

How we made the pop song 19 by Paul Hardcastle and Ken Grunbaum

Paul Hardcastle, composer

All my life I wanted to be a motorbike racer, until I had a bad crash and ended up in hospital for four months. While I was **bedridden** I listened to the radio all the time. Then, one night, I was watching TV, a documentary – it was ABC's Vietnam Requiem – about the war. What struck me was how young the soldiers were: the documentary said their average age was 19. I was out having fun in pubs and clubs when I was 19, not being shoved into jungles and shot at. One line – "None of them received a hero's welcome" – really struck a chord. When the soldiers came home, people wondered what had happened to the smiling kids who went out there. What did they expect if they'd been through that shit?

I started messing around and adding music to the narrative. I used an Emu Emulator, an early type of sampler that had a two-second limit when it came to doing samples. That's why the **hook** was "N-n-n-nineteen". It was the only bit of the narrative that made sense in two seconds. In those days, Radio 1 wouldn't touch dance music, and a record with someone talking about kids dying seemed a recipe for disaster. But it was 1985 and the 10th anniversary of the end of the war was suddenly all over the media. You couldn't ask for better exposure.

The next thing I knew, it was No 1 in Britain and around the world. In the US, even though it outsold everybody else for three weeks solid, a few stations refused to play it, thinking it was anti-American, which it wasn't. But I had tons of letters from Vietnam vets thanking me for doing something for them.

The song's still special for me. It's also still relevant. In 2010, I did a new version about Afghanistan. My son's friend was killed there. He was 19.

Ken Grunbaum, promoter and video editor

I was working for Chrysalis Records, and Simon Fuller – whose 19 Entertainment would later launch the Spice Girls – was a very young A&R guy, but we just got on. He wanted me to sit in on a meeting. Right at the end, Paul said: "Oh, did you see that documentary about Vietnam last week? I taped it and have been messing about with it." He played us a very rough version of 19. When I heard that "N-n-n-nineteen" hook, I had a "**What the heck?**" moment.

These were the early days of spoken-word **sampling**: the general public had never heard anything like it. One of the first people to get behind 19 was Tony Blackburn, on his Radio London show. He played it and the public went mad for it. Not only did 19 sound unlike anything else on the radio, it also told a story. But, because it wasn't a performance song with a band standing there, it needed a video. So I edited one from the documentary.

Our legal department had a nightmare getting clearance for the samples; there were no precedents for something like this. We ended up having to pay Peter Thomas, the narrator, royalties. Paul was off doing more mixes of the song to keep the interest in it high, too – and the public wanted every version. It was amazing.

Interviews by Dave Simpson, *The Guardian*, 24 September 2012

bedridden : *stuck in bed*

What the heck ? : (*interjection*) expresses surprise

sampling : *échantillonnage*

samples : *extrait*