

**Song Exploder**  
**Fleet Foxes - Mearcstapa**  
**Episode 109**

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.

*("Mearcstapa" by FLEET FOXES)*

Hrishikesh: Fleet Foxes formed in Seattle, Washington in 2006. In 2011, they put out their second record, which was nominated for a Grammy; but then the band went on hiatus. The lead singer and songwriter, Robin Pecknold, moved to New York to go to Columbia University. After six years, in 2017, the band returned with their third album, *Crack-Up*. And in this episode, Robin breaks down a song from that record called "Mearcstapa."

*("Mearcstapa" by FLEET FOXES)*

Robin: My name is Robin Pecknold, I'm the singer-songwriter in Fleet Foxes.

*(Music ends)*

Robin: I started writing this song, December of 2015. I was getting ready to go on tour, opening for Joanna Newsom. She asked me to do some dates, opening for her solo. I was a student at the time, and I was doing undergraduate in English Literature. I was kind of deciding if I should do that tour, if I should keep doing school. And I decided, you know, she's a very hard person to say no to, so I skipped out on my [laughter] finals [laughter], and just started writing a bunch of songs, and this was one of them. I was listening to Ali Farka Touré.

*("Peteneré" by ALI FARKA TOURÉ)*

Robin: He's a guitarist from Mali, and he would do these cool drones where the second was always ringing [mimics guitar].

*("Peteneré" by ALI FARKA TOURÉ)*

Robin: Since I started writing songs when I was 15, I've always been interested in alternate tunings, or people that would find new chords, or unique sounding voicings on the guitar. But I'd never kind of like made up my own tunings. And

so, for this song, I was like, "Okay, I should do this." And Ali Farka Touré, some of his songs have a tuning where the E string, the low E, is tuned up to like a G.

*(Acoustic guitar)*

Robin: And if you play the lowest string and the second lowest string, it's G and A, there's this ringing second.

*(Acoustic guitar)*

Robin: So I got that from Ali Farka Touré. Then I tuned the highest three strings to F, A, C.

*(Acoustic guitar)*

Robin: So that's like an F triad. So then the chord on the guitar was G, A, D, F, A, C.

*(Acoustic guitar)*

Robin: So I had these two kind of segments of the six strings on the guitar. And then, to separate them even more, I started playing a triplet on the F, A, C,

*(Acoustic guitar)*

Robin: and then kind of a four pattern on the G A D [mimics guitar].

*(Acoustic guitar)*

Robin: And that took a long time to kind of get the rhythm.

*(Acoustic guitar)*

Robin: And so, the chord changes, then are just modulating that shape up and down the fretboard. The changes in this song, more than any other song I've done, when they hit, I still have some weird physiological reaction to them. Just something about the way they move, makes some synapse bloom, you know? Or, whatever [laughter]. I always try and chase that when writing a chord progression, setting up an expectation and then subverting it. Something about the third modulation, the image I had in my mind from that was just like sailing. It

just had this feeling of being on the water, or it just evoked that to me. And so, the lyrics grew out of there.

*(Acoustic guitar fades)*

Robin: My father is a good sailor. He was in the coast guard, and worked on boats when he was in his 20s. So we went on a couple trips in the last few years, and I was reading about Bernard Moitessier, who's kind of a sole sailor [laughter]. There was some race where there was like the first around the world race. And he was in the lead, he was going to win, but then he didn't want to go back. And so, then he just went around the world again, and lost the race, but he would have won. I think about him just as kind of a hero of taking your own path, and devotion to the thing itself. I guess there's one way of looking at sailing as just like pastime of the rich or something. But I get excited about this kind of private, almost monastic, or self-flagellating journey.

*(Acoustic guitar)*

Robin: Sometimes on this album, if I was at a loss as far as where to go lyrically, sometimes I would try and obliquely reference what the music was doing. So like the first lyric on the song is like, "Two lines in the air."

*(Vocals join: "Two lines in the air")*

Robin: And that's both like a reference to like looking up from a boat, and looking at the lines of the rigging. And then, it's also just literally what I'm doing. There are two lines going on in the guitar.

*(Vocals with acoustic guitar: "Mearcstapa, on an open sea")*

Robin: Mearcstapa. I don't really even remember where I encountered the word for the first time. I didn't, Mearcs, I didn't know what, how to say it, I didn't know what language it is. Looking it up after the fact I saw that it was from Beowulf, and it was another word for the monster Grendel. It's so clumsy that I got a kick out of trying to make it graceful to sing like Frank Sinatra, or like [sung] "Mearcstapa." [laughter] There's something like really wrong about that [laughter], what was I into?

*(Vocals: "Mearcstapa")*

Robin: The word “Mearcstapa” meant “border walker.” And so, just thinking about Bernard Moitessier as someone like that, or being on trips myself, you're between the air and the water. You're apart from other people, you're on this separate journey, that's what the word began to mean to me. That's how I associated it with sailing.

*(Acoustic guitar)*

Robin: I guess when I hear most of these songs now, I think about the space that I lived in New York when I wrote almost all of them, which was a very small studio apartment. It's a hard place to find an apartment, [laughter] New York, but I found this one that was like a six floor walk-up. And for a long time, I didn't have any furniture. It was just this empty room. And I had a desk, and I just, my mattress was on the floor, and I was just kind of [laughter] like student slash just this weird monk in this top floor studio. Like, “this is the space where I'll be writing these songs, and this is how I exist for this music,” you know? And that was just my day to day, every day was in this wheel spot. It was about the size of a cabin of a boat, I'd say. So I had the acoustic guitar,

*(Acoustic guitar)*

Robin: but then I was like, “Eh, this should be like an electric guitar song.”

*(Electric guitar)*

Robin: I wanted it to be kind of like pointillist, and something about the clarity of an electric was sounding cool. And so, then if you add the other electric guitar in,

*(Electric guitars)*

Robin: the harmonized one, it's the same five notes, but it's rearranged. So then, the song became based around these two harmonized electric guitars that are playing perfect intervals together, and moving counter to each other.

*(Electric guitars end)*

*(Acoustic bass)*

Robin: So that's my bandman Morgan Henderson, playing that part of the guitar line on the acoustic bass. This figure, this G, A, D figure is 1 2 5, and the [mimics bass]

is how the record opens. I built a lot of chords in other songs of the album out of just those three notes, out of a one note, a two and a five. That pattern became this kind of mantra throughout the songs on the record. So there's this kind of stately acoustic bass that's playing, but then this kind of tight, dry electric bass, that's playing this counter rhythm over the top.

*(Electric bass)*

Robin: This 1-2-3-4, 1-2-3-4.

*(Acoustic bass joins)*

Robin: I sort of wanted this song to feel like a Beach Boys song with a Can song being played on top of it. I still remain really like taken by Beach Boys songs like "Feel Flows."

*("Feel Flows" by BEACH BOYS)*

Robin: That certain, transportive magic of those songs.

*("Feel Flows" by BEACH BOYS)*

Robin: Just the kind of an openness, and a harmonic complexity, or grace that is in that music that feels very satisfying to me. And then, CAN is the opposite.

*("Vitamin C" by CAN)*

Robin: It's very tactile, tight.

*("Vitamin C" by CAN)*

Robin: It's not reaching for the air, but it's very like on the ground.

*(Music fades)*

Robin: And so, to have the air

*(Acoustic bass)*

Robin: and the ground,

*(Drums join)*

Robin: these two different feelings kind of happening simultaneously. We knew we wanted the song to go from this lush, open feeling to this really tight precision.

*(Music ends)*

Robin: And so, that's Christopher Icasiano who played percussion and drums on this song. The drums start, and it's just this kind of marching, tribal bass drum pattern.

*(Bass drum)*

Robin: And then, it snaps into this other more textured drum sound,

*(Drums)*

Robin: doing this kind of dry, krautrock drum sound. When these drums come in with these different electric guitars that are harmonized together, it tightens up completely.

*(Electric guitars)*

Robin: Just going for textual contrast.

*(Electric guitars)*

Robin: I love dramatic shifts [laughter]. It's my jam.

*(Drums join)*

*(Qraqeb)*

Robin: That is a Moroccan percussion instrument called the qraqeb. They're like these metal percussion instruments, you hear a lot in Moroccan Gnawa music.

*("Makawyahy" by MAHMOUD GUINIA)*

Robin: They just make this really beautiful, metallic, energetic sound.

*(Qraqeb)*

Robin: You can't quite tell what it is. It could be like a sample of rattling pots and pans or something. If you get a few different patterns going, they have this just interesting, interlocking feeling.

*(Harpsichrd)*

Robin: That is a harpsichord. The part was really beautiful and cool, but it just sounded a little too delicate sounding, too harpsichord-y. And so, we pitched it down an octave, and that's why it has that kind of digital, artifact-y quaver, and that unsettledness.

*(Harpsichord)*

*(Electric guitar)*

Robin: That's a 12-string electric guitar that's also tuned to G, A, D, F, A, C,

*(Electric guitar)*

Robin: and then, played with a photo of a friend [laughter] as the pick,

*(Electric guitar)*

Robin: because all the picks were too, it was like too much attack. I was like, "I need a softer pick than this. I can't do this." I just wanted this really soft kind of background swell.

*(Electric guitar)*

Robin: My friend, Skyler, for [laughter] some reason, he had a childhood photo of Steven Strohmeier, who's a great Baltimore musician and great guitar player, in his wallet, which I still don't really [laughter] understand. But that became the pick for that part.

*(Electric guitar)*

*(Electric guitar ends)*

Robin: So Skyler Skjelset. Sky is my bandmate, and we started a band together when we were 16 or something. And a lot of it was kind of him and I working as a duo. He made a lot of textual contributions and guitar contributions. He kind of did this prepared guitar thing, Sonic Youth style, putting quarters between strings,

*(Percussion sound)*

Robin: or putting a playing card between strings, or a photo of a childhood friend [laughter], and then playing it with his hands.

*(Music fades)*

Robin: I believe it was Sky's idea to have the ending be as long as it is. And then, that's where a lot of the most interesting stuff on the song is happening.

*(Horns)*

Robin: That's a few different horn tracks.

*(Horns end)*

Robin: My only direction to the horn players was, "Make this feel like bubbly, and like you're under the surface of the water."

*(Horns)*

Robin: And then, at certain moments, you're going to crest out, and then duck back under, associating the frequency range with the height of like looking at the sun, and then to be beneath the sea too, you know, having some stuff that's really muffled, and some stuff that's really clear and tactile.

*(Horns)*

*(Horns fade)*

Robin: I wanted the vocal to be really smooth. And then, also like it was cresting, and ducking, and weaving over the surface of the water.

*(Vocals: "The eyes of the sea / So easy to meet")*



Robin: Kind of moving like a boat with these kind of graceful, long lines.

*(Vocals: "Mearcstapa, deaf and blind like me")*

Robin: Making a melody that kind of flowed gracefully over these chord changes, was fun to be messing around with.

*(Vocals)*

Robin: That's me singing into the Fleet Foxes preset on a personal harmonizer [laughter] that's sold by TC Helicon or something. They have this little like voice harmonizer pedal thing that you can buy. And then, someone was like, "Oh, this has like a Fleet Foxes preset on it." And then, it's like, "Oh, that would be so funny if we [laughter], if we used it,

*(Vocals)*

Robin: and pitched it up an octave too.

*(Vocals)*

Robin: The preset was called Fleet Hymnal, but then it didn't really sound like [laughter] Fleet Foxes. I guess it kind of sounded like Bon Iver [laughter].

*(Vocals)*

Robin: Just trying to layer up as many frequencies and textures as we could.

*(B3 Organ)*

Robin: That's just a B3 Organ. We had that B3, and we're like, "It's not like active enough, there's not enough energy." So Sky had these recordings of blue noise,

*(Blue noise)*

Robin: and we ran that through a Leslie speaker,

*(Blue noise ends)*

Robin: so that there was some movement to it. A Leslie speaker is what you attach one of those Hammond organs to, and it's a speaker inside of a big wooden box, and the speaker spins around inside of the box, so you get this vibrato effect. So we recorded that, and then our bandmate, Casey, is proficient in this program called SuperCollider that I know nothing about. But he was able to somehow tease frequencies out of the blue noise. And, from there, he was able to make a keyboard patch that had

*(Blue noise)*

Robin: notes

*(Blue noise)*

Robin: just from the blue noise, he carved out actual notes.

*(Blue noise)*

Robin: The sample we ended up with had the grainy texture of the blue noise sample, and it had the vibrato of the Leslie speaker. And then, it had these kind of weird, quavery notes.

*(Blue noise)*

*(Blue noise fades)*

Robin: I like when expensive things get introduced at the end of songs. The idea was that we would have the song be a long, slow fade out, but then this like string orchestra would come in, as that was happening. And I had that melody from like a little voice memo, just walking around town.

*(Voice memo)*

Robin: And then, for the recording of it, we had that melody, they played it a number of times and layered it all together.

*(Strings)*

Robin: but they did such a good job, and the part sounded so cool that we didn't end up doing a fade out.

*(Strings)*

Robin: I asked them to play it as a round, so to take that melody, and then just to start it at different times. And it ended up really being the most beautiful way we could end the song was just to highlight this round that they were doing, so we faded everything else out. I played the whole song for the string quartet. And they were like, “So what is going on in this song [laughter]? Like what instruments are those?”

*(Strings end)*

Robin: And that was gratifying because that was a goal to kind of build these sound landscapes out of different instruments, and then, the conglomerate whole was its own entity, where the instruments involved were less important than the eventual sound being made.

*(Acoustic guitar)*

Robin: The Mearcstapa is kind of me talking to another part of myself. I was traveling by myself a lot,

*(Electric guitar joins)*

Robin: and either because I couldn't find anyone to go with me, or I just seemed like having a romantic idea of what it means to travel alone. By the end of the song, it's like, “The foam doesn't sing, and the phone doesn't ring, so what will you find, Mearcstapa of mine?” What are you actually accomplishing on these trips? Because life is best experienced with other people. To me, if I do something alone, it just might as well not happened [laughter].

*(Vocals join: “When the foam doesn't sing”*

*(Vocals with electric guitar: “The phone doesn't ring / So what will you find / Mearcstapa of mine?”)*

*(Music ends)*

Hrishikesh: And now, here's “Mearcstapa,” by Fleet Foxes, in its entirety.

*(“Mearcstapa” by FLEET FOXES)*

Hrishikesh: Visit [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net) for a link to buy this track, and to learn more about Fleet Foxes.

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