

Song Exploder
KT Tunstall - Suddenly I See
Episode 66

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.

("Suddenly I See" by KT TUNSTALL)

Hrishikesh: Singer-songwriter KT Tunstall released her debut album in 2004. It was nominated for a Mercury Prize. The song "Suddenly I See" from the record was a hit on the radio, and was used in the soundtracks of big movies and TV shows. But the song was originally written back before KT had a record deal, when she was a struggling street musician living in a small apartment in North London. In this episode, which was recorded live at the Sundance Film Festival, KT breaks down how she made the song with help from producer Steve Osborne. My name's Hrishikesh Hirway. You're listening to Song Exploder.

("Suddenly I See" by KT TUNSTALL)

KT: I'm KT Tunstall.

(Music fades)

KT: I'd spent 10 years trying to get somewhere as a musician; busking and, you know, recording with my friends, and playing in bars. I was thinking about making a record, signing a record deal. What kind of artist did I want to be? And the best answer to that question is have a look at the artists that you love. Look at their songwriting, look at what they were into. Look at their artwork. And it was the artwork that really was the seed of this song.

("Gloria" by PATTI SMITH)

KT: One of my favorite female musicians is Patti Smith.

("Gloria" by PATTI SMITH)

KT: And so, I'm looking at *Horses*, you know, seminal record, and I'm looking at the picture on the cover; Patti on the front of *Horses*. And it's blowing me away. There was definitely a maturity and a wisdom to her, and she's standing there

and she's wearing this amazing, just very simple outfit; white shirt and this jacket slung over her shoulder. And I'm looking at this picture going, "I want to be her. This is what I want to be." And that's where the lyric came from.

(Vocals: "Suddenly I see / This is what I wanna be / Suddenly I see")

KT: So here's the picture of where I was working. There's an area of London called Tufnell park, and I was paying so much money for this tiny little one bedroom apartment in this basement. So I had a laptop, Mac, Logic setup. This is one of the demos on this setup.

(Synth bass with beat)

KT: Oh, no one's ever heard this before, by the way.

(Vocals, guitar, synth bass, and beat: "Her face is a map of the world / Is a map of the world / You can see she's a beautiful girl / She's a beautiful girl")

KT: So the biggest transition from the demo to what was released

(Music ends)

KT: was finding a producer. Finding someone to work with creatively, who could hear what was good about what you were doing, shave away the stuff that was not good. I mean, the dream, really, with a producer is to create something signature. And I'm forever grateful to Steve Osborne, who produced my first record, that he focused on that.

Steve: It all breaks down really to the way she plays acoustic guitar. She's absolutely brilliant. The demos weren't a representation of what KT actually sounded like to me at all. My name is Steve Osborne and I produced KT's first album. I'd heard a number of demos, and I went to see a play in a little folk club in London. And seeing her live, she was completely different to anything that I'd heard recorded. It was definitely looking for something more rhythmic, more energy, more live, you know.

KT: Because I was explaining to him that I had all these songs, and I would do these gigs on my own, and I had got good at rhythm guitar because I played on the street, which we call busking. So I'd play on the street for money a lot. And he said to me, "The most important thing about what you do is your right hand." I

was like, "What are you talking about?" And he said, "Look at your right hand when you're performing. All my rhythm is coming from here."

(Guitar)

KT: He said, "The problem that you have with your music is that every time you play with the band, the drummer starts to play a stock beat. So it was just canceling out the fun of what I was doing.

Steve: So we did a rehearsal.

KT: It was just me and a drummer. And he said to the drummer, "You do that." And he just pointed at me.

Steve: That's the backbone. That's what we're going to sort of base it around.

KT: And the drummer went

(Drums join)

(Guitar fades)

(Drums fade)

Steve: We did want to make everything quite lo-fi when we were recording, we were definitely not trying to be Hi-Fi. I just thought that would suit KT's voice, and neither of us wanted to make a really slick sounding record. I thought she should have one foot in a sort of a blues, you know, in blues, really. So we were very much immersed in getting there an element of that sort of old sound. With this song, I mean, there's like, there's what, there's three rhythms? The snare beat,

(Drums)

Steve: the rims,

(Rims)

Steve: which is sort of just to bring out the top end. That's sort of doing a similar thing to the cajón.

(Cajón)

KT: A cajón, which is like a Spanish slap box.

Steve: That was one of the things she brought with her, was, like, she wanted to use the cajón, so that cajón is on like all over the record.

KT: I'd forgotten about that.

Steve: And I remember there was one day, and I came in, and I was messing around, and I actually just put all the beats [laughter] together.

(Beat)

Steve: There was an energy there, it was definitely working between the drums and the way KT plays a guitar.

(Guitar)

KT: I hadn't really played electric at all. And I love it. The only difficulty for me is that I find that you have to be a bit more precise because it's a more sensitive instrument. I'm not a very precise person, so it's messy when I play electric. But for a song like this, that's not a bad thing.

(Guitar)

(Guitar ends)

KT: I think the backing vocals are my favorite thing. It's one of my favorite parts of making a record.

(Vocals: "Suddenly I see (Suddenly I see) / Why the hell it means so much to me (Suddenly I see) / This is what I wanna be / Suddenly I see (Suddenly I see) / Why the hell it means so much to me")

KT: So, what is the "it"? The very superficial answer to the question is why this picture of this woman is having such an effect on me? Why I'm drawn to it so much. So, you know, why the hell the cover of *Horses* means so much to me? But from a wider, more personal point of view, I'm talking about why I'm doing it. Why am I making music? Everybody would love to know 100% what their

purpose was. And from a young age, I think, really from when I was 15 and started writing music, I was just hell-bent. That's what I wanted to do. I didn't want to do anything else.

(Guitar)

KT: This was the dream job for me at that point in my life. I think I was 27 when I wrote that. You have to justify [laughter] what you're doing, you know? You've got no money. I hadn't, I could never go out, I could never go on a holiday, I didn't buy new clothes. But I would always say to myself, *I'd much prefer to not have any of that stuff to really just bust my guts, to try and do what I really wanted to do.* It was scary, but I knew that I'd regret it much more, not trying it.

(Guitar ends)

Hrishikesh: Now, here's "Suddenly I See," by KT Tunstall, in its entirety.

("Suddenly I See" by KT TUNSTALL)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net for more on KT Tunstall. Thanks to Charlie Reff, John Nein, and Jarom Rowland at Sundance for their help making this episode happen.

("Sticky Drama" by ONEOHTRIX POINT NEVER)

Hrishikesh: Next time on Song Exploder, Oneohtrix Point Never.

("Sticky Drama" by ONEOHTRIX POINT NEVER)

Hrishikesh: You can subscribe to Song Exploder on iTunes, and you can find all the past episodes on the show's website, songexploder.net. Song Exploder is a proud member of the Radiotopia podcast network from PRX. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.

("Sticky Drama" by ONEOHTRIX)

(Music fades)