

Song Exploder
Andrew Bird - Roma Fade
Episode 77

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.

("Roma Fade" by ANDREW BIRD)

Hrishikesh: Andrew Bird is a singer, songwriter, and multi-instrumentalist, maybe best known for his violin playing and his whistling. In this episode, Andrew breaks down his song "Roma Fade," from the 2016 album *Are You Serious?* This interview was recorded on a rainy Friday in Los Angeles.

("Roma Fade" by ANDREW BIRD)

Andrew: I'm Andrew Bird.

(Music ends)

Andrew: Okay, so it started off like you hear in the intro, a loop that I made in my living room.

(Violin)

Andrew: It's just me playing this loop and whistling.

(Whistling joins)

Andrew: It's supposed to be two different instruments, creating this composite melody.

(Whistling with violin)

Andrew: The first couple lines came as I was driving down I-5 from San Francisco with my family. And I was, long drives like that, you got to entertain yourself. So I figured I'll work on this song. I was looking out over this sort of barren stretch of the central valley. And there were some rainstorms kind of in the distance, and light passing through the clouds. There was this patch of light coming down.

And I said, "Light rains, light," sounds like a weather report like "light rains today." Like it is at the moment, but I was also thinking "light reigns," as in rules.

(Vocals: "See her light, how it reigns / So hard on your high plains / So you take such pains / That she won't notice you")

Andrew: And that sort of began a song about how seeing something can change it, you know? How it being observed, changes it, and vice-versa. And the field of electricity between two people, as they're regarding each other, or pretending not to see them, you know that whole dance, sort of romantic dance of seeing someone. It's about when I first saw my wife.

(Violin with guitar)

(Guitar fades)

Andrew: It was after a show, I played at the Beacon Theater. It was like an after show party in the basement. And I just saw her across the room. And it seemed like, I wondered at all, ever since then, if she would know, knew that I was watching her because she was not with anybody, and kind of gazing off in the distance. And as if she may have known that I was watching, you know? It was like, "I'm going to be very statuesque." But she claims that she had no idea. And then, the next night I saw her, from the same distance in another restaurant in Manhattan, in a similar circumstance, with the light and everything. It's like, "Okay, something's going on here."

(Violin with guitar)

Andrew: Yeah.

(Violin with guitar)

(Music ends)

Andrew: Well, the first verse is this "light reigns / hard on her high plains / you take pains that she won't notice you." So you're kind of getting a sense that you might be, the voyeurism is borderline creepy. And so, the next line

(Vocals: "And your x-rays / Of your Paleo male gaze / How they rest, and play / Slowly corrupting you")

Andrew: So your x-rays of your Paleo male gaze. They rest and play, slowly corrupting you, but then it says,

(Vocals: "I wonder what the chance is you wanted to / A thousand vacant stares won't make it true / Make it true")

Andrew: So am I just this creepy voyeur? Or is there something going on here that's mutual? You know, I guess if this has a chorus, it's the next part, which is just, if she sees you, it changes you, rearranges your molecules. If you see her, changes her, she'll be seeing you after school.

(Vocals: "And if she sees you, it changes you / Rearranges your molecules / And if you see her, it changes her / She'll be seeing you after school")

Andrew: From that point on, the song starts to risk a little more romantically. It starts to shift from the third person of like these ambiguous pronouns to like, I and you, which I had to really encourage myself to do, because it's not my tendency. I'm not like super direct or confessional. I have to push myself a bit to put a little more skin in the game, as it were.

(Vocals: "And if you see me, how it changes you / Changes you / And if I see you, how it changes me / And if you see me, how it changes you / It changes you")

Andrew: Preproduction was my favorite part of the whole process. Tony Berg came over to my house every week for a couple months, because this is the first time I've used a proper producer in that sense, like someone to really kind of get in your business in a good way. I kind of enjoy geeking out on the chord voicings, which is his big thing. Finding the melody in a chord progression, you know, not just the outer voices as you say, like, but the inner voices, how are they going to lead? And I went to music school. I did voice structures and leading, but I wasn't very good at it. But it was kind of cool to like get that detailed about how in the bridge of this song, how the chords are going

(Guitar)

Andrew: to lead, and how this time we're going to substitute in A major for the voice leading, and this time, we're going to do a D7, just to keep it kind of constantly, the tension rising.

(Guitar with beat)

Andrew: Because otherwise that would be just three chords cycled over and over again. Dynamically, there's a really interesting moment. There's this long buildup.

(Violin, guitar, synth, bass, and beat)

(Beat)

Andrew: You can't do any cymbal crashes on that chord because it's, that's where it wants to just come crashing in here. But I was really adamant that it, like, walk right through the wall there without any announcement.

(Beat ends)

Andrew: That was really important to me. That's something I kept saying, "Let's not all forget, it's a real, emotional thing to not crash down on the downbeat, and to just kind of push right through."

(Violin, piano, guitar, bass and beat)

(Violin, guitar, bass, and beat end)

(Bass)

Andrew: I'm obsessed with basslines.

(Bass)

Andrew: That's the shit I like. The pick muted, you know, nice dubby sound, I just, it's just a texture that I've always loved that [mimics bass] sound.

Hrishikesh: Who's playing bass?

Andrew: Alan Hampton. Before we started, I said, one of my most important notes to him was like, "Practice triplets with a pick."

(Bass)

Andrew: [sings bassline] That muted bass with the really fast triplets.

(Guitar)

Hrishikesh: Have you ever written a song about your wife before?

Andrew: No, I think this is the first record that has like a handful of songs about her, yeah. There is a little bit like, "What is she going to think of this?" And then, once, you know, she's been hearing it in bits and pieces, and sometimes she doesn't hear it all put together until it's really down. And then, she'll hear, and be like, "Oh, I see."

Hrishikesh: [laughter]

Andrew: But yeah, it's different than in the past, since I know, you know, we're married. It's like, this is it, you know [laughter]? So it's like maybe that kind of leads to some of the more honesty in some of the songwriting. And just like I know there's no doubt.

(Violin, guitar, and percussion)

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Roma Fade," by Andrew Bird, in its entirety.

("Roma Fade" by ANDREW BIRD)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net for more on Andrew Bird, including a link to buy the song "Roma Fade."

Next time on Song Exploder, Grimes.

("Kill V. Maim" by GRIMES)

Hrishikesh: 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.

("Kill V. Maim" by GRIMES)

(Music fades)

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