

Song Exploder
DJ Shadow - Mutual Slump
Episode 91

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.

("Mutual Slump" by DJ SHADOW)

Hrishikesh: In 1996, Josh Davis, aka DJ Shadow, released his first album, *Endtroducing.....*. It's been hailed pretty much universally as one of the best albums of the '90s, and *Time Magazine* included it in its top 100 albums of all time. It changed the face of hip-hop and electronic music, and helped define the trip-hop genre. Now, for the 20th anniversary of the release, DJ Shadow breaks down the song "Mutual Slump."

("Mutual Slump" by DJ SHADOW)

Josh: This is Josh Davis, aka DJ Shadow.

(Music fades)

Josh: The record store on the cover of *Endtroducing.....* called Records in Sacramento, California, that record store was my muse. If I felt like I ever was kind of hitting a creative brick wall, I would get in my car. I would drive to go to that record store once or twice a week, for the entire duration that I was working on the album, and just spend a few hours looking at records, listening to records, and generally, without really even trying very hard, I would chance upon something that inevitably unlocked, whatever jam I was in creatively. And that's where I found the drums, which come from a, well, a European Prague jazz record.

("Love, Love, Love" by PUGH ROGEFELDT)

Josh: I think the only part of the original sample that I kind of left pretty much unchanged was the noisy intro, the kind of drum fill with the guitar feedback over the top.

("Love, Love, Love" by PUGH ROGEFELDT)

(Music fades)

Josh: I don't like to just loop, you know, a one bar break. The rhythmic basis, the breakbeat has to be the strong foundation upon which everything else is built. If you chop a breakbeat and there's five or six different kicks you can use, five or six different snares you can use, what I like to do is alternate between the three or four strongest kicks, the three or four strongest snares until you've reassembled a kind of super version of the original.

(Beat)

(Beat ends)

Josh: The secretive component of sampling, and crate digging, and looking for beats, looking for samples goes all the way back to the very beginning of hip hop culture. DJs who discovered breakbeats that made the audience react, had a secret weapon. And DJs used to cover up the artist's name and song titles to protect that knowledge. But again, that culture, as much as I contribute to it and aspire to it, can also be a little bit pretentious. So I always felt that you have to balance the kind of secretive beat-digger philosophy of sampling by sampling just, you know, something almost intentionally really obvious.

("Possibly Maybe" by BJÖRK)

Josh: The Björk album had come out, maybe six months prior to me starting work on this track. She was kind of a big presence in the UK when I was living there in the summer of '95.

("Possibly Maybe" by BJÖRK)

Josh: I liked the record, and I liked the idea of taking what is kind of an obvious sample, and putting my own spin on it.

(Sample)

Josh: One of the things that I liked to play with a lot is taking samples, and slowing them way down.

(Sample)

Josh: For samples that are prone to melancholy anyway, they seem to become even more so when they're slowed way down. At some point it crossed my mind, *Oh, I wonder what the Björk sample would sound like over these drums*. Realized I would have to pitch it way down, which I was happy to do. And then, realized, "Oh, you know, there's something here."

(Sample with drums)

Josh: Between the drums and the Björk sample, I mean, already the song had a certain feel. To me, this song had a foreboding, it had a melancholy,

(Music ends)

Josh: but it also had an anger. During the kind of intense drum break section, there's a little sound.

(Warning sound)

Josh: And it just kind of felt like this disoriented, almost kind of a warning sound. And to me it just fell in line with the energy of the song. I mean, I felt like the song was approaching this kind of, almost unhinged place, and that sound inserted in the way that it was between the drums on one hand was kind of a slick production moment. Like something I was proud of on a producer level, but it also touched the right kind of foreboding that the track was conveying already.

(Beat)

(Beat ends)

Josh: I wanted to make instrumental music because to me it seemed like a challenge. I wasn't just making beats that sounded like they needed a vocalist on them, I was trying to make arrangements that worked in an instrumental form, and kept your attention and evolved. To me, it was almost like a more difficult task. But I didn't want the album to be devoid of words.

(Vocals: "I was scared, I have to admit, at first / Never had a cat before")

Josh: The female voice on the track is actually my wife. At the time, we were dating, and her name is Lisa. For this part, you kind of have to use your imagination, because I recorded the album at Dan the Automator's studio, at his house, that

he was still living in with his parents, at the time. The studio was actually contained within a unincorporated part of the house. So you actually had to climb up a ladder, you had to open a hatch, and then, you were in this extremely small space, that was really only big enough for a mix board, some outboard gear, and a rolling chair. And you couldn't stand up. You would hit your head on the ceiling. And the person who was recording something, whether it was a rapper or, in this case, my now wife, she was in a pitch-black area below where I was, and you had to close the hatch again, and they would have to sort of feel where the microphone was and talk.

(Vocals: "Five feet under")

Josh: But it actually lends itself really well to her just sort of being in a space in her own mind. And I recorded her for probably about 20 minutes.

(Vocals: "Do you feel like Darth Vader [laughter]? / And I'm Princess Leia")

Josh: She was raised in Japan until age eight, and then came to America. And she talks about literally seeing the movie *Xanadu*, which would place it at 1980. And she lived in Southern California, so roller skating was a thing, and she's seen people do it in movies. I didn't give her any kind of direction, because I knew that the more I said to her, the more it would be contrived. She just kind of steers herself in all these unusual directions, and finds herself saying things that, you know, they're odd. I just wanted to try to capture some of that. And then, I just sort of sampled the pieces from her dialogue that I felt somehow made sense in the track.

(Vocals with sample: "Then I came to America, saw Xanadu / And that's all I wanted to do, rollerskate")

(Beat joins)

(Saxophone)

Josh: The saxophone that kind of runs through the end section, to me there's a despair and unhinged quality to it. It's kind of a free jazz expression. And with a little bit of needle dropping, it made it even more unhinged. I mean, there's a point where literally I'm picking up the needle, and dropping it at random almost.

(Saxophone)

Josh: And then, the pullback, right at the very end, before the track rides out.

(Pullback)

(Flute)

Josh: The flute exists

(Flute ends)

Josh: in a natural state, in the same note structure, but the vibes do not.

(Vibraphone)

Josh: So I kind of bent the vibes to match the flute.

(Flute with vibraphone)

Josh: Putting samples in tune with each other was something that I really wanted to achieve in my music. And this is before timestretch technology and pitch bending and stuff like that. It was a factor of luck and a factor of will. I didn't want it to be simple. You know, there's new things happening every eight bars, every four bars, changes in bridges, and places where it kind of goes abstract. And then, there's time signature changes. And I didn't want it to be intellectual by any means, but I just wanted it to feel different. I wanted other producers to listen to it and be like, "How did he do this?"

(Flute with vibraphone)

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Mutual Slump," by DJ Shadow, in its entirety.

("Mutual Slump" by DJ SHADOW)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net to learn more about DJ Shadow and the 20th anniversary deluxe edition of *Endtroducing.....* On the site, you'll find a link to buy the new edition, which includes the original album, alternate takes, and remixes.

You can find all the past and future episodes of Song Exploder at songexploder.net or wherever you download podcasts. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a curated network of extraordinary, cutting edge shows made possible by the Knight Foundation, MailChimp, and by listeners like you. Learn more at radiotopia.fm. This episode was produced by Christian Koons and me. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.

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