

Song Exploder
MGMT - Time to Pretend
Episode 62

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 has some explicit language.

("Time to Pretend" by MGMT)

Hrishikesh: You're listening to Song Exploder. My name's Hrishikesh Hirway.

MGMT was formed by Ben Goldwasser and Andrew VanWyngarden in 2001. The song "Time to Pretend" was one they wrote early in their career. It first came out on their debut, the *Time to Pretend* EP in 2005. And three years after that, they put out a new version of the song, on their first full-length album, *Oracular Spectacular*, which was named Album of the Year by NME, and was one of Rolling Stone's top 20 albums of the decade. It went on to sell over a million copies worldwide. In this episode, Ben and Andrew trace how the song "Time to Pretend" was made, from its dorm room origins, to its first recording, to re-envisioning it with Grammy-winning producer Dave Fridmann. They also uncover the hidden sounds and easter eggs within the recording. Here's MGMT on Song Exploder.

("Time to Pretend" by MGMT)

Ben: This is Ben from MGMT.

(Music fades)

Ben: Most of the sounds in both the recording on the EP and on the album version, have been around since we were in college. I mean, the actual sounds that we made on my laptop without any fancy studio gear or anything like that, most of that stuff is still on the recordings. I was totally broke. I couldn't afford any musical gear at all. I mean, it was all on the laptop that I used to write papers on for college.

(Synths)

Ben: They're just [laughter], they're synths in Reason, like everything pretty much is, you know, one of the stock synthesizers that comes with the program. And in college, in our spare time, we just spent a lot of time messing around with those synths, and trying to see what kinds of crazy noises we could get out of them.

(Synth bass)

Ben: That's just a bass on one of the synths in Reason.

(Synth bass fades)

Andrew: Hey, this is Andrew VanWyndgarden. We were, like, really into super naive, childlike melody stuff in college. And the intro kind of has a very toddling sound.

(Synth)

(Synth ends)

Andrew: It's not a pleasing sound. It's like the wings of an insect are making it or something, but it's definitely the hook.

Ben: At that point in time, we were two nerdy liberal arts college students. The band was a joke about being rock stars.

Andrew: That was the kind of whole shtick of the band in college is that we would be playing like in someone's living room for 15 people. And we'd be wearing fake fur coats, and sunglasses, and drinking champagne, and just acting like fools [laughter].

Ben: It was kind of performance art in a way, but not very like high concepts.

Andrew: I would say no concept.

Ben: No concept.

Andrew: [laughter]

Ben: I mean, it was a song about becoming rock stars, and destroying our lives. And we would sing everything in unison.

Andrew: It became sort of like this ironic mission statement type thing, and it felt right for us both to sing every part of it.

(Vocals: "Let's make some music, make some money / Find some models for wives / I'll move to Paris, shoot some heroin / And fuck with the stars")

Andrew: 2005 was the first time the song was on an official release.

(Synth)

Andrew: I think we made like a thousand CD copies of the EP.

("Time to Pretend" (EP version) by MGMT)

(Music fades)

Andrew: And then, 2006 is when there was the first interest from Columbia Records.

Ben: And they didn't own the recording on the EP. You know, they wanted to put those songs out as well. And I mean, we were fine with that.

Hrishikesh: So when Ben and Andrew went to record new tracks for their album on Columbia, they also recorded a new version of "Time to Pretend."

Ben: We didn't really re-record the whole song. I mean, it's, you know, remix is probably more accurate. The label was telling us, "You need to work with a producer." We didn't really know what a producer did, or get the subtlety of what a producer could be.

Andrew: That's when we kind of started to think about producers who we would want to record with. And we talked to Dave Fridmann, and really got along well.

Ben: I mean, we knew we liked the way that the drums on the Flaming Lips record sounded.

("Fight Test" by FLAMING LIPS)

(Music fades)

Ben: Dave is a very easy going guy as a producer. He never really phrases things like, "You should do this." He's more like, "Hey, how about we try this as an experiment?"

Andrew: Dave is the one who suggested we change the tempo a little bit. It was only one or two BPM that we sped it up, and we landed on, and wanted it to be the exact tempo of "Dancing Queen" by Abba, which it is.

("Dancing Queen by ABBA")

(Piano with drums)

Andrew: And also we recorded the same piano part from "Dancing Queen" in this song.

Ben: You can't really hear it, but it's in there.

Andrew: Yeah, it's definitely there at the end.

(Synth joins)

Andrew: [laughter]

Ben: [laughter] There it is. It's in there somewhere, but

(Piano, synth, and drums)

Ben: We'll probably get in trouble for saying this now.

(Music ends)

Ben: I don't know if it was an obvious thing to add live drums. Maybe a lot of it had to do with the fact that we were just really excited about being in a studio where we can make drums sound good. And we hadn't really had that opportunity before.

Andrew: And I remember I did like, a bunch of live drum takes that were just really ridiculous. This was kind of Dave's idea as well. Some takes where I was just doing the most ridiculous, like tom fills.

(Drums)

(Drums fade)

Andrew: Yeah. We were really taking advantage of Dave's abilities with drum sounds. Ben was kind of a master of synth horn arrangements in college.

Ben: I've always been really inspired by, like really good fake sampled orchestra instruments. Like you would never be fooled into thinking that somebody is actually playing that instrument, but it sounds really amazing in its own way, and it's really fun to manipulate that, and turn it into something new.

Andrew: There's some like, "Let's go on a Fox Hunt,"

Ben: [laughter]

Andrew: kind of

(Synth horn)

Andrew: like, French horn sound [laughter].

(Synth horn ends)

Ben: Dave Fridmann's one musical performance on the album,

Andrew: I'd forgotten about that! It's amazing.

Ben: it was this little like metal robot instrument. It looks like a robot, and it's called a Thingamagoop. And it has like a little light sensor on it.

Andrew: The difference in the amount of light would change the pitch.

Ben: He had like a giant industrial dimmer switch for the lights in his room. So you could actually play the robot sort of like a theremin.

Andrew: There's a sound towards the latter part of this song, that's like an ascending kind of squeal.

(Thingamagoop)

Andrew: That's being played by Dave Fridmann, by turning a dimmer switch very precisely [laughter].

(Thingamagoop)

(Synth)

Andrew: It was just such a big deal to be in a real recording studio with like this guy, who is a legend in our minds. And that was kind of, definitely a moment for me where I, it kind of hit me like that we are at a different level of working. We weren't just screwing around. We were kind of like making something that was maybe good. "Time to pretend," like, if you had asked us in 2005, we wouldn't have been like, "Oh yeah, that song could be popular." When we were kind of first talking to the label, some guy in the music industry thought it could be a hit single. And we were, like, laughing about that, because we were like, "Yeah right." But then I guess, I don't know, you know, we didn't really know what we were doing at all [laughter].

(Dave Letterman: "Our next guests are an acclaimed band from Brooklyn who are making their network television debut with us tonight. This is their CD entitled Oracular Spectacular, please welcome MGMT")

Andrew: I know for me, I think whenever it was, 2008, when we played on David Letterman, that was kind of, like, very surreal, because we played "Time to Pretend," and we had decided to wear Druid capes. And it's just one of those moments where like, yeah, it was all like funny and silly, like inside joke and then like, "Oh yeah, but you're [laughter] on national TV looking like a fucking idiot in the Druid cape." So like, I don't know, that was like, I feel like if you watch that video, you can see me, like, kind of like, "Oh God, what is happening?" [laughter]/

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: Now, here's "Time to Pretend," by MGMT, in its entirety.

("Time to Pretend" by MGMT)

Hrishikesh: Next time on Song Exploder, Kelela breaks down her song "Rewind."

("Rewind" by KELELA)

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 part of Radiotopia from PRX. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.

("Rewind" by KELELA)

(Music ends)

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