

Song Exploder
How to Dress Well - Pour Cyril
Episode 33

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.

Hrishikesh: This episode contains explicit language.

(Interview excerpt)

("Pour Cyril" by HOW TO DRESS WELL)

Hrishikesh: That was from an interview with Belgian filmmakers the Dardenne brothers, talking about the kinds of stories they tell saying, "Human suffering, that interests us very much." It also interests Tom Krell, a songwriter and producer who goes by the name How to Dress Well. After seeing one of the Dardenne Brothers' films, *The Kid With a Bike*, he was inspired to make the song "Pour Cyril." In this episode, he'll dig deep into where that inspiration led him, from transformations within the song, within the film, and within himself. Now here's How to Dress Well from an interview recorded live at the Swedish American Hall in San Francisco.

("Pour Cyril" by HOW TO DRESS WELL)

(Music fades)

Tom: My name's Tom, and I play music as How to Dress Well. The backbone of the song is a sample of a Beethoven concerto.

(Beethoven concerto sample)

(Music ends)

Tom: It's sampled from a film, *The Kid With a Bike*, by the Dardenne Brothers. They used the music in the film to signal chapter changes.

(Beethoven concerto sample)

Tom: This boy Cyril, he is living in a foster care, contemporary orphanage. And a woman for no real kind of rational calculation decides to take him, and bring him into her life, and try and give him a love which would remedy the wounding he's, sort of, living out as a young boy. He's been abandoned by his family, and has become quite violent. And then, the movie is quite simple. It's just what unfolds when this woman tries to do this quite courageous, moral thing for this already quite damaged child. People are forced to do either morally courageous things to try and help him, or morally compromising things when they're exposed to what happens when we live in a world with abandoned children.

(Music ends)

Tom: The film just blasted me. I couldn't stop thinking about it for like three or four days after I saw it. The whole song kind of, like, flows out of my experience with that film. Treating the sample kind of ruthlessly, setting up distortion channels, and then playing with the gain structure on the distortion channel, trying to bring something novel out of very simple sample.

(Beethoven concerto sample)

Tom: Yeah, it continues like that. It becomes, like, progressively more distorted, and sonically I really am attached to those swells and distortions, things going into the red. I think that when something goes into the red on a recording, it can be like a really powerful, metaphor is not the right word because it's more like visceral than that. But like when you're listening to someone sing, and it goes into the red, it feels intense.

(Beethoven concerto sample)

(Music ends)

Tom: You know, lyrically, this song is like direct to the point of almost being like didactic. I sing this sort of, like, fairytale intro of a love with no pain and no shame.

(Vocals: "I said there's no shame in this love / There's no pain in this love")

Tom: And then, I go into the main verse, and I sing about this boy, like just literally describing the film. And I sing, "There's no world with a broken child," so it's not like ambiguous writing.

(Vocals: "You hold her hand, you know this sweet little life / There's no world with a broken child / No consolation, please no more lies")

Tom: One of my best friends quite unexpectedly had a baby. She's very young, and watching her care for this child kind of was pretty revelatory for me. At a certain point, I don't even care who her parents are, even though I really love her parents. It's just like the fragile child laughing, and farting, and crying, and stuff, that's like the source of a possible new world. I like to think about, *what would the world be like, if it were a good world to live in, and not a terrible world?*

(Trumpet)

Tom: I made a MIDI scale of a trumpet blast that plays in a movie called *Beau Travail*, a Claire Denis film. The trumpet is played in a funeral ritual in that film. And so, the first sequence of brass that comes in is me playing a MIDI on keyboard, and then, that's replaced by a real brass quartet.

(Brass quartet)

Tom: By the end of *The Kid With The Bike*, Cyril is a completely different thing. You know, he was like this sort of dangerous to himself and others, very pained creature at the beginning. And then, through love, he's transformed, and he becomes like fully human in the deepest sense of that word. And so, the idea across this section was to try and perform musically that growth from the death trumpet, MIDI, synthetic to the rebirth trumpet.

(Trumpet)

(Trumpet ends)

Tom: I used to be like a really aggressive dude, was kind of like a bit of a dick. And the music I made was like pretty harsh noise stuff, like played in like some different kinds of metal bands, and did solo stuff that was just like sweltering harsh noise, just to basically make you feel bad. A lot of shit changed in my life over the last six years, just really important relationships, like losing some people quite close to me. I had a confrontation, sort of, with, like, my own arrogance and hubris and shit. And I just realized I needed to, like, figure out how to take better care of myself, so that I wasn't such a negative force in the world. And then, I started listening to a lot of different kinds of music, and one song that had a huge

influence on me, in terms of understanding the value of sentimentality and understanding this like direct approach that I was talking about earlier, is this song by Janet Jackson called “Special.” She sings like at the beginning, “We need to remember that love lies deep within ourselves.”

(“Special” by JANET JACKSON)

(Music fades)

Tom: It's a cool, it's a good sentiment, I think.

(Strings)

Tom: Everything I'm saying, I'm not, like, conscious of this in advance of the work. I'll have like a hunch, more like a feeling. I'd be like, “Man, that movie was, like, beautiful. I think I want to be a better person. Maybe I'll write a song.” You really learn about yourself in retrospect. And so, I'll do these acts, and record these songs. And then, I spend about two years talking about the songs to strangers. And then, I learn like, “Oh shit, okay. I was pretty obsessed with that for like three weeks there.” And, “Oh yeah, like I never realized how important that person is to me.” And I learn an enormous amount about myself through my music. I mean, that's the most compelling reason to keep doing it.

(Strings)

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's “Pour Cyril,” by How to Dress Well, in its entirety.

(“Pour Cyril” by HOW TO DRESS WELL)

Hrishikesh: That was from How to Dress Well's 2014 album *What Is This Heart?* There's another version of the song that Tom recorded live with an orchestra. Here's an excerpt from it.

(Orchestra version excerpt)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net for links to both versions. You can find all the past and future episodes of Song Exploder at songexploder.net or on iTunes, Stitcher, or wherever you download podcasts.

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