

Song Exploder
Grizzly Bear - Four Cypresses
Episode 113

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.

("Four Cypresses" by GRIZZLY BEAR)

Hrishikesh: Between 2004 and 2012, the band Grizzly Bear put out four critically-acclaimed albums. Their newest album is called *Painted Ruins*, and it features this song, "Four Cypresses." And in this episode, two of the members of the band, Chris Taylor and Daniel Rossen, tell the story of how the song came together.

("Four Cypresses" by GRIZZLY BEAR)

(Music fades)

Daniel: This is Daniel Rossen.

Chris: My name's Chris Taylor.

Daniel: And there's Ed Droste, and there's Chris Bear who plays drums, he plays a lot of things. We like to play a lot of different instruments, none of us really like to get stuck in one corner [laughter]. Chris Bear was up at my place upstate, and we were trying this approach where he would just put down a bunch of different drum feels, kind of improvising different drum feels, over the same progression.

(Drums)

Daniel: He played this, like, rollicking drum groove that almost felt like, it was very disorienting, and we didn't really, you couldn't almost feel where 1 was in the beat, it was just kind of like this rolling, strange thing.

(Drums)

Daniel: He kept messing around with it and he, from that drum idea, he developed this very kind of stable, almost like metronomic part on a little keyboard that starts the song.

(Keyboard joins)

(Drums fade)

Daniel: The very first moment of the song is, I guess, kind of a wrong note [laughter].

(Keyboard)

Daniel: And he was doing this like, just this tom feel,

(Beat joins)

Daniel: that thumping room drum recording that you hear.

(Keyboard with beat)

Daniel: Another thing that makes the song even more disorienting is the drum groove. It comes in, I think, not even on 1, comes in on a different beat.

(Drums join)

Daniel: The way it develops, within the first minute of the song, it's, you don't really quite understand what's going to happen. The whole thing is a, you know, crazy improvised mess, feels chaotic.

(Music fades)

Daniel: And then, Chris Bear just put down this like series of bass notes on a Wurlitzer.

(Wurlitzer)

Daniel: So he was playing the Wurlitzer part at the same time as he was playing this little DX100 keyboard.

(Keyboard joins)

Daniel: Everything that opens the tune is like the first things that he, Chris, played on his own.

(Drums join)

Chris: Initially, it was pretty barebones kind of idea, but I just found it really trancelike. Seems like it's just sort of slowly pulling you in.

Daniel: It had a very satisfying, like, slow pace to it, and nothing else we were doing really felt like that, at the time. So it sat in this form for like six or seven months like that. Nobody really knew quite how to approach it, but we knew that we liked it.

(Music fades)

Daniel: I don't live here anymore, but eventually like I started coming out to LA for writing trips, and the next spring, we opened it up again. We were just kind of talking about it in Chris's studio, and that's when we laid that basic chord progression with the little Roland string synth.

(Synth)

Daniel: And that basic guitar part.

(Guitar joins)

(Drums join)

Daniel: Leaving something with so many unknowns for so long, we don't do that too often. It was kind of nice to do it, actually, to kind of just let some of these songs develop very slowly over time. Which is challenging because it can be kind of frustrating to not know what it's supposed to be, where you're like, "I really want this to be something, but if it's not going to reveal itself, then I'm just going to throw it away, you know." But something about that little progression of his, we kind of just kept coming back to it.

Chris: Usually we, as we're like coming up with the part, we're also just recording it, and like that's very intentional. Like, let's make sure that the song is good before we even, like, decide it's a song.

Daniel: I think it just felt better to not put that pressure on it. It was like, "We're just working on ideas here," with no assumption that we were using any of this.

(Music fades)

Chris: It was like on the way to being a song, but it needed someone to sing on it for it to really turn into an actual song.

Daniel: Actually, initially, really thought Ed was going to do this tune, but it never really clicked for him, so I took a version of it home with me. That night, after we had opened it up again. I kept finding my way to staying in these like pretty depressing rentals in LA. That night I came back, and there's a guy sleeping in the driveway. I don't know exactly what his story was, but he clearly was just like trying to stay out of the heat and get some rest. When I got up the next morning, I was like thinking about the song, and I was thinking about this dude that was probably still out there. And like, I got up, and I was sitting on the ground trying vaguely to meditate, and failing, and like looking out the window, and thinking about us looking out at the same scene; four cypresses in the neighbor's yard, thinking about some kind of connection between totally unrelated experiences. The basis of the lyric, that's where that came from, and the idea of displacement and homelessness, really. Trying to connect with someone else's experience, and trying to find a shared experience with someone that's having a much worse time than I am. I actually didn't have anything to work with, I just had my laptop, and I think I used GarageBand or something,

(Keyboard, synth, synth bass, and beat)

Daniel: to just record a vocal part like straight into the computer speaker.

(Vocals, synth, and guitar join: "Instead of moving / Stared into the wall / Tangled up in a pile / It's early / Make no sound")

Daniel: "I'm staring into the wall, tangled up in a pile, it's early, make no sound," I don't like sitting down and writing lyrics. I prefer when they just happen. And often when they just happen, they're extremely literal, or it's like whatever's right in front of my face, which doesn't always work [laughter]. But it kind of worked this time. When I can, I really prefer to be able to develop the melody and the lyric kind of at the same time as one process, one thought. Because the chord progression was so repetitive, I felt like this needs a melody that kind of keeps moving and growing and changing, but still like, you know, grounding and soulful. But isn't another series of repeating notes, like something that kind of just keeps moving along and along and along.

(Vocals, guitar, keyboard, synth, synth bass, and beat: "Living in a pile / It's chaos but it works")

(Music fades)

Daniel: And I brought it back to the guys.

Chris: Dan's like, "I think I got something," and that's always really exciting. He recorded, and we're both like, "Woah, like this is," it felt like a new way of approaching a melody for Dan, at least, it was just, it felt like refreshing. And we were immediately very into it. And it's always like really cool too because it means like a car now has some wheels, like it's going to go out of the garage now a little bit [laughter]. That it wasn't just going to be like a vibe, it was going to be a song, and that's like, that's always a really, really exciting moment.

Hrishikesh: The band took the work they'd done in Los Angeles, and brought it to Allaire Studios in upstate New York.

Chris: The attitude of all the sections was kind of determined by the time we got upstate. And it was just a matter of like executing it. To kind of settle up all those questions before actually going in to record, made the recording process itself just really fun. Because then, it's just a painting, it was like, "Choose your favorite sounding thing in the room that you can imagine, and make it sound as good as you can because we already know the part."

Daniel: Yeah.

Chris: You know, the Wurlitzer has like a kind of more like mid-range-y singing kind of quality to it.

(Wurlitzer)

Chris: But we wanted to add some weight

(Synth bass joins)

Daniel: with a giant subby synth.

(Wurlitzer with synth bass)

Chris: And the bass guitar.

(Bass guitar)

Daniel: It kind of creeps in slowly.

(Bass guitar)

Chris: And then, the bass veers off of the initial bassline thing, and does its own kind of chordal part.

(Bass guitar)

Daniel: That's like riffing off the guitar part.

(Guitar joins)

Daniel: It's like the guitar part and the bass part do this kind of, like, arpeggiating thing together.

(Guitar with bass guitar)

Chris: They're kind of interacting with each other.

(Guitar with bass guitar)

(Music fades)

Daniel: I also, very poorly, play cello.

(Cello)

Daniel: I'm not actually studied in doing it, but I can piece it together. So that was something that I recorded at my place.

(Cello)

Chris: I'm personally a really big fan of Dan's cello

Daniel: [laughter]

Chris: playing even though, you know, it's not classical, but it's got a feel to it that I find, you know, charming. I think it's kind of better that it sounds a little rough around the edges. I'm kind of okay that it doesn't sound great. It's a little more human that way.

(Cello)

(Cello ends)

Daniel: Chris Bear often messes around with pedal steel. And he was trying to see if he could play the whole chord progression, all at once, on a pedal steel, and it was kind of impossible, and he doesn't really play pedal steel. But we were like tuning it around, and then it was like, "What if you cut the chord progression up into two separate stages so that it goes like, you do one chord, then you play the other one, then you play the other one, then you play the other one, so it like almost chimes in like call and response."

(Pedal steel)

Daniel: So he played the whole line in like two separate parts, kind of call and response thing. And then he added on top of that, he built this like stack of ascending fourths on a Prophet.

(Prophet joins)

(Pedal steel fades)

Daniel: It just kind of triggers this

Chris: weird afterglow almost,

Daniel: Yeah.

Chris: like after you release the note, it sort of like opens a filter that like this sort of wheezy, crystalline sound kind of creeps out, and the kind of release of the sound.

(Prophet fades)

Daniel: There's also an electrified Celeste with, like, a tremolo function. I played out this, just very simple, little top notes of the chord.

(Celeste)

Chris: And then, I took all those sounds,

Hrishikesh: The pedal steel, the Celeste, and the Prophet synthesizer.

Chris: and built like a stereophonic structure, and so that things would go up and then out, and sort of bloom.

(Pedal Steel, Celeste, and Prophet)

Chris: When it was all working, I remember it feeling like waves of ecstasy. This sort of wave of like [inhales] "Whoa!" Just wow, like taking in all of it.

(Pedal steel, Celeste, and Prophet)

(Guitar)

(Music ends)

Daniel: I think that's like one of our favorite moments on the whole record. It just was such a strange combination of elements, it was very unexpected. But we kind of knew that like, "Well, it has to leave this place that it's in, it can't just continue rollicking in the same way."

Chris: You're like, "OK well, we have this first part,

(Drums)

Chris: and the second part should sort of erupt."

(Drums)

Chris: Watching Chris playing drums is something to behold. He's just such an incredibly talented drummer, and he, it's like Christmas a little bit, it's like, you know, "Wow. You're gifted."

(Drums)

Chris: And so, we sort of like making big, broad strokes in terms of general energy direction.

(Piano joins)

Daniel: We have a really open moodboard of like this feel.

(Guitar joins)

(Music ends)

Daniel: But we had no idea what it was going to be. There were some unresolved questions of how to balance the energy of some of the parts. There's this section of repetitive clavinetts.

(Clavinetts)

Daniel: And then, kind of moving around it are these electric guitar parts.

(Electric guitar joins)

Daniel: And there was this, like, biting DI distorted electric guitar part.

(Distorted electric guitar)

Daniel: And it just felt too much like heavy metal or something. Intense in a fun way, but it was a little bit over the top.

(Distorted electric guitar ends)

Daniel: Chris really tried to help me, like, shape the guitar part, so it wasn't so repetitive and so relentless. It was like kind of relentless in its initial format. So solving this section was kind of a finish line.

Chris: And then, I think a process that I know Dan and I both really enjoy is like, when there's a big pile of stuff, and, you know, it's like, "OK, this is kind of amorphous brick of weight, what can we lose?" It's really fun to like just whack things out,

and be like, “Nope! You don’t make the cut.” I don’t know, it’s just, it’s cleansing.”

(Synth)

Chris: You have these bands that are really actually just one person driving the whole ship. And what’s exciting to me about this band is that it’s really a band still, there isn’t a leader in that sense, or just, there’s no one calling all the shots, like we are really democratic in that way, as much as you really can be. With the four people having opinions on stuff, you have a lot to work with there, and really define the collective voice of a band.

Daniel: I feel like it’s a great privilege to be able to like, “I can’t wait to hear what, you know, Chris is going to do with this,” or vice versa, or like being able to look forward to everybody’s kind of unique perspective is really exciting, lucky thing.

(Synth ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here’s “Four Cypresses,” by Grizzly Bear, in its entirety.

(“Four Cypresses” by GRIZZLY BEAR)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net for a link to buy this track, and to learn more about Grizzly Bear.

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