

Song Exploder
alt-J - In Cold Blood
Episode 107

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.

Hrishikesh: This episode contains explicit language.

("In Cold Blood" by ALT-J)

Hrishikesh: alt-J formed in Leeds, England in 2007. Their debut album won a Mercury Prize, and their second album was nominated for a Grammy. Their third album, *Relaxer* came out in June 2017. In this episode, they break down "In Cold Blood" from that album. It's a song they'd written years earlier, but when they tried to record it, they couldn't get it right. The problem was the tempo. Coming up, you'll hear how they solved it and more. It's alt-J on Song Exploder.

("In Cold Blood" by ALT-J)

(Music fades)

Joe: I'm Joe from alt-J, and I sing and play guitar.

Gus: I'm Gus. I play the keyboards.

Joe: The first memory I have of the early writings for "In Cold Blood," that was in Leeds University, that was when we were in college, 2009. I was basically just at the front room of this shared house. I kind of wait until the house is empty and has no distractions. And I just had this guitar riff that I was working on.

(Guitar)

Joe: Often with Gus, when I write a guitar part, you react quite quickly to what I'm doing. And it's almost like a rally,

Gus: Yeah.

Joe: like it's as quick as me serving you a ball, and you're hitting it back.

(Keyboard)

Gus: I do remember writing the keyboard part very quickly. I bought this Casiotone 405 from eBay for one pound and five pence. Like amazing deal, you know, ludicrous. What I really love about the Casiotone is it's got a really warm, kind of old sound because it's made in the early 80s. It's not a synthesizer. It's a basic keyboard, really, with about 24 sounds. And I particularly loved that organ sound that I used. I think it's the pipe organ sound. I mean, it sounds nothing like a pipe organ [laughter] but it's just great in its own way,

(Keyboard)

Gus: which then Thom drums to.

(Drums)

(Drums end)

Joe: Thom's minimalist approach to drums was,

Gus: one of the things that give alt-J quite a recognizable sound. Maybe

Joe: he didn't need a grand drum kit to create great beats.

Gus: When it was setting up the band, and we were playing in Gwil, our old guitarist's bedroom, Thom was gradually bringing in piece after piece of percussion every week, go home for his Sunday lunch with his dad, and then he'd come back with a different drum. So he was building like this kit, sort of piecemeal in Gwil's bedroom. And so, first he brought the snare drum,

(Snare drum)

Gus: and then, he brought the kick drum

(Kick drum)

Gus: and then, he bought cowbells.

(Cowbell)

Gus: He didn't want to bring his Toms. So he brought his bongos, and started hitting them with sticks.

(Drums with percussion)

Gus: There's some cowbell in there as well.

(Drums with percussion)

Gus: We're not like a music school band. And had we been a music school band, we probably would have booked like, you know, a practice room, and there would have been like a full drum kit with,

(Music fades)

Gus: you know, all the Rack Toms, and Floor Toms, and cymbals, and hi-hat, and whatever. But because when we started out, we were doing it in a DIY way, that became

(Drums)

Gus: our drum sound.

(Drums with percussion)

Gus: For years we had this song and didn't record it. We occasionally just like break it out in a soundcheck or something,

(Keyboard joins)

Gus: but we were naturally slowing up and speeding down.

(Music ends)

Gus: Sorry [laughter], speeding up and slowing down.

(Keyboard, drums, and percussion)

Gus: When we were playing it without a click, you know, just jamming it together. You know, like why does the verse seem to want to be like a hundred?

(Metronome)

Gus: And the chorus just really wants to be 105.

(Metronome)

Gus: Usually when that happens, you can find the tempo that's acceptable for the whole song. So we were just like, "We have got to, let's just do it at 103. Come on." For some reason, it just didn't work. So in this case, we decided to change the tempo in the different sections.

Joe: I remember being in the studio with Charlie Andrew, our producer, and we had to do a number of takes to go through each section to find the right tempos.

Gus: So once we acknowledged that, then the song worked. So that was a real breakthrough actually, was figuring out the tempos. So once we had the intro guitar and Casiotone thing going on, then it goes quite quickly into another section, like slowed down sort of bluesy section.

(Guitar with Casiotone)

Joe: That was the moment where I remember thinking, "We're onto something here." Because you were doing some really cool things with the keyboard.

(Keyboard trumpet joins)

Gus: I have another really basic keyboard. It's a Yamaha, it's basically, it's like a keyboard that secondary schools buy in bulk, and put them in like the music rooms. So it's got about a hundred sounds. Again, the whole orchestra is on there. So I think I was using the trumpet setting on this. And we really liked the sound actually, because it sounded so fake, but so good.

(Keyboard trumpet joins)

Gus: We sent over a version with Yamaha brass, and I think it might have been the head of our label came in,

Joe: Ah, yeah, yeah.

Gus: and was like, “We should use real brass on this.” But we had all kind of convinced ourselves that actually Yamaha brass sounded really great, and we didn't need real brass, but then, you know, we had this day booked at Abbey Road to do strings. So, as we had that room booked, it made sense to get a little brass section to come in, and just quickly knock the “In Cold Blood” brass part out in half an hour. Well just see how it sounds. I think once we even heard them just rehearsing it

(Brass)

Gus: before we even turned on the tape, it was just like, “Wow, this is amazing. This is obviously going to sound absolutely incredible.”

(Brass)

Gus: We were totally convinced then.

(Brass)

Joe: They give that section a really kind of like ominous sinister presence.

(Brass ends)

Gus: With this song, essentially, the story is a guy jumps into a pool. He's at a pool party, everyone's having a good time. They're all bros, beer kegs, howling, 6 packs. Your classic pool party. And the guy jumps in. The time he resurfaces, someone's been stabbed.

(Vocals: “My pool, summer, summer, pool, summer vibes killed / In cold blood”)

Gus: This must've been an alt-J fascination with pool parties. It seems to keep cropping up, the pool party.

Joe: Yeah [laughter].

Gus: I don't know, because we're not particularly big pool party people.

Joe: Oh, no. No, no.

Gus: No. You know, growing up in England, I don't know, you watch a lot of American TV and films and stuff, and it always seems to involve, you know, a pool party when you're watching like *American Pie*, or some of these films

Joe: Yeah.

Gus: that we watched growing up.

Joe: Yeah, or like *The O.C.* or something,

Gus: *The O.C.* Yeah, exactly.

Joe: grow up watching these programs, and you're like, "Oh, of course, every episode they have a pool party."

Gus: You're kind of half like fascinated and jealous, and then, you half think it's just like ridiculous like, "Oh, yep, there's the pool party."

Joe: Yeah.

Gus: "There's the guy with the keg, you know?"

Joe: Token pool party coming up.

Gus: Yeah, yeah.

Joe: So that's the general idea.

(Vocals: "In cold blood")

Joe: Often I will fill space, using my voice. When I'm in a booth on my own, and no one's looking at me, I can kind of like act out of character, maybe, and do the song justice by making an attempt to add something extra that could work. But I do it on my own when no one's looking, because I look like an idiot doing it.

(Vocals: "In cold blood / In cold blood")

Joe: We did a lot of takes, and Charlie Andrew was just basically like, "I don't know which one I like." And so, we were all like, "Well, why don't we just use them all?"

(Vocals)

Gus: At the end of the song, there's a very simple synth lead, which again comes from my Yamaha, my sort of school keyboard.

(Synth lead)

Gus: So it's me playing it, but it's kind of arpeggiated in its structure, but I did experiment with using arpeggiator on a real synth, but it sounded too perfect. I think it's the fact that it's not quite perfect is what makes it good. I always really enjoyed playing that part, but it's hard because it really knackers my arm [laughter]. Like I'm doing it live now, it's a real punisher, but it is worth it. And then, the key change as well at the end,

(Synth joins)

Gus: and it just really sounded cool over the top of the brass.

(Brass join)

Gus: You, Joe, I think you just sort of thought that we just needed one more thing to happen, really. Didn't we?

Joe: Yeah. Just something to finish it off. We haven't had a song key change. So I felt like this was the song to get that emotion.

Gus: It's the final push, isn't it?

Joe: And you want to have a big exit.

(Orchestra)

(Orchestra ends)

Gus: We do like using sound effects in songs. I think that they're just little gap fillers. So there's a big whoo between verse one and verse two.

(Vocals)

Joe: That was The London Cheerleaders.

Gus: London Cheerleaders, I think. Yeah. They're a bunch of cheerleaders, literal, real cheerleaders. And just for hire,

Joe: For hire.

Gus: yeah, don't know. I don't know if they have a particular team.

Joe: No, I don't think they do.

Gus: I think we just Googled [laughter] "London Cheerleaders" [laughter].

Joe: Yeah.

Gus: There was a group called The London Cheerleaders [laughter].

(Diving sound)

Gus: So that is the sound of a, like it's somebody diving off a diving board, and then making a big splash. We initially actually used a like library sample for that. Online, there's sort of like various uncopyrighted sound effects you can download. But funnily at like, at the last minute, I think the label got cold feet about what was the actual legal status of these sound effects. So there was a very panicked day where Charlie, our producer, had to recreate all these sound effects [laughter], and I don't know how he did it. Did he build a springboard?

Joe: I think what happened was there was some construction work going on outside the studio, and he found a big bit of plywood.

Gus: Mhmm.

Joe: And he put two of them together, so they had some kind of, sort of like, almost like rigidity to it, and then just sprung it, and it made the right sounding noise

Gus: Yeah.

Joe: to fit with a springboard.

(Springboard sound)

Joe: And then, with the splash, he just said he threw a stone in the pond [laughter].

Gus: [laughter]

Joe: Something like that.

(Splashing sound)

Gus: I don't know, it's just, we've always just done it when it comes to recording. Just kind of like

(Guitar)

Gus: when you finish a piece of work, and then you put stickers all over it, just to like, you know, make it look extra pretty or something like that, isn't it?

Joe: It's the bay leaf in the curry.

Gus: Yeah, yeah.

Joe: Do you put bay leaves in curry?

Gus: You should put curry leaves in curry [laughter].

Joe: [laughter] Yeah sure.

Gus: There you go.

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "In Cold Blood," by alt-J, in its entirety.

("In Cold Blood" by ALT-J)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net for a link to buy this track, and to watch the music video for "In Cold Blood." Song Exploder is produced by me, along with Christian Koons. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a curated network of extraordinary, cutting edge podcasts made possible by the Knight Foundation. Learn more about all the shows at radiotopia.fm. 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.

© 2020 Translucence