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.

("Dolphin" by PANDA BEAR)

Thao: Panda Bear is musician Noah Lennox. He's a founding member of the experimental, genre-defying band Animal Collective, and as a solo artist, he's released six albums. In February 2019, Panda Bear released the album *Buoys*, and in this episode, he and his co-producer Rusty Santos break down the opening song, "Dolphin." You'll hear the original demo, and how they drew inspiration from music from all over the world.

("Dolphin" by PANDA BEAR)

Panda: This is Panda Bear.

(Music fades out)

Panda: "Dolphin" was first written on a guitar. And I hadn't really played a guitar in a long time. But there's a song, "Tezeta," by a guy named Mulatu Astatke.

("Tezeta" by MULATU ASTATKE)

Panda: And that was kind of my springboard, the guitar in that song.

("Tezeta" by MULATU ASTATKE)

Pana: If you listen to the song, I feel like you can hear the inspiration for "Dolphin."

("Tezeta" by MULATU ASTATKE)

(Music fades out)

Panda: The vocal line mimics the saxophone.

(Demo)

Panda: I made demos in my practice space, in Lisbon, Portugal, where I live. Just going through the song and making little adjustments to it and going, "Doo doo doo," like that kind of stuff.

(Demo)

(Demo fades)

Panda: I always had some sort of electronic element to the music. I always wanted that to be there, to steer it away from just being like a straight singer-songwriter type of thing. I wasn't super interested in doing that. And it's a big reason that I wanted to work with Rusty.

Rusty: Hey, it's Rusty Santos. I'm an engineer, producer, mixer based in Los Angeles, California.

Panda: Rusty recorded the *Sung Tongs* record by Animal Collective with us. *Sung Tongs* is a record that we recorded in 2003, and then I hadn't really seen him. I'd stayed in touch with him, we would email once in a while. And I was always admiring the stuff he was working on. And then I remember my friend in Lisbon sent me a photo of her and Rusty. And I thought to myself, "They're somewhere else in the world, like at a festival or something like that." But she's like, "No, he's here in Lisbon." So I was like, "Let's hang out." I hadn't seen him in forever. And he told me then he was doing a bunch of like latin trap productions.

(Latin trap production)

Panda: And immediately I was like, "I'd like to push it somehow into that sort of space."

(Latin trap production fades out)

Panda: We had a vocal take and the guitar.

(Guitar)

Panda: Those were kind of like the first elements that we put in there.

(Vocals along with guitar: "To the sea")

Rusty: Noah told me that water was a major theme of the record.

(Vocals along with guitar: "To the end of the road")

Rusty: So I think that really just dialed it in right there, was like, "This record was about water."

Panda: We had a thing called the Digitakt.

(Digitakt)

Panda: It's more like a sampler than a drum machine, but there's a lot of stock drum machine-y type sounds in it. Just a quick and easy way to get really basic rhythmic stuff going.

Rusty: And my friend Liz, who I work with on music, she gave input on the arrangement.

Panda: There was like kind of snare-y sound initially, and then Liz suggested a water drop sound.

(Water drops along with guitar)

Panda: And that really becomes sort of the defining characteristic of the song.

(Beat joins)

Panda: There's a lot of suggested rhythm as if like the rhythmic structure was there and then we just removed it from the song, like there's almost no kick drum on the record. So I feel like the rhythms are more implied than represented.

(Music ends)

(White noise)

Rusty: So this is white noise. Comes from just like a straight up white noise sample,

(White noise sample)

Rusty: and then, automation. So, automating the frequency sweeps,

(Frequency sweeps)

Rusty: automating the volume. So, turning it up, and it hits a reverb and you have the reverb trails going out.

(Volume automation along with reverb trails)

Rusty: And it sounded like the ocean.

(White noise)

Panda: Like a lot of things on the record, it's both organic and synthetic in that it sounds like the ocean but it's engineered, and the sound of the record comes from the interplay of those two themes.

(White noise fades out)

Panda: Another thing that Rusty was super into was 808 samples.

Rusty: When you think of 808, you think of like big energy, like turning it up.

(808 along with electronic kick drum)

Rusty: But in the case of this, the 808 is used in a way that I never used them before, which is pretty subtle.

(808)

Panda: Those samples sort of define all the low-end stuff that's going on in the record. There's no like basslines really, it's all just pitched and tuned samples of 808's for the most part. It's kind of like a cloud to me, almost like a pillow that the rest of the production sort of sits on.

(808)

Panda: At that point, we knew it was going to be the first song on the record. And we didn't just want to start it with the drum sequence. So we were looking for some sort of introductory sound.

(Galaga)

Panda: That's from Galaga.

Rusty: Definitely from Galaga, yeah [laughter].

Panda: Old video game like when there were big cabinets in arcades and stuff. It's from that.

Rusty: It's very laser like.

(Galaga)

Panda: One of the things I talked to Rusty about before going into the studio was wanting to do a vocal that was more kind of intimate and singular.

(Vocals: "Could it be?")

Panda: I didn't want to do a whole bunch of harmonies.

(Vocals: "Has it always been so, so quiet?")

Panda: I remember doing the vocal takes and hearing the stuff with the Auto-Tune and the vocal production that Rusty was doing, and feeling like excited about where it was going.

Rusty: When I looked back at the project, the vocals are called "Scratch 1" or something, meaning like that was supposed to be a scratch take, and it never left the main vocal.

Panda: Well that's always the trick right?

Rusty: Yeah

Panda: You always tell the performer, "Just lay one down-

Rusty: "Just as a practice."

Panda: "Just as like a blueprint,"

Rusty: Yeah, yeah. And on the second voices, we pitched them down by 7, and when those hit the Autotuner, it sounds very synthetic.

(Pitched down vocals)

Rusty: Those second voices are all taken from the main vocals. It's all one vocal take. So the harmonies are all just made from the pitch-shifting.

(Vocals along with pitched down vocals: "To the end of the road")

Rusty: Auto-Tune was originally made for modelling the ocean floor for depth finding. It was taken from ships. So the person who made Auto-Tune was already in this kind of maritime mindset, thinking aquatically. It just really fits the vibe so good of the song.

(Vocals along with pitched down vocals, guitar and white noise: "I would always be there when you need it")

(Guitar along with white noise)

Panda: In terms of the lyrics, I was just thinking about what makes us do certain things and how those impulses, if left unchecked, can kind of lead us down unsavory roads. And for a couple albums, I like to talk about human beings as animals and I just figured the dolphin was a sort of good symbol for that. The emotion I wanted to have injected into the music was something really kind of caring and embracing, and loving, even though that sounds kind of cheesy, but I felt like there was people getting into divisive feelings, mainly in politics but also in other places in the world. So I wanted to make something that was kind of like a salve for that sort of movement. It's kind of like a love letter to weirdos, and yeah that's, that's it.

(Music ends)

Thao: And now, here is "Dolphin," by Panda Bear, in its entirety.

("Dolphin" by PANDA BEAR)

Thao: Visit songexploder.net for more information about Panda Bear and Rusty Santos. You'll also find a link to buy or stream this song, "Dolphin."

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