

Song Exploder
Aimee Mann - Patient Zero
Episode 103

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.

("Patient Zero" by AIMEE MANN)

Hrishikesh: Aimee Mann is a Grammy- and Oscar-nominated singer-songwriter. In the 80s, she fronted the band 'Til Tuesday, and in 1993, she released her first solo album. In 2017, Aimee released her 9th album, *Mental Illness*, and in this episode, she tells the story of how the song "Patient Zero" from that album was made. I talked to Aimee along with the song's co-writer, Jonathan Coulton. The interview was recorded in front of a live audience, on board the JoCo Cruise, a music and comedy cruise organized by Jonathan Coulton. Here's Aimee Mann on Song Exploder.

("Patient Zero" by AIMEE MANN)

(Music fades)

Aimee: My name is Aimee Mann. This all was originally written or inspired by meeting the actor, Andrew Garfield, at a party.

(Audience laughter)

Aimee: I had seen him in *Social Network*. I was a big fan of *Social Network*, and I thought he was really great, and my husband was with me. And so, we met him, we were very excited to meet him. And we were talking, and it was one of these big Hollywood parties. This was before Spider-Man. So he had just sort of landed in Los Angeles, and was completely freaked out by being around super famous people, and huge amounts of money and studios, like just the whole thing seemed to be not his thing at all. And so, that kind of gave me the idea for a story about someone who comes to Hollywood, a real artist, with the promise that they're going to be in a big movie, and then kind of gets chewed up and spit out by more corrupt influences.

(Voice memo)

Aimee: This is the crummy voice memo on my iPhone.

(Voice memo)

Aimee: I wrote it as a waltz. It was in 3/4 time. You know, I love writing waltzes on acoustic guitar, so it came really easily for me, but it also, because it was so much, my bag is acoustic guitar waltz time, that it was not that exciting to me.

(Voice memo)

Aimee: I thought it could be something, but I just didn't have any sense of perspective about it.

(Voice memo fades)

Aimee: And so, you know, I was kind of at the point where I knew that I had run out of ideas for it, and thought, *Well, I'll just hand it to somebody else.* For me, this record, I wanted it to be very soft, and acoustic, and depressing, and melancholy. And I [laughter]

(Audience laughter)

Aimee: thought I should have Jonathan, of course,

Jonathan: I am all of those things.

Aimee: sing his sad, soft, 70s style vocals.

Jonathan: [laughter]

(Audience laughter)

Jonathan: I take that as a complement. My name is Jonathan Coulton, and I co-wrote this song with Aimee.

(Voice memo)

Jonathan: Aimee sent me that voice memo, and I listened to it on the computer in my office. And she had said, "This song is dead to me. I can't make it go. And you could do whatever you want. You can really wreck it. I don't care."

Aimee: It's a little bit, "I can't lose" situation, because if you come up with something, then great. And if you don't, then it was a piece of garbage I was never going to use.

Jonathan: When you're taking somebody else's song and trying to change it, what you don't want to do is learn it too well, because you will get stuck in the same rut that they're in. So I like to listen to it a couple of times just to get it.

(Voice memo)

(Voice memo fades)

Jonathan: And then, let it unfold the way it wants to unfold.

(Vocals with guitar: "But news filtered over the transom / That a villain ended up with the part / You paid your respects like a ransom / To a moment that was doomed from the start")

Jonathan: Putting it into 4/4 came pretty easily to me, because once I started doing it that way, it made a lot more sense, and the lyrics sort of straightened out. And I don't know, I don't know how else to describe it. It sounds a little pretentious, but it felt like it wanted to be in 4.

Aimee: I thought it was great. I loved it. And it really did what I was hoping it would do, which is completely revitalize the song for me. It afforded me a rhythm that didn't come as naturally to me, but made it more interesting.

(Guitar ends)

Aimee: We finished this record last summer at my producer, Paul Bryan's studio. We were going to keep it pretty simple, but this is probably the fullest production on this record. It's just irresistible. I mean, you're in the studio when you're like, "You know what? We probably should put some percussion."

(Drums with percussion)

Aimee: Jay Bellerose played drums. He is such an interesting drummer, and we wanted to have him play on this, because he doesn't approach it like a drummer playing a drum kit, necessarily. He picks drums, and sounds, and pieces of percussion that he thinks fits in with the song. He's kind of an oddball.

(Drums with percussion)

Aimee: As he was playing, I kept picturing the traffic going through Los Angeles like it was blood going through veins. And I said something to him about it. And he said, "That's what I was thinking, that it was blood going through veins." He's got this very organic, evocative feeling to him.

(Drums with percussion end)

Aimee: Well, now that there's percussion, you really want to hear some bass.

(Bass)

Aimee: Paul played on this song. He's my bass player on the road.

Paul: My name is Paul Bryan. On this track, I played an old 1960s Vox bass called an Apollo IV. It's a pretty cheap bass and it doesn't intonate very well. You can kind of hear the out of tune notes. I like this in a bass. I'm very influenced by upright players. And I think that little pitchiness adds personality.

(Bass ends)

Aimee: And then, Paul is like, "Well, let me just write some string charts." So there's a song called "Tinseltown in the Rain," by this band called The Blue Nile.

("Tinseltown in the Rain" by THE BLUE NILE)

Aimee: It's another Los Angeles song, and kind of evocative of the same flavor. And it's got the strings. And so, I wanted to have pizzicato strings to sort of echo that.

(Strings)

Aimee: Originally, I was not going to have strings on that many songs, but his charts were so fantastic and different. He's a great arranger.

(Strings)

(Piano)

Aimee: That's Jamie Edwards.

(Piano)

Aimee: That's Paul's piano. It's a Steinway, that's old, and dark sounding, and has sadness built right into it.

(Audience laughter)

Aimee: Jamie is a person you could say, "This is what this song is about. This is the vibe," and then he really replicates it.

(Piano)

Aimee: It's so beautifully sad. He's just the greatest.

(Piano fades)

Aimee: You know, it's not a happy song. It's not the best that Hollywood has to offer in this song. And also there's a lot of references to *Day of the Locust* and sort of Raymond Chandler, like the version of Los Angeles that's darker and more and more and more disturbing. There's a lyric that refers to someone named Carmen Sternwood, which is a character in a Raymond Chandler novel.

(Vocals: "Carmen Sternwood probably pulled that trigger for fun")

Aimee: Carmen Sternwood is the daughter of a wealthy man. And she's just a nut bag who shoots a guy because it's hilarious, and she's crazy, but it's really an implication of wealth, and Hollywood, and being spoiled, and narcissistic, has brought her to this. So I felt like it was a character that made sense to reference. But, as I was writing it, I thought that it was Sherwood. And then, after it was mixed, I realized it was the wrong thing. And so [laughter], I came in and sang a "St"

(Audience laughter)

Aimee: on my lead vocal, but we did not do it on the background vocals. So you can hear that it's Sherwood on the background vocals.

(Vocals: "Carmen Sherwood probably pulled that trigger for fun")

(Audience laughter)

Aimee: [laughter] Well, this song, it's definitely fictional, but my brother-in-law is Sean Penn, so there's occasional brushes with movie stars. And seeing how they are, and having conclusions about what is good about being a star, and what maybe it is not so good for people. I think also just my own experience, being a musician where

(“Voices Carry” by ‘TIL TUESDAY)

Aimee: the first band I was in was pretty popular for not very long, but I got enough of a taste of that to feel like, *I don't know how people do this*; have fans follow you home, and get your phone number, and call you up, and like I don't understand how people cope with that. That freaked me out. And so, I think when I met Andrew Garfield, and felt like it's a weird world, it really is a very strange world. And you have to have certain resources to navigate that world. So I was kind of worried about him, you know? But that was partially based on my brief brush with fame.

(Vocals)

Jonathan: I came out after most of the song was put together, to do the background vocals.

Aimee: He was just singing a little melody that I thought was really great. And I said, “We should make that a bridge,” and asked him to write words for the bridge.

(Vocals: “In the hills where hope is such a constant companion / Close enough to almost touch the lights of the canyon”)

Jonathan: That line, “In the Hills where hope is such a constant companion,” felt like the topic sentence, sort of summary of the story. The other half of the couplet is, “Close enough to almost touch the lights of the canyon.” I am not really that familiar with the geography of Los Angeles.

(Audience laughter)

Jonathan: So when I sent that, I wasn't entirely sure what that would mean. If that was a thing that you could look and see lights in a canyon. And if that would mean that you were living in a place that was a fancy place or a less fancy place? I wasn't

exactly sure what it meant, but I felt like I had heard other songs about Los Angeles talking about canyons,

Aimee: [laughter]

(Audience laughter)

Jonathan: and that I was probably pretty safe in mentioning it. And if it was completely off the mark, Aimee would tell me.

Aimee: You're on firm ground.

(Vocals: "Close enough to almost touch the lights of the canyon (lights of the canyon)")

Aimee: I did know that I wanted a particular sound in the background vocals. I don't really know where I got this idea from. I think probably more easy listening records from like the 70s. It's probably Jonathan's influence with his a capella vibes.

(Vocals: "Close enough to")

Jonathan: Aimee Mann does not like the major seventh chord.

(Audience laughter)

Jonathan: It has a certain cheeseball quality, I suppose, but I like it a lot. I slather my songs with major seventh chords. There was a point where we had put some layers on, and there were too many major seventh chords for Aimee's comfort. And so, the first time through, you notice it doesn't go to the major seventh, it goes all the way up to the tonic again.

(Vocals: "In the hills where")

Jonathan: And so, we saved the major seventh for the second time through.

(Vocals: "Close enough to")

Aimee: It makes it more of a tension rather than a statement.

(Guitar)

Aimee: By the end, it painted a picture, it had sort of soundtrack elements to me of what this story was, it felt very Los Angeles at night, and you see the lights in the canyon. I wanted it to have a sense of compassion.

(Piano joins)

Aimee: You know, it's sad when good people can't negotiate a corrupt system. This person comes to Hollywood, and they're like, "This is going to be great." And it's just all terrible, just all garbage, and they have to leave. I mean, it's a sad story.

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Patient Zero," by Aimee Mann, in its entirety.

("Patient Zero" by AIMEE MANN)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net for a link to buy this song, and to watch the music video, and for links to learn more about Aimee Mann and her collaborators. Song Exploder is produced by me, along with Christian Koons. Special thanks to Jonathan Coulton for inviting me on the JoCo cruise to make this episode. You can learn more about the JoCo cruise at jococruise.com. That's jococruise.com. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a curated network of extraordinary, cutting edge podcasts made possible by the Knight Foundation and listeners like you. Learn more at radiotopia.fm.

("Sweet" by LITTLE DRAGON)

Hrishikesh: Next time on Song Exploder, Little Dragon. You can find Song Exploder on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram @SongExploder. And you can find all the past and future episodes of the show at songexploder.net or wherever you download podcasts. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.

("Sweet" by LITTLE DRAGON)

(Music fades)