, this is so much cooler.

So then it was my time to do the drum programming. At first we just had a basic pattern, just like a straight pattern.

(drums loop)

He had a Linn Drum. But what he didn't have is, he didn't have a clap sound on that thing. He had two snares. So we ended up doing, um, a halftime feel on the second snare. So you would have the (imitates drums with snare)

(add halftime snares)

For me, it gave the whole song what I'd been missing. That sort of, a little bit of a different swagger.

Hrishikesh: Morten has all these little moves that he does in his vocals that are so awesome.

(Morten vocalizing)

One of my favorites is this, like, little ramp up that he does going into the chorus.

(Vocals: "Today is another day to find you / Shyin' away / (ah, ah, ah)")

Paul: This is just him just in the groove and he is just sort of egging yourself on, you know.

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

(Vocals: "(ah, ah, ah) / I'll be coming for your love, okay")

Paul: It did feel like it was a good song to start with because we did feel everything was very unsettled around us.

Are we gonna be sent back to Norway? Are we gonna lose this deal because we didn't finish the album? I had met my, later, wife, she was American. I don't have a penny. How, how am I gonna keep her without any... everything was up for grabs. And you're just sort of, yeah, you're just sort of dreaming big and hope that it's gonna come through.

Hrishikesh: And that was what informed the lyrics to this song?

Paul: Yeah, it sort of like, "It's not better to be safe than sorry".

(Vocals: "Say after me / It's not better to be safe than sorry")

Already then it was sort of like, it's such a good vibe in the track.

(PPG wave synth)

There must have been a song that I'd heard which used the PPG wave, which is that synthesizer. So I asked if we could possibly rent that in for the day. So that was a very cool synth. You know, they didn't make them too well, so they always break down. But back then it was brand new. The newest thing.

Hrishikesh: One thing I didn't know was in the song until I got these stems,

Paul: Mm-hm?

Hrishikesh: Is the acoustic guitar.

Paul: Yeah. (chuckles)

(acoustic guitar strumming)

When we signed the deal with Warner Brothers, they took me to a guitar shop just to pick out a guitar, you know, and being Norwegian, it was literally, pick the cheapest one there, you know, it was like a no bottom in it.

You know, I read later that the guy from Smiths, he just got them to buy, like, the most awesome vintage guitar. I should have gone that route.

Hrishikesh: (laughs)

Paul: But yeah, (laughs) I ended up with this kind of horrible thing. But, you know, there's a reason for everything. It had a very sort of high, treble-y sound. So whenever you kind of mix that in with all the drum fills, it became this sort of exciting thing. So, it worked out pretty well.

(drum fills with acoustic guitar)

(background vocals: "Ahhh")

So, Tarney, Morten and myself. It's a three part harmony.

Hrishikesh: Wow. So the producer's also singing?

Paul: Yeah.

Hrishikesh: So it would be all three of you singing in one mic?

Paul: Oh yeah. One mic, yeah.

(Vocals: "Take on me (Take on me) / Take me on (Take on me) / I'll be gone")

I love the, particularly, the last chorus. 'Cause the two first choruses, he goes to the falsetto at a sort of a later stage, but on the last one he does the chest voice and that's always like the big payoff for me.

(Vocals: "I'll be gone / In a day")

Hrishikesh: After you finished recording this version, did the three of you feel differently than you had up until this point?

Paul: Yeah, this time when we mixed it, with the house engineer there, Gerry Kitchingham, I just remember walking around there while he was mixing, hearing it through like a half open door, or down the hall or whatever. And I'd just feel like, God, if this isn't the hit, I don't know what is. You know, it was like, no matter in what sort of terrible situation you were in, it still sounded great.

Hrishikesh: How much time passed between you finishing the song and then it finally coming out again?

Paul: Well, that was the thing. I mean, we finished it very quickly in five days. And then the English WEA, which is sort of Warner in England, released it very quickly again, and did the same kind of job as last time. There's no plan, there's no promotional thing. So it did the same business as the first time. You know, it just didn't do anything.

And that's really when the people who signed us sort of stepped in, said, "Okay, don't do anything more with this band. We want to launch it." So they kind of put the foot down and said like, "You don't do anything more on A-ha."

Hrishikesh: The American counterparts.

Paul: Yeah. And there was a new guy on the company, Jeff Ayeroff.

He fell in love with the, the album and the song. And he had been keeping this one particular idea sort of in the back of his head. There was this art film called Commuter, with animation. So, he was the one who put together that with Steve Barron, who was the director.

Hrishikesh: And made the music video.

Paul: Yeah.

Hrishikesh: Do you remember the day it became clear to you that this version of the song, released in America, had become a hit?

Paul: It was very strange because it climbed so slow. It was like it started at the bottom. But of course nobody's heard about this two first attempts.

Hrishikesh: Right, because that was only in the UK?

Paul: Yeah. But you know, as we get closer to the top, we would, uh, get our, really, our hopes up.

And when it went into Top 100, we were ecstatic. When it went into Top 40, we couldn't believe it. When the top 20, it was like, this is just amazing. I mean, we were on a high, you know.

But of course you didn't really expect it to go to number one. But then suddenly we got the call... I think we celebrated with a hamburger. (laughs)

Hrishikesh: You know, this song for me has been an enormous hit my entire life. But to know that it had all these different iterations.

Paul: Mm-hmm.

Hrishikesh: I don't know how much that exists anymore, of giving something that much of a chance.

Paul: Yeah. I mean, if you have something that you think it's uniquely itself, you never lose, uh, faith in it that it could be something, you know? And, so you, you chase it up and you give it its best shot, you know? But of course, when it comes to hits, you have to be a little bit lucky.

If you're in the right time, in the right spot. There's so many things against you, and it's very difficult. But it does help to be a little bit stubborn.

(*Vocals: "Ahhh"*)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Take On Me," by A-ha, in its entirety.

(*"Take On Me" by A-HA*)

Visit songexploder.net to learn more. You can see some of the original pages from Paul's notebook in 1981 where they were working out the lyrics to the song as it evolved. You'll also find links to buy or stream "Take On Me," and you can watch that iconic 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.

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