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The Way It Is By Bruce Hornsby And The Range

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The Enduring Anthem of Resolve: Revisiting The Way It Is By Bruce Hornsby And The Range

In the vast landscape of 1980s popular music, certain songs transcend their era to become timeless cultural touchstones. Few tracks accomplish this with the quiet dignity and lyrical power of **The Way It Is By Bruce Hornsby And The Range**. Released in 1986 as the debut single from their album of the same name, the song is far more than a soft rock classic. It is a poignant narrative about civil rights, systemic inequality, and the human struggle for dignity. Driven by a distinctive, cascading piano riff, the track captured the attention of millions and earned a Grammy for Best New Artist. Yet, its true genius lies in how it delivers a powerful social commentary wrapped in an accessible and melodic package.

This article explores the origins, lyrical depth, musical composition, and lasting legacy of **The Way It Is By Bruce Hornsby And The Range**, examining why a song about resistance to change remains so profoundly relevant decades later.

The Genesis of a Classic: Context and Creation

From Virginia to the World Stage

Bruce Hornsby, a native of Williamsburg, Virginia, grew up in the racially charged environment of the American South during the 1960s and 1970s. This background deeply influenced his songwriting. Before forming The Range, Hornsby had already paid his dues as a keyboardist and songwriter, even collaborating with artists like Huey Lewis. However, it was the formation of The Range that allowed him to fully realize his artistic vision.

The creation of **The Way It Is By Bruce Hornsby And The Range** was not accidental. Hornsby has stated in multiple interviews that the song was inspired by the Civil Rights Movement and the persistent resistance to desegregation and equal rights. The title itself is a sardonic reference to the phrase "that's just the way it is," often used to dismiss or justify social injustices. Hornsby wanted to challenge the apathy behind that phrase, to suggest that historical conditions are not immutable truths but rather choices made by individuals and societies.

The now-iconic piano riff was actually a happy accident. Hornsby was experimenting with a rhythmic, hypnotic pattern on his piano that reminded him of a carousel. When he built the song around that circular, repetitive figure, it created a sense of forward motion combined with a feeling of being stuck in a loop—a perfect musical metaphor for the cyclical nature of social struggle.

The Defining Piano Riff

It is impossible to discuss the song without addressing its musical signature. The opening piano riff is one of the most recognizable in rock history. Hornsby plays a syncopated, bright pattern in E-flat major that is both joyful

and insistent. This riff sets the emotional tone for the entire track. It is not a lament; it is a declaration. The technical precision of the playing, combined with the emotional lift of the melody, creates a contrast with the heavy subject matter. This deliberate juxtaposition makes the message more palatable and powerful. The riff is the sound of resilience.

Deconstructing the Message: A Lyrical Deep Dive

The Narrative of Unfinished History

The lyrics of **The Way It Is By Bruce Hornsby And The Range** are a masterclass in storytelling. Rather than using abstract slogans, Hornsby presents a specific, relatable character. The first verse introduces a poor black man standing at a welfare office, trying to provide for his family. The line "He's still waiting for his check / And he's trying to do his best" humanizes a figure often vilified in political discourse.

The chorus, "That's just the way it is / Some things will never change," is delivered not as a statement of fact but as a cynical observation from those who benefit from the status quo. Hornsby immediately counters this fatalism with the hopeful refrain: "Ah, but don't you believe them." This is the heart of the song. It is an explicit call to reject the narrative of inevitability.

The Civil Rights Act and the Price of Progress

The second verse shifts the scene to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Hornsby sings about a senator who opposes the bill, referencing the real-life actions of politicians who filibustered against desegregation. The line "They said, 'You know, the old laws are coming through / And that's just the way it is'" demonstrates how arguments for tradition ("the old ways") are often used to preserve inequality. By naming the historical date, Hornsby grounds the song in a specific political struggle, reminding listeners that the fight for equality is a recent and ongoing battle.

This verse is particularly potent because it exposes the hypocrisy of power. The senator uses the phrase "the way it is" to justify oppression, while Hornsby uses the song to expose the lie. The lyrical structure uses the chorus as a weapon, contrasting the defeatist "don't you believe them" with the resilient "maybe someday."

Universalizing the Struggle

While the song is explicitly about race and civil rights, its themes are universal. The final verse broadens the scope to include any situation where individuals are told to accept their circumstances. The line "Hand me down my walking cane / I've got to get up and try again" speaks to the universal human experience of facing failure and oppression. It is a song about agency. It argues that change is possible not through passive hope, but through active resistance. The genius of **The Way It Is By Bruce Hornsby And The Range** is that it functions simultaneously as a specific history lesson and a general anthem for underdogs everywhere.

Musical Composition and Production: A Synth of Styles

The Sound of the 80s with a Timeless Core

Musically, **The Way It Is By Bruce Hornsby And The Range** sits at a fascinating crossroads. It has the polished production values of mid-80s rock: clean guitar tones, a solid drum machine or tight live drums, and synth pads that fill the sonic space. However, the acoustic piano is the star, lending the track an organic, timeless quality that separates it from many of its synth-heavy contemporaries.

The arrangement is deceptively simple. It builds slowly. The song opens with the solo piano riff, which is then joined by a simple bassline and drums. The verses are relatively sparse, allowing Hornsby's vocal delivery and lyrics to take center stage. The chorus opens up with backing harmonies and fuller instrumentation, providing a release of tension. This dynamic structure keeps the listener engaged across the song's nearly five-minute runtime.

Vocals and Delivery

Hornsby's vocal performance is understated but deeply expressive. He sings with a nasal, soulful timbre that conveys both weariness and defiance. He does not preach; he observes. When he delivers the line "That's just the way it is," there is a slight sneer in his voice, a hint of bitterness that reinforces the song's critical perspective. In the bridge, where he sings "They tell me change is good," his voice rises with a questioning, almost desperate energy. This vocal nuance adds layers of meaning to the text.

The production, handled by Hornsby and Huey Lewis, is clean and punchy. The bass is warm and melodic, the drums provide a steady, driving beat, and the guitar solos are tasteful. The song's high dynamic range allows it to feel intimate in the verses and anthemic in the choruses. This balance is a key reason why the song enjoyed massive airplay on both pop and adult contemporary radio.

Commercial Success and Cultural Milestones

Chart Performance and Awards

Upon its release, **The Way It Is By Bruce Hornsby And The Range** became an instant smash. It reached number one on the Billboard Hot 100 in December 1986, holding the top spot for two weeks. It also charted highly on the Adult Contemporary and Mainstream Rock charts. The album went multiplatinum, and the band won the Grammy for Best New Artist in 1987. The song's success launched Hornsby into a long and respected career, both as a solo artist and as a touring member of the Grateful Dead.

However, the commercial success was not without irony. Many radio stations played the song for its catchy melody without paying attention to its political message. Hornsby himself has noted that some listeners missed the point entirely, assuming the chorus was an acceptance of fate rather than a critique of it.

Sampling and Rediscovery

The song found a completely new audience in the 1990s when rapper E-40 sampled the piano riff for his hit "Things'll Never Change." This introduction exposed a younger generation to the original track. Later, legendary hip-hop producer DJ Premier used a loop of the song for a track by Gang Starr. In the 2010s and 2020s, the song experienced yet another resurgence on social media platforms like TikTok, where it became associated with themes of perseverance and social justice. The cyclical rediscovery of **The Way It Is By Bruce Hornsby And The Range** is a testament to its structural integrity and timeless message.

The Song's Enduring Relevance in Modern Discourse

A Mirror for Modern Movements

In an era marked by renewed debates over racial justice, voting rights, and economic inequality, **The Way It Is By Bruce Hornsby And The Range** has lost none of its power. If anything, it has gained relevance. The line "Some things will never change" now feels like a direct commentary on the cyclical nature of history. The song serves as a historical document that reminds us that the struggles of the 1960s are not ancient history but are continuously being reenacted.

Modern social movements like Black Lives Matter have philosophies that align with the song's core message: that change requires persistent, active refusal to accept the status quo. The song empowers activists by validating their frustration and providing a soundtrack for their resistance. It is often used in video montages, documentaries, and social media posts that discuss civil rights history, proving that good art remains a vital tool for education and inspiration.

Critiques and Complexity

It is also important to acknowledge the complexities of the song. Some critics have argued that as a white artist,

Hornsby occupies a complicated position in singing about Black struggle. However, Hornsby has always been transparent about his intention to speak about his own experience as a witness to injustice in the South. The song does not claim to speak for anyone; it speaks against systemic apathy. By focusing on the resistance to change, he makes the song accessible to a broad audience while maintaining its integrity.

The Musical Legacy: Covers and Tributes

A Song for All Genres

The universal appeal of the melody and message has led to countless covers across genres. From jazz instrumental versions to bluegrass renditions and orchestral arrangements, the song adapts well to different contexts. Each cover interprets the emotional core slightly differently: some emphasize the melancholy, others the defiance, and still others the hopefulness.

Artists have covered **The Way It Is By Bruce Hornsby And The Range** in live performances at Memorial Day concerts, charity events, and music festivals. It has become a standard in the American songbook. The fact that a song with such a specific political context can be performed in settings as diverse as a political rally and a wedding reception speaks to its emotional versatility.

Impact on Bruce Hornsby's Career

For Bruce Hornsby, the song was both a blessing and a curse. It remains his signature song, the one he cannot escape at concerts. However, it also freed him to pursue more experimental music. He has said that the success of the song gave him the leverage to make albums that were less commercial. His career after The Range has been marked by a deep dive into jazz, bluegrass, and classical music. Yet, he always returns to this song with respect and reverence, often reinterpreting it with new arrangements to keep it fresh.

Conclusion: More Than Just the Way It Is

The Way It Is By Bruce Hornsby And The Range endures because it does exactly what great art is supposed to do: it entertains while it enlightens. It is a pop song with a conscience, a hit

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