

Song Exploder
Dropkick Murphys - Blood
Episode 96

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.

("Blood" by DROPKICK MURPHYS)

Hrishikesh: The band Dropkick Murphys formed in Boston in 1996. For over twenty years, they've made music that's reflected the culture and community they've come from. In January 2017, they released the album *11 Short Stories of Pain & Glory*. In this episode, guitarist Tim Brennan breaks down how the music for "Blood" was made, and Ken Casey explains the inspiration behind the lyrics.

("Blood" by DROPKICK MURPHYS)

Tim: This is Tim Brennan from the Dropkick Murphys. I play guitar and accordion.

(Music fades)

Tim: Over the course of the last few albums, our songs started getting played in like Fenway Park and the song that the band wrote about the Bruins would get played in Boston Garden during a hockey game.

("Time To Go" by DROPKICK MURPHYS)

(Music fades)

Tim: And without fail, every time it would come on, we would turn to each other and go, "Why does it sound terrible?" [Laughter] You know like and then you hear an AC/DC song come on.

("Back In Black" by AC/DC)

(Music ends)

Tim: You're like, "Man, that sounds phenomenal, and our thing just sounds weird and muddled." But then we became friends and luckily colleagues with our now producer, Ted Hutt, who explained to us that space [laughter] is pretty vital when

it comes to things sounding huge, and in a situation like that. You know, we were used to coming up with these sort of raucous punk songs. And so, I was just sort of thinking about that a little bit and wanting to see if I could make a Dropkick Murphys song that was in the vein of these giant stadium rock songs. I play guitar for the Dropkicks, but my first instrument is the drums. So a lot of musical ideas that I have, sometimes they're based around drum parts or ideas for drum beats and things like that. I got the idea to try to do something that had like a, "We Will Rock You," type of beat underneath it. Just "doosh, doosh, ka."

("We Will Rock You" by QUEEN)

(Music ends)

Tim: I was playing an electric guitar, but unplugged, just sitting on my couch, just sort of strumming. I record a lot of things in my voice memos. Before I start playing anything, I just kind of lay out the drum beat,

(Guitar)

Tim: fooling around on the guitar. I had stumbled across a chord pattern that I thought was interesting.

(Guitar)

Tim: It probably sat in that basic demo form for a year and a half or two years. And then we started actually getting together to flesh out the ideas for what will become this new album. Matt Kelly, our drummer and I will meet at the space and he'll record a drum track. And then, I'll take it home and record everything else over it.

(Guitar with drums)

Tim: And then bring it to everybody and say, "Here's what this could possibly sound like. What do we think?" So we typically have a fairly good idea of what things are going to sound like when we're going into the studio, but we had never done something like that, that's sort of a slower tempo, but still sort of big and triumphant. The physical studio that we were recording in was a pretty giant, airy room. And once we started getting the drum track down and you could really hear all that space and the sort of breath of the room itself, it was like, this is going to work beautifully.

(Drums)

Tim: Just hearing the giant drums reverberating off of the super high ceiling. And it was just like, “Man, this sounds phenomenal.”

(Drums)

(Drums end)

Tim: When I initially came up with it, I knew that it was going to be a bagpipe based song, or at least have the bagpipes in it. We have these electronic bagpipes that I'll write all of the bagpipe parts with, but when it comes to recording the real bagpipes, it's a very fickle instrument. It's got reeds in it and twine wrapped around it, it's bizarre in there. It's a tough instrument to record, certainly. We found that one bagpipe sounds thin, two bagpipes sounds out of tune. And so, we triple track all the bagpipes

(Bagpipes)

Tim: in order to get a bigger sound and to make sure that it doesn't sound out of tune with one another.

(Bagpipes)

Tim: Early in high school, I started getting into listening to traditional Irish music. And while the bagpipes are inherently Scottish, I guess it was just sort of a part of it. You know, you go to an Irish festival or something like that, and it's just sort of wrapped up in the whole thing.

(Bagpipes fade)

Tim: My sophomore year of high school, I had one of those like life-changing teacher experiences. There was this young guy, he was probably like 23 at the time. He was an English teacher, and he and I would talk music every once in a while, and he found out the type of stuff I was into. And one day, he showed up with a cassette tape of a Pogues record and that totally changed my life, essentially [laughter].

(“Dirty Old Town” by THE POGUES)

(Music ends)

Tim: Not too long after that he came in with *Do or Die*, the first Dropkick Murphys album and said, "You know, I think you're going to dig these guys." And he was absolutely right. I was a sophomore in high school at that point. And then I joined the band, my senior year of college. You know, when I was a kid, I would learn all the drum parts to my favorite records and sit in the basement, playing, envisioning, like going to a show and the drummer's broken his arm or something, and we can't continue unless there's somebody out there that knows how to play the songs [laughter]. Ken called me when I was at work one day after school, and asked me if I wanted to join. It was pretty crazy.

(Bouzouki)

Tim: There's a bouzouki that's playing this droning note, this droning B flat throughout the song.

(Bouzouki)

Tim: A bouzouki, it was initially a Greek instrument and then was sort of repurposed by the Irish people. It's kind of like a giant mandolin almost. It's got eight strings, it's sort of 12 string guitar sounding in its tone. It's an interesting instrument.

(Bouzouki)

(Bouzouki ends)

Tim: The idea for the words and the chorus came to Ken right out of the gate.

Ken: This is Ken Casey from the Dropkick Murphys. The goal of the song was to sum up the history of the band and to talk about the mutual dedication of the fans, of the band and us to them.

(Vocals: "Trouble underground in Kenmore Square")

Ken: The band got its start at a venue that Bostonian's called The Rat. And that was like our CBGB's of Boston. They would basically give you the downstairs during the day to do always is matinees. So that was our home base, we were able to build a following there. And we had a show on a St Patrick's Day, it got a little

out of hand, and we were told we weren't welcome to play in the city on St. Patrick's Day for a few years.

(Vocals: "You'd better watch out, you'd better beware")

Ken: The mayor at the time, who was our mayor for like 20 years in Boston, he did not like the Dropkick Murphys, you know. And there was a woman who ran the licensing at City Hall, which would just like come and, you know, they try to shut down the shows. So we kind of had to hit the road, you know, which is the line, "Goodbye, good luck," you know.

(Vocals: "It's time to go, goodbye good luck / They said people like you screw everything up")

Ken: When it says, "They said people like you," it's not just us, it was like, the "you" was like us and the fan base and punk rock, in general. You know, that was just a reflection of how it was back in that day. But if I had to sum up the song, it's about the dedication that we have to the fans and the gratitude we have for their dedication, more so than it being about the negatives of the city.

Tim: "Blood" is really our love letter to our fans.

Ken: The course, I was few on board, we'll give you some meaning. Like we'll give you everything, you know, like because you've given us a life beyond our wildest dreams. From opportunities to see the world, to be able to, you know, have a job and to be able to put a roof over our heads as a result of this.

Tim: When we get to the end of recording and it's time to do the backing vocals, the band members will do a few tracks of like tight backing vocals.

(Vocals: "If you want blood, we'll give you some / (Blood, blood) / Straight from heart 'til the job is done")

Tim: And then, everyone puts the phone calls out to their buddies and we pile them all in there and get as many voices on it as we [laughter] can. So layered on top will be the giant 30-person Scally Cap Choir, as they like [laughter], as the band used to refer to them.

(Choir: "If you want it now, then here it comes / (Blood, blood) / If you want blood, we'll give you some")

Tim: It's plumbers and carpenters and a couple of music friends, but it's all walks of life. [Laughter] I remember, specifically, we were doing the backing vocals one night, and Ted is behind the glass, you know, saying "Good job, good job." And then after one take, he comes in and he's just standing in front of the whole group of people. And he says, "Start singing." And everyone starts singing and he's just walking around listening. And he goes and picks out like three people. And he says, "I'm sorry, but you guys *cannot* be in here [laughter]." And so, unfortunately the really non-musical friends end up just being our cheerleaders for the evening. But, you know, we appreciate that just as much.

(Vocals: "If you want blood, we'll give you some / (Blood, blood)")

Tim: There's barely a difference between us and our fans. We say all the time, if we weren't on stage playing every night, we'd be the guys cleaning up the trash after the show was over, you know?

(Piano)

Tim: We've only played "Blood" once. And it was recently, we waited until it came out. I was always really excited about hearing what it sounded like with everybody playing. We played at a veterans benefit at the Mohegan Sun Arena in Connecticut. And so, we got to play this giant Dropkick Murphys style arena rock song in a big arena.

(Drone joins)

Tim: And it felt awesome. I was particularly excited that night because it really did feel like it had been this super long road where at the very beginning of it, I saw the end. I knew ultimately what I was hoping for and to get to play it, especially in that setting, you know, a setting that the song was sort of made for to have that come to fruition like that, it felt really good.

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Blood," by Dropkick Murphys, in its entirety.

("Blood" by DROPKICK MURPHYS)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net for more on Dropkick Murphys, including a link to buy this song.

Song Exploder is produced by me, along with Christian Koons and is a proud member of Radiotopia from PRX, a curated network of extraordinary cutting-edge podcasts made possible by the Knight foundation and by MailChimp, learn more 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