

Song Exploder
Anamanaguchi - Prom Night
Episode 17

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.

("Prom Night" by ANAMANAGUCHI)

Hrishikesh: In addition to guitars, drums, and bass, the band Anamanaguchi makes their music with the 8-bit sounds that were built into Nintendo video game consoles made in the 1980s. They use music software called trackers to meticulously sequence and produce those sounds. Most of their music is instrumental, but in this episode, they break down one of the first times they've incorporated vocals, for the song "Prom Night," which features singer Bianca Raquel. "Prom Night" is from their most recent album, *Endless Fantasy*, which debuted at #1 on Billboard's Heatseekers chart when it came out in 2013. Here's Anamanaguchi on Song Exploder.

("Prom Night" by ANAMANAGUCHI)

(Music fades)

Pete: Yeah, I'm Pete.

Ary: And I'm Ary.

Pete: There's two other boys who could not be here. Their names are James and Luke, and we're Anamanaguchi. There's a big community of people who would take old Nintendos from 1985, and use them as synthesizers. People in Sweden, New York, Japan, London, taking apart these old video game consoles and old home computers, and using them as synths instead of game consoles.

Ary: They'd write software specifically for producing music on them.

Pete: We all just kind of met under the umbrella of, like, music technology, and formed a band around this kind of fun concept. The appeal isn't necessarily using the actual console, for me, the appeal is the limitations. You get such a, like,

shortened language of electronic music. It really simplifies the idea of how to build the sounds that you want from the simplest building blocks. It's kind of expanded to using this language of simple digital music, but applying it to everything else as well. So this already had started. I was really, really down. I had just heard this group Capsule.

("I Wish You" by CAPSULE)

Pete: This guy from Japan, Yasutaka Nakata, he put out this album in 2010. It was just some of the most exciting music I'd ever heard.

("I Wish You" by CAPSULE)

(Music ends)

Pete: I was like, "Shit. Like, I can't write anything like that. Like, I feel like such a noob." I just, like, put my headphones on, and wrote the chorus to this song. And it's completely inspired from that. So here's the lead of the track for the chorus, these plucky square wave synths. I wanted Tokyo, neon lights, like, late night technology city, to evoke that kind of stuff.

(Synth)

Pete: The cool part about the NES as a sound chip thingy, you get all this bit quantization, which means like it has 16 values for volume. When a note fades out, it doesn't go like laaa, and like goes into nothing, goes like la la la. Like, it looks like stairs instead of a diagonal line.

(Synth)

(Synth ends)

Pete: There's also these like chord pads, these little guys.

(Chord pads)

Pete: Ary taught me about sidechaining, getting that like pumping sound. In the same way that the fade's quantized, the sidechain is quantized. It's like, it's saying play volume four at this tick, play volume ten at this tick, and then volume sixteen at this tick. So yeah, it's fun [laughter]. That's like the kind of emergent

fun that comes from doing stuff on a simple program. You have to find fun workarounds for things.

(Music ends)

Pete: It also allows you to get this saw wave, that is this really rip-y, cut-y bass. It's got a very weird quality to it.

(Bass)

(Bass ends)

Pete: I'm not thinking about my melodic choices in any kind of space. I'm just listening to the sound and deciding what I like. That's kind of what I like about programming electronic music anyway, is that kind of note selection process with melody. Our brains are a lot more creative than our hands. Instead of, "Whoa, that's a big leap, that interval," on like piano or something like that, in tracker space, they're all the same distance away from each other because you're just filling in a text box, basically.

(Guitar)

Pete: The guitar came pretty early on actually. It was what kind of helped define what I wanted the track to be like band-wise. I needed this track to, kind of, have this like, shimmer to it, where it's just like, sounds sunny, and sounds, like, positive. So, yeah, but the chords, like that were a bit melancholy, like the chord pads,

(Guitar fades)

Pete: I like this chord arrangement because it kind of balances that out. I'm going to play them together.

(Guitar with chord pads)

Pete: I'm happiest when I'm writing music. And so, I tend to write happier music. I'm much less interested in expressing myself when I'm upset and dwelling in that space, than I am getting out of it.

(Guitar with chord pads)

(Music fades)

Pete: I just couldn't find anyone to sing on my fucking songs [laughter]. But a month before we were putting this album out, we found Bianca through a friend, Leah, and she was, like, interested in doing, like, stranger stuff. And she's like an R&B singer. And I was like, "Well, that would be perfect." So a lot of the interesting part of this track for me was being able to blend a melody, like a square wave of melody with an expressive vocal. So this is what the hook that I played earlier sounds like with that thing.

(Vocals with synth: "La la la la la love me, love me, love me, love me / Love me like it's prom night / Wanna be this fantasy all night with you")

Pete: The bridge of this song has this kind of like very choppy, vocal process-y part that was a lot of fun to do, because I love messing with that kind of stuff. Like the synthetic vocal stuff is very, very, very interesting to me. Just chopping up the wave, finding fun syllables, affecting them.

Ary: And then, I did, like, the choppiness stuff in virtual DJ, just free DJ software [laughter], just did like weird like chopping stuff, and then handed that over to Pete. And then, he did a bunch of, like, selecting like specific syllables, and pitches, and re-pitching them.

Pete: Yeah, like I took the acapellas of the new version, took specific syllables, pitched them up, down, put different effects on them. It was basically like having a dueling guitar solo, but with vocal samples [laughter]. So the first half of this is me, and the second half is Ary.

(Processed vocals)

Pete: Like they might as well not be a vocal. They might as well just be a synth.

Ary: It's much more like an instrument.

Pete: Like it's Auto-Tune, it's all that stuff. And that was definitely one of the funnest parts of working on this song, for sure.

(Vocals: "Baby, love me, love me / Love me like it's prom night / Wanna be this fantasy all night with you")

Pete: Yeah, for me, like lyrics, especially in pop music, it might as well be anything as far as I'm concerned. It's like, it's not what you say, it's how you say it. Or maybe it's just weird that there's a song about prom night, and, like, I didn't even go to prom. It's not like we, like, care about prom night [laughter].

(Synth with bass)

Pete: It came instantly from the melody. I was just like, this song is called "Prom Night," because it's sassy, and like it's a place where you can like, show yourself off in like your best clothes, and be like, "I'm never going to see these people again." It's the American idea of, like, prom is important [laughter].

Hrishikesh: But, for you, it wasn't?

Pete: No, I played Resident Evil at 4AM in my basement, I think [laughter].

(Synth with bass)

(Music fades)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Prom Night," by Anamanaguchi, in its entirety.

("Prom Night" by ANAMANAGUCHI)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net to learn more about Anamanaguchi, including a link to buy the song "Prom Night," as well as the Capsule song that influenced it. You can find all the past and future episodes of Song Exploder at songexploder.net or on iTunes, Stitcher, or wherever you download podcasts. Find this show on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram @SongExploder. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a curated network of extraordinary story-driven shows. Learn more at radiotopia.fm. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.