

Song Exploder
Danny Elfman - What's This? (The Nightmare Before Christmas)
Episode 224

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.

("What's This?" from The Nightmare Before Christmas by DANNY ELFMAN)

Hrishikesh: Tim Burton's *The Nightmare Before Christmas* came out in 1993. It's a stop-motion, animated musical, with music by legendary composer Danny Elfman. He's won Emmys, a Grammy, and he's been nominated for four Oscars. From 1979 to 1995, he was also the singer and songwriter in the band Oingo Bongo. *The Nightmare Before Christmas* takes place in a world where different holidays all have their own realm. And the story is about Jack Skellington, the leader of Halloweentown, a place where it's always Halloween and Halloween is all they know. And Jack has grown a little tired of it, but then Jack discovers a portal to Christmastown with snow and Santa and all things Christmas inhabiting it. The song "What's This?" takes place in that moment of discovery. In this episode, Danny Elfman tells the story of how it all came together, and how writing and singing this song for Jack Skellington ended up profoundly connecting to his own life.

("What's This?" from The Nightmare Before Christmas by DANNY ELFMAN)

(Music ends)

Danny: My name's Danny Elfman. Tim Burton just called me one day, and he said, "Disney came across this story idea I had years and years and years ago when I was working there, and it never got made, and it got stashed away, and somebody found it, and said, "Oh, hey, look, we've got this Tim Burton thing." By the time Tim called me about *Nightmare Before Christmas*, we'd already done five movies together. We'd done the two Batman movies. We did *Pee-wee's Big Adventure*, *Beetlejuice*, and *Edward Scissorhands*. So we already knew each other fairly well. He would present me with these universes that he was creating, and they all just seem completely normal to me. You know, we kind of came from similar backgrounds. I grew up on monsters and science fiction fantasy as Tim did in the same era. So his world didn't ever seem that weird to me. And I guess that's why it [laughter] worked out. So it's not like I'd

ever go, “Oh my God, this is weird. What am I going to do? It’s just like, what? I don't get it.” It was, for me, it was just like, “Yeah, I totally get it.”

(“What’s This?” from The Nightmare Before Christmas by DANNY ELFMAN)

Danny: So Tim came over the house, and it was really as simple as this. He sat down, and he pulled out these wonderful drawings that he did. And as soon as I saw what Jack looked like, said, “Oh [laughter], yeah, right. This makes perfect sense to me. Let's just do it.” And then, he would start telling me the story.

(Music ends)

Danny: The way we did the whole musical was I would say, “Just tell me the story as if you were telling it to like, you know, some nephew or niece around a fire or, you know, at night. And just tell me a little bit at a time.” And he said, “Okay, Jack wanders into the forest, and there's three doors, and he's mystified,” and I'm picturing this. And he said, “He's going to open the door. And he gets sucked in when he pops out, he's in this snowy world, there's snowflakes falling, and he's seeing things he's never seen before. Everything's new to him.” And I would kind of write down little notes, and I'd say, “Okay, I got it. I got it. Go, go, go.” And I would kind of shoo him out the door.

(Strings with celeste)

Danny: The first things we hear are strings and celeste. And since I'm doing kind of a classic arrangement here, harp seemed like a natural.

(Harp joins)

Danny: And it's Jack arriving in Christmastown, and seeing it for the first time. So before the song starts, it's really score.

(Music ends)

Danny: I often write for Celestes, and I often write for voices, and I think it probably just goes back to Tchaikovsky. The use of Celeste in Tchaikovsky's ballets.

(“Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy” (from The Nutcracker Ballet) by TCHAIKOVSKY)

(Music ends)

Danny: So I'd talk with Tim, he'd give me some ideas. I'd grab a steno pad, and I'd start writing down lyrics. And as I'm writing down lyrics, I'm hearing a cadence. And I'm going, "Okay, I'm starting to feel this as a, you know,

(Strings)

Danny: kind of a quick tempo, he's all excited. So I would just start with just going bah, bah, bah, bah, bah, bah, bah, bah, bah.

(Orchestral demo)

Danny: At that time, I didn't even have a studio. I was living at my girlfriend's house in Burbank, and I set up a makeshift studio in her garage. I'd have like four or five or six samplers, and one will be loaded up with string samples, one with woodwind samples, brass samples, percussion samples. Now that many years ago, the orchestral demos were pretty cheesy sounding.

(Orchestral demo)

Danny: So we got our French horns, played their little fanfare, and again, that's Tchaikovsky-esque.

(Orchestral demo)

Danny: And now, it's score, and it's just kind of creating an energetic vibe for all the things Jack was singing.

(Orchestral demo)

(Music ends)

Danny: I really wanted it to sound timeless, but not self-consciously timeless. Like I'm not trying to recreate an old style that somebody would go, "Oh, that's an old style song of such and such." But to feel like it could be any time or place. I mean, the only thing consciously I thought about a little bit when I was doing "What's This?" was Gilbert and Sullivan [sings "I Am The Very Model of a Major-General" by Gilbert and Sullivan]. That very kind of a tongue twister type of a thing. So I thought, "Oh, it'd be fun if Jack was [sings the Gilbert and Sullivan rhythm]. It was like, "What's this? What's this? / There's color everywhere / What's this? There's white things in the air / What's this?" And it's

like, "Okay, I'm getting the cadence of it." And I'm blocking it out with some basic chords. And by the end of a couple of days, I'd have a demo. Tim would come by and he'd listen, and he'd go, "Oh yeah. Okay, cool."

(Demo: "What's this? What's this? / There's color everywhere / What's this? There's white things in the air / What's this? I can't believe my eyes / I must be dreaming, wake up, Jack, this isn't fair / What's this?")

Danny: So I did my vocals

(Music ends)

Danny: to the demo, and those were just really funky because, you know, I was just using a [laughter] RadioShack microphone in my garage when I first laid them down. And then, what I did is I took all the instrumental tracks, and we went into a studio. It was just Tim and I late at night. And I got in front of a real microphone, and did all of Jack's vocals, and all the other vocals. And we recorded all the songs for the whole movie in one night.

(Vocals: "What's this? What's this? / There's color everywhere / What's this? There's white things in the air / What's this? I can't believe my eyes / I must be dreaming, wake up, Jack, this isn't fair / What's this?")

Danny: Jack's voice is kind of theatrical. It's more theatrical than my voice is going to be, if I'm just singing one of my own songs. His voice like dips down into this part, and then back up again. There's a little bit of talk singing.

(Vocals: "What's this? What's this? / There's something very wrong / What's this? There's people singing songs / What's this? The streets are lined with little creatures laughing / Everybody seems so happy / Have I possibly gone daffy? What is this?")

Danny: By the time I did those demos, I hadn't written them for myself, but I had, in the process of writing those 10 songs, became so attached to Jack that I didn't know how to bring it up. Afterwards, I was kind of hemming and hawing about it, and I was going, "Tim, about Jack, and he goes, "Yeah, don't worry. You'll sing Jack." And I was like, "Sure, because if not," if he said, "No, no, no, we have to hire a professional singer." I would have gone, "OK, alright." But, you know, all kinds of mysterious accidents would have happened. And they'd finally come back to me, go, "Danny. I mean, we've just had the most incredible bad luck off these three singers, all got killed in the most mysterious ways. Would you mind

doing it?" And I'd go, "Well [laughter], if you really want, I suppose I could, not a problem."

(Orchestral demo)

Danny: The demo sounds cheesy, but all this is going to get replaced with the orchestra, it's going to sound wonderful.

(Orchestral demo)

(Orchestra)

(Music fades)

Danny: But there's a lot of detail that goes between my finished demo and getting it on paper. When I got *Pee-wee's Big Adventure*, I'd never done a score before. And I was like, "I don't know what the [redacted] I'm doing. I need a orchestrator to work with me, and I didn't know any orchestrator, so I turned to Steve, my guitarist in the band Oingo Boingo, and I go, "Have you ever orchestrated?" He goes, "Oh, I took a class at UCLA. I go, "That's good enough." So it was Tim Burton's first feature, my first time composing an orchestral film score, and my guitarist's first time being the orchestrator. He's still working with me now, by the way, so we've done, I think, 105 films together. But what I learned working with Steve is that he doesn't reinterpret the music. He just gets it to express itself, as best it could be on paper for the orchestra to play. So if I have a bunch of woodwinds going [sings ascending melody] like that, you know, it's like, he'll take the time to write down, "OK, it's four, it's actually three different instruments, and they actually have [sings ascending melody]."

(Orchestra)

Danny: The orchestra's amazing. There's nothing I can write that the orchestra can't play. It blows my mind even after 37 years. I write some really big, long pieces for films, and the first rehearsal that they do never having seen it before is already insanely good. And they're sight reading because they don't take this music home and study it. They just walk in there and play it.

(Orchestral recording)

(Music fades)

Danny: I really felt a strong kinship to the character of Jack, because I was at a place right at that point in my life with my band Oingo Boingo, where really starting around 1990, I wanted to leave the band. And every year I kept saying, "You know, I think this is our last year [laughter], I think this is our last year. And they were like, "Oh, no, it can't happen. Can't happen." And I felt really bad. And so, that feeling of guilt really kept me going for at least another five [laughter] years, which, you know, I don't regret, but I felt for Jack who's this character that was really the king of his own world, but wanted out. He wanted something else because that's exactly how I felt at that moment. You know, when you're a songwriter, singer in a band, you know, it's your universe. You've created that universe, and you're kind of the center of that universe. And that's exactly what Jack was in Halloweenland. And like Jack, I was looking for a door. I was really looking for a door to take me into another world.

(Vocals with orchestra: "The monsters are all missing / And the nightmares can't be found / And in their place, there seems to be / Good feeling all around / Instead of screams, I swear / I can hear music in the air / The smell of cakes and pies / Are absolutely everywhere")

Danny: I poured a lot of myself into *Nightmare Before Christmas*. And when it came out, it was really, really misunderstood. Nobody got it. And I was really kind of heartbroken. It wasn't a flop, but it was far from a hit. I mean, I had to do like a hundred short interviews, and every one of them asked the same thing: "So this is too scary for kids, right?" I go, "No, it's not too scary for kids." It was just this thing that was the perception of it. "It's not for kids, kids hate it," but my daughter, Molly, she was around 10 because I remember she listened to all the songs as I was writing them. And so, when people kept saying, "Oh, kids are going to hate these," I said, "No, my [laughter], my 10 year old daughter's heard them all and really loves them." And it was one of these incredibly lucky things of a movie that took on a life after it came out, which is so rare. I think if I was going to have any one piece that gets to have a second life on its own, what's it going to be? And I would say *Nightmare Before Christmas*, because I, you know, every other film I'd done, I'd only worked on it for three months, and here I'd worked on this film for close to two years. And so, I felt really, really lucky when years afterwards I saw that

(Orchestra)

Danny: it hasn't gone away. In fact, it's kind of growing.

(Orchestra)

Danny: I mean, the idea that I created any kind of iconic Christmas sound is ironic in the extreme for me, because I am a creature of Halloween in every way, shape, or form. You know, Halloween was the night I looked forward to, and Christmas was just like this, put my head under the pillow and cry, you know? It was just like, I want this to be over. I grew up as a lonely Jewish kid growing up in a neighborhood that there were, I'd had no Jewish friends. So Christmas time every year, I was by myself, and lonely, and just wishing it would be over so I can get back to my life again.

(Music ends)

Danny: And so, my appreciation of Christmas, I'm a latecomer to it, because then I had my two daughters, and I started getting into it for the first time in my life through them.

(Orchestra)

Danny: And so, I developed this kind of real excitement about, oh, making a perfect Christmas, having a Christmas party, getting the presents just right. All for the pleasure of seeing their faces in the morning. So at the point when I did *Nightmare Before Christmas*, I was [laughter] in the transition of like starting to think positively [laughter] instead of like a dark cloud of depression rolling my way.

(Music fades)

Danny: The just pure anticipation of having this

(Celeste)

Danny: night before Christmas, and the anticipation of what's going to happen, and then the presents in the morning, it's, it's really wonderful.

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, from *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, here's "What's This?" by Danny Elfman, in its entirety.

("What's This?" from The Nightmare Before Christmas by DANNY ELFMAN)

Hrishikesh: To learn more, visit songexploder.net. You'll find links to stream or download this track, and you can watch a trailer for the movie. And that wraps up this year, the eighth year of Song Exploder. Thanks so much to all the artists who shared their stories and music with me this year. And thanks so much to you for listening. We'll be back in January. This episode and the show's theme music were made by me. Editing help from Craig Eley and Casey Deal, artwork by Carlos Lerma, music clearance by Kathleen Smith, and production assistance from Chloe Parker. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a network of independent, listener-supported, artist-owned podcasts. You can learn more about all our shows at radiotopia.fm. You can follow me on Twitter and Instagram @HrishiHirway, and you can follow the show @SongExploder. You can also get a Song Exploder t-shirt at songexploder.net/shirt. I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. Thanks for listening and have a happy new year.