

Song Exploder
Old Crow Medicine Show - Dearly Departed Friend
Episode 74

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.

("Dearly Departed Friend" by OLD CROW MEDICINE SHOW)

Ketch: My name is Ketch Secor, and I play the fiddle in Old Crow Medicine Show. I remember Operation Desert Shield all through the night. Every one of our favorite shows had been preempted by night vision flashes of airstrikes on Baghdad. And at 12 years old, I knew that I was captivated, but I also knew that I thought the war was wrong. The very next day in school, there was a great big speech all about this new time we were living in, and George Bush and his decision to put these airstrikes together. And I remember not standing for whatever we sang, whether it was "God Bless America," or whatever it was, and getting in a lot of trouble for it, getting pulled out of the room.

(Music ends)

Ketch: I had a really wonderful principal, and he was a sweetheart of a guy, but he told me then, "We'll Ketch, the way I think about it, you love it or you leave it." So I really came up in a love it or leave it kind of town. And that sentiment is something that I've been wrestling with as a songwriter ever since.

("Dearly Departed Friend" by OLD CROW MEDICINE SHOW)

Hrishikesh: Old Crow Medicine Show is a six-piece band from Tennessee, who've been around since 1998. They were inducted into the Grand Ole Opry in 2013, and they won the Grammy for Best Folk Album in 2015, for their record *Remedy*. In this episode, Ketch Secor tells the story of how they made one of the songs from that record. It's called "Dearly Departed Friend." I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. You're listening to Song Exploder.

("Dearly Departed Friend" by OLD CROW MEDICINE SHOW)

(Music fades)

Ketch: I was always interested in the stories from Afghanistan. The kind of music that I play has found appeal among a number of veterans my age and younger, and older, too. So I knew I wanted to write a song, and write many songs from their perspective. This is a story about somebody from a place, much like a lot of the places that I've lived before. These sort of crossroads, these sort of Tri-Cities with a sign out front that says, "Welcome to a Certified Business Location." And all you see around are smokestacks. The story of "Dearly Departed Friend" really is centered in this town called Elizabethton. But up there, they say it "Lizbethton." Well, I lived sort of on the outskirts of Elizabethton, Tennessee, where Tennessee meets Virginia and North Carolina. There's pretty limited economic opportunity for the kids who would graduate from a place like Elizabethton High. So when I was living there, I would see other 18-year-old young men like me, and there were no jobs, so they just joined the military. The military was the best option going. I've been dealing with this idea of a kid from the hills who goes over and "Dearly Departed Friend" is about him coming home.

(Guitar)

Ketch: In preparation for talking to you today, I was going through some old recordings I had made, and the demo, it's a lot different. It starts with sort of the bare bones, which was a lot more spoken. I really thought that this could be a song where I just ramble.

(Vocals join: "The service went the way it should have gone / No one talked too much or cried too long / 'Cept your mama's new boyfriend / He went on and on and on and on about the country / And the hero you'd become / We were all bowed down / And just then a truck backfired / And all the boys flinched their heads / Yeah that shook me up pretty good I guess / Been home a month now and still can't get no rest")

Ketch: The music that I wrote for it changed entirely when we went to make a record on it.

Hrishikesh: The band worked with producer Ted Hutt to make the album.

Ketch: When Ted Hutt got involved with this song, he treated it sort of like a hymn with more of an oratory approach to the vocal. Ted's ability to capture this band called the Dropkick Murphys, they are playing traditional Irish music at breakneck speed with a swagger that's very modern.

("The Hardest Mile" by DROPKICK MURPHYS)

(Music fades)

Ketch: And we're playing sort of the wicked step-sister of Irish music: old time or the sort of Appalachian string band music, we're planning that kind of thing with a whole lot of, you know, modern styling as well. And the thing about these genres is that they're very live, they're really energetic stuff. So how can you capture that live energy successfully and not compromise sonically? And that's what Ted was so good at doing. He really honed in on a melody line.

(Vocals: "I'm standing by the grave of a dearly departed friend / Nothing much to say except sorry it turned out like it did")

Ketch: To me, this song and the narration has a hard edge to it, from the vantage point of a guy who has seen a lot of things that the typical guy his age, unless he's been in combat, has not seen. So that colors his understanding of the world around him, this new world that he's re-entered. He's not the same boy who left.

(Vocals join: "The service went the way it should have gone / No one talked too loud or cried too long / 'Cept your mama's new boyfriend / He went on and on while they laid you in the ground")

Ketch: But it's not negative, and it's not somber, it's just sort of plain. This is how it is. You're dead, and we've buried you. And I live in this town now, and I drive circles around it.

(Vocals: "And right about then a truck backfired / And all the boys they flinched their heads / Yeah that shook me up I guess / I been home a month now and I still can't get no rest")

Ketch: And on this song, "Dearly Departed Friend," the arrangement, there's an intricacy to this. It was a challenge. The hardest part about this song was trying to do something this slow in a band that normally plays at breakneck speeds. You know, trying to breathe through it, trying to approach it the way we do all songs, with a lot of gusto and fire, but not to lose the delicacy of the song. It was really difficult to slow it down this much.

(Pedal steel)

Ketch: Pedal steel and its sort of ambient hum really feels akin to the story that's being told. Gill Landry spent a long time figuring out that pedal steel solo. In fact, he really bought a pedal steel to play this song. This is his pedal steel recorded debut. So he spent a lot of time working on it.

(Pedal steel)

Ketch: The pedal steel is unrestrained by frets, just moves. And our boy, our hero here is adrift. He's not bound in by anything except the voices in his head. He's sort of letting the winds blow him, and they've blown him back home, and now he's letting the winds blow him all across town.

(Pedal steel)

(Gitjo)

(Gitjo ends)

Ketch: Gitjo is a 6-string banjo, back in the teens and in the early 1920s. The banjo was the instrument. Everything got turned into a banjo. Banjo-ukuleles, banjo-mandolins, banjo-guitars. And this is the banjo-guitar.

(Gitjo)

Ketch: Gitjos don't really sound like banjos, they sounded like Gitjos. When you're isolated, and you hear it solo, it ain't pretty. But stick it down into a six-piece band, and it kind of makes all the difference.

(Mandolin)

Ketch: I'm such a rudimentary mandolin player. But the reason that I did play that part is because what the song wanted was a rudimentary mandolin.

(Mandolin)

(Mandolin ends)

Ketch: When it comes to harmony parts, we've just got to figure it out. Nobody in this group has the background and the science of, you know, notes and fits and parts and all that stuff.

(Vocals: "Standing by the grave of a dearly departed friend")

Ketch: You know, we just know when it sounds right.

(Vocals: "Nothing much to say except sorry it turned out like it did")

Ketch: And in the choruses, that's the trio of Chance and Critter and I.

(Vocals: "21 guns for 21 years and American flags in the wind / Standing by the grave of a dearly departed friend")

Ketch: Particularly in the tradition that our music comes out of, harmony singing is just sort of taken for granted. That's the kind of singing, group singing that's most exciting to me. And when we're good, we can do that in Old Crow.

(Vocals: "I'm just standing by the grave of a dearly departed friend")

Ketch: There wasn't a bridge originally when I wrote this song. And this was Ted saying, "Alright, I want it to go deeper here, guys." You know, we needed this big part with the drums, and spent a lot of time trying to figure out what the kind of rumble would be.

(Drums)

Ketch: I really wanted it to be a rocket's red glare kind of a sound.

(Drums)

Ketch: Yeah, that's definitely the rocket's red glare, and the bombs in the air.

(Vocals join: "Hey, there's only one road leads out of this town and it comes right back / So I just drive in circles, circles, and I try not to blow my stack")

Ketch: I wrote that line. That was all a new line that, "There's only one road, leads out of this town, and it comes right back, so I just drive in circles, and I'm trying not to blow my stack." It was definitely a Eureka moment. That bridge, to me, felt like the heart of the song.

(Mandolin)

Ketch: This song has broken the ice in a conversation that I've really wanted to have with the men and women in the United States armed services. I really want to talk to them. I want to know what they're doing. I want to know what they're up to right now, and how they feel about it. And I want them to feel my love and gratitude.

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: Now, here's "Dearly Departed Friend," by Old Crow Medicine Show, in its entirety.

("Dearly Departed Friend" by OLD CROW MEDICINE SHOW)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net for links to learn more about Old Crow Medicine Show. You can find all the past and future episodes of Song Exploder at songexploder.net or on iTunes, Stitcher, or wherever you download podcasts.

("Kusanagi" by ODESZA)

Hrishikesh: Next time on Song Exploder, ODESZA. Song Exploder is a proud member of the Radiotopia network, from PRX, made possible by the Knight Foundation and MailChimp, celebrating creativity, chaos, and teamwork. Find the show on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram @SongExploder. This episode was edited by Christian Koons and me. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.

("Kusanagi" by ODESZA)

(Music ends)