

Song Exploder
Mumford & Sons - Beloved
Episode 154

Thao: 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 Thao Nguyen.

("Beloved" by MUMFORD & SONS)

Thao: Mumford & Sons are a Grammy-winning band that formed in London in 2007. They've put out four albums, and sold millions of copies. Their last three albums have all debuted at number one on the Billboard charts. The most recent of those albums is *Delta*, which came out in November 2018. The band is made up of Marcus Mumford, Ben Lovett, Winston Marshall, and Ted Dwane, and in this episode, Marcus and Ben break down a song from *Delta* called "Beloved." You'll hear how the song went from Marcus' original raw voice memo to the intricate finished track.

("Beloved" by MUMFORD & SONS)

(Music fades out)

Ben: I'm Ben Lovett, and I principally play the keys in Mumford & Sons.

Marcus: My name is Marcus, I also play in Mumford & Sons. I sing and primarily, I'm a drummer, but I also try and fake it on the guitar.

Ben: The way that we have done things historically with the band is, songs can come from any four of us. And "Beloved" was one of Marcus'.

Marcus: I started it in October 2017, down at my studio in Devon, which is in the countryside in England. And I'd just bought a Hammond C3 organ. And I love new instruments, because most of the time, if you've bought a new instrument, you tend to write a song on it straight away. And that happened with this organ. I turned the organ up as loud as it could go, and I just started playing on it.

(Voice memo organ)

Marcus: Generally, I try and capture what I'm messing around with on a voice memo. I was on my own, and I opened the doors. It was quite a sunny day, and you just see fields, you just see grass. It's quite an emotive sound for me, it's a sound I

grew up hearing. And couple weeks before, I was hanging out with my grandma who was dying. And so I was kind of thinking about that a lot, and started writing that initial chorus idea.

(Voice memo vocals along with organ: "And as you leave / Remember we are with you / And as you leave / See my children playing at your feet")

(Voice memo organ)

Marcus: I didn't complete it lyrically until she died. But that's where the song came from.

(Voice memo organ fades out)

Marcus: Then next day, I did the first demo of it.

(First demo including organ, banjo and acoustic guitar)

Marcus: That form was just organ, banjo, and acoustic guitar. I was just capturing an idea, and playing these chords.

(First demo including organ, banjo and acoustic guitar)

Marcus: And then I took it into the lads.

(First demo acoustic guitar)

Ben: Marcus sent it over on email. And I remember thinking that it felt important and it was moving, you know, just those really simple things.

(First demo acoustic guitar)

Ben: It's funny, we've sent each other so many demos over the years, and sometimes we send each other stuff that just doesn't sound important. And it can sound good without sounding important. Those are different things, but this song had a weight to it.

(First demo acoustic guitar ends)

Marcus: When it came in, it was kind of two-step rhythm, which has become the starting place for a lot of the songs I write. And there was a song in it that we all recognized that was worth pursuing, but sonically it wasn't very interesting.

Ben: And a lot of this, we kind of have to tip our hats to what a process it was working with Paul Epworth, because in hindsight, the direction that it went in, Paul heard immediately.

Thao: Paul Epworth is a producer who's won an Oscar and multiple Grammys for his work with Adele. He's also worked with Paul McCartney, U2, and Lorde. And in 2012, he won the Grammy for Producer of the Year.

Marcus: We had a session with Paul in December.

Ben: It was like out of the gate, and he couldn't even quite articulate it. He was there just running around the studio. And basically, what he managed to communicate was on the basis of talking about this Reich-esque rolling piano type thing, like "Six Pianos" by Steve Reich.

("Six Pianos" by STEVE REICH)

Thao: "Six Pianos" is a piece from 1973 by composer Steve Reich, who's one of the pioneers of American minimal music.

Ben: It's a real touch point, bizarre touchpoint, for Mumford & Sons, but it was there. And that's what he heard when he heard the demo. It's that kind of mantra stuff that never lands, it's always moving onto the next bit.

(Music fades)

Ben: That kind of triggered some thoughts and we just started messing around with some stuff.

(Piano 1)

Ben: It was about layering this kind of intertwining rhythm.

(Piano 2 joins)

Ben: It's three pianos on top of each other.

(Piano 3 joins)

Ben: And they all stay doing what they do throughout the whole song. So the dynamic's created by these like single parts that are built and then taken away again.

(Piano 2 ends)

Ben: It's an entirely unplayable piano part by anyone [laughter].

(All pianos fade out)

Marcus: So Ben put down that piano part, which completely changed the rhythm of the song. And then Winston put down the banjo which was so unlike what I was expecting.

(Banjo 1)

Marcus: This like rhythmical, mantric banjo.

(Banjo 2 joins)

Marcus: So the repetitive rhythm of the guitar was replaced by this intertwining rhythm between the piano and the banjo.

(Banjos along with pianos)

Marcus: And those two things completely changed the texture of the song.

(Banjos along with pianos end)

Marcus: Paul's studio, it's a wooden floored room. It's the noisiest recording studio you've ever seen, like all the floorboards squeak, and then you're using the most precise microphones in the world to pick up every foot squeak. And Ted, Ted's very fidgety and he was fidgeting just before we started the take, tapping on his electric bass strings while they were muted.

(Taps)

Marcus: And stomping his foot at the same time.

(Taps along with stomps)

Marcus: We then chopped that up, and looped, and that became part of the rhythm track.

(Taps along with stomps and beat)

Marcus: Paul had just come fresh off the back of doing a lot of hip hop, and taking some inspiration from hip hop producers. And it's basically like sampling. It's like using a sample of something live played in a room by a musician and then cut it up, put through different reverbs,

(Rhythm track reverbs)

Marcus: mute it.

(Muted rhythm track)

Marcus: And then bring it back in.

(Rhythm track)

Marcus: We did it a lot. Because it makes you go, "Oh that texture has been in since the top. I just didn't really notice it." And then you notice it,

(Muted rhythm track)

Marcus: and then it's taken away and replaced with something else.

(Live drums)

Marcus: Like a live drum kit. It's really distorted, we used quite a violent compressor. And alongside that live drum kit, we used the Minimoog synth.

(Minimoog synth)

Marcus: If you get it into a certain mode, you can use it as basically a drum kit, but it sounds pretty weird and 80's.

(Minimoog ends)

Ben: I think there's a youthful lack of thought to this record.

Marcus: It was youthful in its kind of innocence, and we were just playing music in a room, and then falling in love with particular moments. And a lot of that came from improvisation.

Ben: Just trying something out, and really like asking questions musically. Sometimes not even a completed thought.

(DX synth)

Marcus: Oh it's the DX! Oh, sick!

Ben: That DX is a beast of an instrument. It probably weighs like 150 pounds, it's like 35 years old, this one that's in Paul's studio. And it's unique because apart from having its analog synth sounds to it, it's also entirely touch sensitive. It's like, you can lean into the note, and you get more out of it. That was really fun because it just means it's a new thing to explore there.

Marcus: And I've heard Paul say it like 20 times. He'd never heard it like the way Ben played it. He said in Ben's hands, it sounds like a different instrument to the one that he was familiar with. I think he just kind of had a love affair with that instrument.

(DX synth fades out)

Marcus: We certainly used different techniques on this record than we had before, and it was really fun to do so.

(Vocals through VoiceLive harmonizer)

Marcus: You're hearing a lexicon harmonizer, called a Voicelive and it's a new toy that we started playing around with. Sort of made famous by Kanye and Bon Iver.

(Vocals through VoiceLive harmonizer)

Marcus: We tried that in the first session we did with Paul and actually we ended up using it for demoing quite a lot, and then sound replacing what the harmony engine had come up with, with real voices.

(Harmonized group vocals: "Before you leave / You must know you are beloved")

Ben: We were getting a bit used to just singing one, three and five harmonies on everything and stacking them. But using the harmony engine to fabricate harmonies would make us find like the seventh that we'd never really normally sing or weirder harmonies.

(Yebba's harmonized vocals)

Ben: That's Yebba, who we were all big fans of.

Marcus: She came into the studio, and she sang on that. And she's a powerhouse man. She's got pipes for days, she stacked up like eight parts for the ending.

(Yebba's harmonized vocals)

Marcus: We're used to doing a lot of takes. But the first demo vocal we did in London ended up being the verse vocal.

(Vocals: "Sit enthroned in white grandeur / But tired")

Marcus: I lose objectivity very quickly on vocal takes, don't really know when it's getting too sentimental or a bit melodramatic or not putting enough of a shift in or if I'm getting lazy and feel like, "Oh, that'll do." But Paul changed my attitude towards singing. By encouraging me, it's really simple, he'd just be like, "Try singing it really quietly."

(Vocals: "And shift a wisp of wayward silver hair / From your eyes")

Marcus: I never tried that before. I'd never tried it. I'd always projected, because I played live so much before ever getting in the studio. I was always used to having to project, and singing to the back of the room. And it was completely revolutionary, it wasn't sounding very good, and he just went, "Try singing it as quietly as you possibly can," and it completely changed the way that I now approach singing. Paul was funny on it as well, because he was just

unbelievably relaxed. He's like, "Yeah the demo vocal's pretty good, man."
[Laughter] I was like, "When are we going to do the real ones?"

(Vocals: "She says the Lord has a plan / But admits it's pretty hard to understand")

Marcus: And then the chorus, I did in New York.

(Vocals: "Before you leave / You must know you are beloved")

Ben: There were two ways to go with that first chorus. One was to sing it out and proud, and one was to bring it really intimate and quiet and down. We went back and forth so many times. And it's the vocal performance itself specifically that ended up being the reason why we ended up going as it is. It just lands. And Paul's advice was, you know, "You don't have to do it another fifty times. If it lands, it lands."

Marcus: We recorded a lot around this Neumann microphone which is effectively a head, like a crash test dummy head. It's a binaural microphone, and it just sounds like what you would hear if your head was in that position. And Paul encouraged us on this song, to stand as the four of us around this head microphone and just play it. I played acoustic guitar.

(Acoustic guitar)

Marcus: And Ben played keys.

(Piano joins)

Marcus: Winston put down the banjo.

(Banjo joins)

Marcus: And Ted played bass.

(Bass joins)

Marcus: So that became the basis for this recording, which was far more interesting than the demo that I had brought, which now sounds very dull in comparison. I mean, no song is a Mumford & Sons song without going through everyone's hands. That process is invaluable to us.

(Vocals along with organ: "Before you leave / You must know you are beloved / And before you leave / Remember I was with you / And as you leave / I won't hold you back beloved")

(Organ)

Marcus: The idea of someone departing, that's where the genesis of the song came from. And I think wherever a song starts, it should stay with you in that way during the making of it. That's kind of a beautiful and a painful thing at the same time, and normally it's unspoken. It's very un-English to talk about your emotions in that kind of way, so we tend not to.

Ben: Obviously, we were all very aware of what was going on, personally for Marcus at the time, you know. But I actually felt like it was a love song, and in some ways, it is a love song still.

(Strings join)

Marcus: Which I loved. That's what I wanted the song to be.

(Music ends)

(Bass note)

(Bass fades out)

Thao: And now, here is "Beloved," by Mumford & Sons, in its entirety.

("Beloved" by MUMFORD & SONS)

Thao: Visit songexploder.net for more information about Mumford & Sons, their producer Paul Epworth and Yebba, the guest vocalist on "Beloved." You'll also find a link to buy or stream this song. Song Exploder was created by executive producer Hrishikesh Hirway. This episode was produced and edited by Christian Koons. Carlos Lerma made the artwork, which you can see on the Song Exploder website. Special thanks to the folks at the Headgum podcast network, who let Hrishi record his interview with Mumford & Sons at the Headgum studio in downtown LA. You can check out all of their podcasts, including Punch Up The Jam, and Gilmore Guys at headgum.com. Song Exploder is also part of a podcast network, Radiotopia,

from PRX, a collective of fiercely independent podcasts. You can learn about all of our shows at radiotopia.fm. You can also find Song Exploder on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter @SongExploder. And you can find me @thaogetstaydown. My name is Thao Nguyen, thanks for listening.

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