

Song Exploder
Breakmaster Cylinder - The Reply All Theme
Bonus Episode

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.

("The Reply All Theme" by BREAKMASTER CYLINDER)

Hrishikesh: This episode contains explicit language. Four years ago, on November 24th 2014, the first episode of the podcast Reply All came out. It's a podcast about the internet hosted by Alex Goldman and PJ Vogt. And since then, they've put out 131 episodes. The show's gotten over 100 million downloads so far. Robert Downey Jr. is going to star in a movie based on one of their episodes. And from the debut, it's been one of my favorite podcasts. A while back, in 2015, I did a special edition of Song Exploder for Reply All, about their theme song by Breakmaster Cylinder. I'd hear the guys talk about "the mysterious Breakmaster Cylinder" in the show's credits, but I didn't really know who or what that was. And I wanted to find out more. So in honor of the four year anniversary of Reply All's launch, I'm putting out this special crossover edition for the first time here on Song Exploder. I hope you enjoy it. It starts with the Reply All theme song, which goes like this.

("The Reply All Theme" by BREAKMASTER CYLINDER)

(Music fades)

Hrishikesh: By the way, I'm not sure how many of you know this, but before Reply All, Alex and PJ had another podcast about the internet called TLDR. And a lot of aspects of Reply All first manifest in that show, including having a theme song by Breakmaster Cylinder so they've all been working together since September 2013. When I wanted to find out how the Reply All theme was put together, I discovered a few surprising things like the fact that PJ and Alex have never actually spoken to Breakmaster Cylinder who prefers to remain anonymous. They've only ever emailed. So when the guys say, "The mysterious Breakmaster Cylinder," in the credits, they really mean it. They don't even know if Breakmaster's a he or a she. I interviewed Breakmaster Cylinder but out of respect for his or her privacy and mystery, I had an actor replace Breakmaster Cylinder's voice. Or did I? I'm sworn to secrecy. I also discovered that before there was a theme for Reply All, before there was even a theme for TLDR, PJ

and Alex first had to agree on whether or not their podcast should have a theme at all. Here's PJ.

PJ: Alex wanted one and I didn't want one. I think I remember like feeling like it was not a good idea because, 'cause you would end up having episodes that didn't tonally fit the theme song. Do you remember that argument?

Alex: Yes, I don't think that I had a particularly strong counter argument.

PJ: So why did you win that?

Alex: [Laughter] It's a weird question, I never win any arguments. I wanted something kind of anthemic and breakbeat-y, and just like really heavy.

PJ: Isn't it anthemic? Like an anthem instead of an *an-theme*?

Alex: So many years ago, probably 2008 or 2009, I somehow stumbled upon a video that Breakmaster Cylinder made, which is a remix of "Mr. Sandman" by The Chordettes.

("Mr. Sandman" remix by BREAKMASTER CYLINDER)

Alex: It was this video that was just the most gruesome moments from every horror movie strung together to the tune of this sort of creepy distorted remix of Mr. Sandman. And I was like, "Woah, this is someone I want to keep an eye on." So I started looking through Breakmaster Cylinder's other videos and I started following their music and then when it came time to do a theme song, I was like, "Who is just weird enough to work with us and make this thing?"

Breakmaster: My name is Breakmaster Cylinder. And I first wrote a theme song for PJ and Alex for TLDR.

(TLDR theme song)

Breakmaster: The first theme was received relatively well and was sort of the sound of the show. In retrospect, it feels more childish, I guess. It's sort of goofier.

Alex: I think that initially we were enamoured of the idea of doing a show about the internet that was very internet-y and our first theme song was all synthesizers and it was all synthesized. One of the things that we really realized making TLDR

is yes, it's a show about the Internet but it's mostly a show about just your environment and where you are, and who you're talking to, and how you're talking to them.

Breakmaster: So they wanted to do something a little more refined maybe. The tone of the new show was going to distance themselves from what that theme sounded like, which was too, you know, little kid-like. I am reading an old email from Alex Goldman to myself, in November of 2014, and he says, "If I had to describe what I wanted in terms of emotion, I'd try to describe our show, which at its best moments is both irreverent and earnest.

("Prelude in C Major" by J.S. BACH)

Breakmaster: I had some weird thing where I was just, I was obsessed with Bach. Prelude in C is basically what the Reply All theme is.

(Music fades)

Breakmaster: Yeah it follows the same chord structure. It's the first four measures but instead of playing each individual 16th note, you bring it all into one chord. So what you can do is you can take one measure

(The first measure of "Prelude in C Major" on piano)

Breakmaster: And you can block it into one chord so it's this.

(Piano)

Breakmaster: And the second measure is this.

(Piano)

Breakmaster: And third.

(Piano)

Breakmaster: And fourth.

(Piano)

Breakmaster: And then it goes, the first four measures.

(Piano)

Breakmaster: And then it goes, measures 12 through 15.

("Prelude in C Major" on piano)

Breakmaster: So

(Piano)

Breakmaster: And you land back on the tonic, and it's nice. You can't possibly do it better than Bach would have done it. It's got all those nice diminished sevenths, it's really good.

(Piano)

Breakmaster: This piano in this room is not really good enough to record most of the time.

(Electric piano)

Breakmaster: That is a fake e-piano sound though, which is a little unfortunate, but I kind of tried to dirty it up in the EQs.

(Electric piano)

Breakmaster: I totally cannot play drums so I just recorded every drum hit individually.

(Drums)

Breakmaster: I bought some brushes because they're awesome.

(Drum played with brushes)

Breakmaster: That is layered with a trap kit

(Drum with trap kit)

Breakmaster: This theme song is just like layering all my favorite shit ever, I guess.

(Coin sound)

Breakmaster: It's a coin being spun on a table but it's pitched up like exponentially along a curved line. So it starts slow and it gets higher quickly so hopefully it sounds like it warps into whatever sound comes next.

(Coin sound into the next sounds)

Breakmaster: Those are two different sounds, that is a Mason jar being rolled across the table.

(Mason jar sound)

Breakmaster: And then the other sound is a small glass being shattered with a hammer.

(Small glass sound)

Hrishikesh: In addition to these organic elements, Breakmaster Cylinder also made parts of the music digitally, programming notes with MIDI software on a laptop.

Breakmaster: This bass line

(Bass)

Breakmaster: I wrote a MIDI line and then exported it to five different bass noises. And then throughout the track, I have them all layered at the same time. And then I'd mute all of them except for one, and just switch between them when it sounded right.

(Different bass)

Breakmaster: It switches between them quickly so you get some sort of bee boops and some rumblier dubstep basses, and some sort of warm midrange out of all the same bass melody.

(Different bass)

Hrishikesh: After a few rounds of drafts and revisions, went back and forth between Breakmaster and PJ and Alex, the theme settled into its final form. I asked PJ and Alex if the theme song had a title. It doesn't really, but

Alex: it's called "Reply All intro four, frankenfuck one and three bee boops lower down.wav." It's called frankenfucked because we combined the beginning of one and the end of another, and then it says bee boops lower down because we

PJ: I said I wanted lower down bee boops.

Alex: Because we [laughter] turned down the bees and the boops in the mix [laughter].

Breakmaster: TLDR is a great show but Reply All has a lot more depth than TLDR did. They'll be talking about one just general branch of the internet and then they suddenly zoom in on one human story. And I don't know if the theme does that exactly, but I think it does balance the organic with the electronic, you know. Bach and machine bass like the human component and the internet, which their show does really well.

(Piano)

Alex: I think our show feels a lot like both of our personalities, which is like cheerful with [laughter] like a depressed streak and like a little bit manic. But I think that mostly it's a pretty optimistic show and I think the theme song is an optimistic theme song, and I like the feeling it starts us out with every week.

(Piano ends)

Hrishikesh: Normally, in Reply All episodes, what we hear is a condensed version of the theme song, but it's actually a longer piece of music. So here's the fully assembled, full length version of the Reply All theme by Breakmaster Cylinder.

("The Reply All Theme" by BREAKMASTER CYLINDER)

Hrishikesh: To learn more about Reply All and the mysterious Breakmaster Cylinder, visit songexploder.net. Reply All's website is replyall.limo. Thanks to everyone who made this episode possible - PJ Vogt, Alex Goldman, Phia Bennin, Tim Howard and Ferelith Young.

Next time on Song Exploder for the 150th episode, Fleetwood Mac. Song Exploder is produced by me along with Christian Koons. Carlos Lerma does original illustrations for the show. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, a collective of fiercely independent podcasts. You can learn about all of our shows at radiotopia.fm. You can find Song Exploder on Twitter, Instagram,

and Facebook @Song Exploder. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.

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