

**Song Exploder**  
**ODESZA - Kusanagi**  
**Episode 75**

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.

*("Kusanagi" by ODESZA)*

Hrishikesh: In September 2014, ODESZA put out their album *In Return*. It debuted at #1 on Billboard's Dance/Electronic charts, and spent 13 weeks in the top 10. But the song "Kusanagi" isn't a dance track. It slows down the pace of the album, and in this episode, Clay and Harrison of ODESZA explain why. They tell the story of how they made the track, along with their friend and collaborator who they named the song after, Sean Kusanagi. This episode was recorded live at Moogfest in Durham, North Carolina. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway. You're listening to Song Exploder.

*("Kusanagi" by ODESZA)*

Clayton: I am Clayton Knight, one half of ODESZA.

Harrison: I am Harrison Mills, the other half.

*(Music fades)*

Clayton: We had been playing like a lot of heavy electronic music festivals where it's a DJ act, and they're playing these just bangers after banger after banger. And it just beats you up, and we're just like kind of burnt out, kind of like beaten over the head with this heavy electronic sound for like, for so long. We were like, "God, I wish we could just make something that's the opposite direction, completely. Really low key and basically ambient.

*(Synth)*

Harrison: We were in LA at Sean Kusanagi's house. Sean's extremely important, he's like the secret third member of ODESZA. He introduced me and Clay back in college.

Clayton: I've known him since 16.

Harrison: That he's played guitar on every single one of our albums.

Sean: This is Sean Kusanagi, and I play guitar in ODESZA.

*(Synth fades)*

Sean: Clay and Harrison were on tour, staying on [laughter] my couch in LA, and I was just messing around playing some chords on acoustic guitar.

*(Acoustic guitar)*

Harrison: Yeah, when we heard those chords, we knew we needed to do something with them because they sounded so beautiful. We just kept talking about how we'd love to take them. We didn't have our equipment with us really to record too much, so that was just the beginning of the idea. Since we were on tour, we waited until we were off, and we decided we'd go to a very comfortable space to keep working on it. So we went back to Clay and Sean's hometown, which is Bainbridge Island. It's right outside Seattle, it's a ferry ride away. And we went to Sean's parents' house, and they have this kind of side house next to their home.

Clayton: It's right on the water in the rainy Northwest so it was very, very inspiring.

Harrison: And, we, yeah, that was the first thing we wanted to start working on them with, was that song.

*(Acoustic guitar)*

*(Acoustic guitar fades)*

Sean: When it came time to go into the studio, that's where we laid down the four chords that you hear in the track.

*(Guitar swells)*

Sean: So those main four chords are actually guitar swells. I played all with a volume pedal. So you can kind of hear, if you listen to me closely, you can hear the kind of hiss of the amp when the volume gets all the way up.

*(Guitar swells)*

Harrison: To me, it felt like kind of a distant memory and feelings of longing. That was something we really thought about, and how do we keep emphasizing that feeling?

*(Children vocals join)*

Harrison: Those children vocals, it's actually an old Christmas record, and it's chopped up.

*(Children vocals)*

Harrison: So they're not saying words anymore, because I think when lyrics are said, you make an instant connection and that's, we were going for more of an emotive tone and atmosphere to immerse yourself in, instead of a specific meaning.

*(Children vocals)*

*(Children vocals end)*

Clayton: We had these ideas for these strings. It was like, we can't hire an orchestra. So we'd, we found ways around it, and ways to like make these sounds that were kind of corny in the computer, and layer them properly to make something unique and kind of special.

*(Strings)*

Harrison: The electronic music we make, it's important for us to have a very human aspect to it.

*(Beat)*

Harrison: That's us dropping stuff

Clayton: [laughter]

Harrison: on a table [laughter]. I think we had some sticks we were breaking

Clayton: It's like a, yeah

Harrison: too.

Clayton: it's like a plank of wood. I think there's like ripped paper.

*(Collection of sounds)*

Harrison: Yeah. A lot of weird stuff.

*(Collection of sounds end)*

Clayton: I'm just thinking of how stupid we look.

Harrison: [laughter]

Hrishikesh: [laughter]

Clayton: Yeah, watching someone just drop quarters, and look at you like, "That's the one? We get it?" That was pretty funny.

*(Collection of sounds)*

*(Collection of sounds end)*

Sean: One of my favorite parts of the track is the guitar sweep. That's when you hear that [mimics guitar sweep].

*(Guitar sweep)*

*(Guitar sweep ends)*

Sean: I actually can't take any credit for writing that part, because it was all done by Clay and Harrison when they took single guitar notes that I played. And then, they'd record it, play another note, and record it.

Clayton: And then, put that on this sampler. And then, with the sample, you can kind of play out stuff that you wouldn't be able to play on guitar, basically, that would be really hard. And what we were able to do, you're able to create like this really percussive sound with each individual note. You know, it's, it sounds like a guitar, but it's played in a fashion that almost is unplayable.

*(Sampled guitar)*

*(Sampled guitar ends)*

Harrison: It's also fun to kind of limit yourself. Like you have *this* sound, you need to make something completely new out of it. Taking an actual sound, a human sound, and trying to manipulate it to make it a melody, or a pad, or something is a fun process.

*(Field recording)*

Clayton: That was a field recording that we took of just a playground.

*(Field recording)*

Clayton: Every time I hear that, I just think of Sean's house, and the ferry ride over, and like just being at home, which is such a nice, nice thing.

Harrison: And around that time, we had been touring so much that home had become this whole new meaning for us. And when you're living on a suitcase for that long, and don't get me wrong, I can't complain about being a musician, it's the best job ever, but those things become so much more powerful to you, and seeing your friends and family have so much more meaning when you, you know, get pulled away from it.

*(Field recording ends)*

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Kusanagi," by ODESZA, in its entirety.

*("Kusanagi" by ODESZA)*

Hrishikesh: For more information on ODESZA and their music, visit [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net).  
Special thanks to Moogfest for hosting the taping at their festival.

*("Clearest Blue" by CHVRCHES)*

Hrishikesh: Next time on Song Exploder, CHVRCHES.

*("Clearest Blue" by CHVRCHES)*

Hrishikesh: Follow Song Exploder on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. My username is @SongExploder. You can find all the past and future episodes of Song Exploder at [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net) or on iTunes, Stitcher, or wherever you download the podcasts. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a curated network of extraordinary story-driven shows. Learn more at [radiotopia.fm](http://radiotopia.fm). This episode was edited with help from Christian Koons. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.

*("Clearest Blue" by CHVRCHES)*

*(Music fades)*

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