

Song Exploder
Semisonic - Closing Time
Episode 176

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.

("Closing Time" by SEMISONIC)

Hrishikesh: There are some songs that you've heard over and over and over again throughout your life. "Closing Time" by Semisonic is one of those songs for me and I think for a lot of people. And I always figured I knew what the song was about, closing time at a bar. But it turns out there's more to the story, and in this episode, Dan Wilson, the singer and songwriter of the band, Semisonic, tells the whole story. "Closing Time" came out in March 1998. It hit #1 on the Alternative charts, and was nominated for a Grammy for Best Rock Song. It gets played in stadiums, Weird Al covered it, and it's the last song of the night in countless bars. In the year since the song came out, Dan has gone on to become a powerhouse songwriter who has written or co-written for artists like John Legend and Taylor Swift. And he's won Grammys for his songwriting with the Dixie Chicks and Adele. But over two decades ago, Dan and his bandmates John Munson and Jacob Slichter were in Minneapolis, getting ready to start work on their second album, *Feeling Strangely Fine*.

("Closing Time" by SEMISONIC)

Dan: I'm Dan Wilson.

(Music fades out)

Dan: I first started writing "Closing Time" in a big batch of songs in late '96 or early '97. Semisonic had gotten off tour after a long stretch and John and Jacob and I were thinking about what to do for our next record and I specifically remember among their requests to me in this batch of music was a new song to end our shows with. Before *Feeling Strangely Fine*, I would write a song when I felt like it. But I was trying to write a song every day and eventually we had about 60 songs that I had written and a lot of them were not great. But I think I wrote "Closing Time" in the middle of that giant batch of songs. It was in John's basement that I first played "Closing Time" for John and Jacob. And the first demo is me down in that basement playing it for them.

(Acoustic guitar)

Dan: Almost all of Semisonic's songs I wrote on a Guild F-30, a little acoustic guitar. And I thought of the title "Closing Time" literally because of the request from John and Jacob for a new closer for our sets.

(Demo first verse vocals along with acoustic guitar: "Closing time / Open all the doors and let you out into the world / Closing time / Turn all of the lights on over every boy and every girl")

Dan: Semisonic started in '92, and John and I had been in our previous band for eight years before that and had toured most of that time. So I lived in bars, you know, a lot of my time. I heard people yelling at us to get out a thousand times or probably more, and I immediately thought of this thing that one of the bartenders at the 400 Bar, where we would always hang out, would always yell, "You don't have to go home, but you can't stay here."

(Demo first verse vocals along with acoustic guitar: "Closing time / You don't have to go home, but you can't stay here")

Dan: I've always loved those very metaphorical poets like Elizabeth Bishop, where, you know, you're like, "Is this entire poem about an old decrepit gas station?" Well you know she's got something, like there's an idea, you know, with those poets. Like it's, they're writing you a poem about the time their dad dangled them down the laundry shoot in their house, you know, like that's not just about that, that's about a lot of other things. So at that time I had this theory that every line in my songs had to be about two things, and I didn't mind if people would only understand the one, but to me it always had to be about two things. At that time I thought that was my way of pushing myself to be more like Elizabeth Bishop. When I wrote "Closing Time," I was on the couch in the living room of my wife, Diane, in my house. At that time we were expecting a baby, we had found out several months before. And so "Closing Time" definitely took on a kind of, for me, a double meaning of being born. This kind of funny double meaning about being bounced from the womb and bounced from the bar. I was about halfway done and I realized "Oh it's got this other meaning," and I was very delighted by that because then I could think of lines, and they all didn't have to get generated by the workaday image of bar time and looking for someone to hook up with. It could be generated by other more mysterious images.

(Demo second verse vocals along with acoustic guitar: "Closing time / This room won't be open 'til your brothers or your sisters come")

Dan: It's funny because, you know, to be removed or kicked out of the uterus and, you know, enter a world of bright light, it's like going out under the streetlamps after being in a bar. Like you're in this wonderful like dreamland and then you get like kicked out and now you have to figure out what to do with your life. In utero you're drinking the purest nourishment from your mother and you don't want it to end. I think you know like, I don't know, maybe babies are excited to be born, but I don't think so, you know. So I was just laughing to myself at the parallels. I just thought there was something sweet and beautiful about that.

(Demo chorus vocals along with acoustic guitar: "I know who I want to take me home / I know who I want to take me home / Take me home")

Dan: Semisonic had a friend named John Kuker. He had golden ears for what sounded right in a guitar or a compressor or a keyboard, anything, he was a genius. And then John told us that he was gonna start a studio and he called it Seedy Underbelly and he built it in downtown Minneapolis, but the studio is not quite finished at this point, so we're working in the storefront next door, getting the songs together and waiting for John Kuker to finish the studio, and let us start recording the record.

(Storefront demo)

Dan: So this recording, this demo is us in that storefront rehearsal space with an upright piano that we were using to like show each other ideas. And that's where John Munson thought of that piano part of "Closing Time."

(Piano joins in demo)

Dan: The producer of "Closing Time" is Nick Launay. We sent him the storefront recordings. And they were way more formative than we expected them to be because they became Nick's vision of what the songs were supposed to sound like, but actually they were literally just the way we played them on that day. Like if we had recorded "Closing Time" the day before, it wouldn't have had the same piano part. If we had recorded "Closing Time" the day before that, it would have no piano at all. You know, it was all basically like wherever it was, we just froze it and sent it to Nick.

(Storefront demo: "Closing time / This room won't be open 'til your brothers and your sisters come / Closing time" slowly fades out)

Dan: Then a month after the storefront demos, Nick came to Minneapolis and we started recording in early April. And then our daughter Coco was born many, many weeks early and very tiny. She arrived after six months and she stayed in the hospital for a year, after she was born. We were very afraid for her survival the whole time. Nick and I had a heart to heart on the phone, a long conversation about what to do and my daughter's doctors, I discussed with them what to do and they said, "You need to just keep doing your job because if this goes well, it's still going to be a long process and you can't live at the hospital. You need to do your life." So then I had a conversation with John and Jacob from the band and I told them, I was, we're gonna do this music, but I would not be present for a bunch of it, "I'm gonna do everything I can to like, I'll do all the singing and I'll play, you know, all the guitars I think of and we'll do all the takes of the songs, but then I'm gonna spend as much time as I can at the hospital with Coco."

(Strings)

Dan: So my life was very difficult at that time, but the recording wasn't that difficult and we didn't fight really. Nick Launay had a hard job, but he was an easy person to work with. One of the things we really liked about Nick was that the recordings he had made were all really heavy. There was just something about the way he recorded things that gave everything this gravitas and heft. And it relates a little bit to John Kuker, whose studio we worked in. He would say, "Oh, I don't like that guitar because it doesn't sound mungy enough," and I would never know what he meant by that word mungy, but getting to know him more, it was like everything had to be dark. And so all the amps were like really loud, but they weren't shrill and bright, they were dark and kind of dead sounding.

(Electric guitar)

Dan: And then Nick's secret was, I think, to have me play the parts a lot of times so it was all a little bit out of tune, and then just add them all together in this huge low mid range kind of mass.

(More guitars join)

Dan: "Closing time" is very simple like a folk song, very repetitive, very innocent in its melody. And then almost in a funny way, it's really loud. It's like this melancholy, street corner, busker song played super loud.

(Guitars along with bass and drums)

Dan: The band is a trio, so there was no extra person to strum the guitar. So if I was to play a melody on the guitar, we would be sacrificing the chords, which is just the way we understood it. And so, you know, during the chorus, I'm playing those chunky chords and then during the solo, forget the chords, I'm playing the melody.

(Guitar solo)

Dan: ZVEX Effects is based in Minneapolis and they had this new invention called a Fuzz Factory, which is this crazy sounding distortion box that makes guitars sound like it's a giant zipper being zipped, very strange sounding. And Zach at ZVEX Effects brought that Fuzz Factory to a party at my house and it was labeled number 5, so it was like the fifth one that they built and I used it on everything. It was that buzzy sound, just struck me as so insane, I just loved it. And that's the sound of the solo in "Closing Time," that, "bzz-bzz-bzz-bzz," that really strange, like a hive of bees singing a melody or something.

(Zvex Effects guitar solo)

Dan: The song is so sing-songy and so much like a nursery rhyme, so I wanted the bridge to just sound like a whole different world from the rest of the song. I wanted it to sound sentimental and cinematic and dreamy and kind of sad and emotional. So I just made this arbitrary change of key.

(Demo of the key change on acoustic guitar and vocals)

Dan: But I also felt like a change of key would even make it sound more like an old children's movie or some kind of LP of children's stories or something that would have an interlude with sort of string sections. Like Winnie the Pooh, they'd be like walking through the forest and then you'd hear like flute melodies and strings, and there'd be this beautiful, like very musical little interlude that would change keys, and then you'd come back to the main story. I just wanted the bridge of "Closing Time" to have that quality of like it's a whole cinematic change of scenery. And Jacob had been learning more and more about

arranging and orchestrating. And so he wrote the string arrangement of that melody that I just kind of sketched out on the demo.

(Strings)

Dan: In the bridge, we wanted to have the drums change radically and John and Jake created a loop of Jacob playing the drums, but with a super different sound.

(Drum loop)

Dan: So then we played the bridge to Jacob and John's loop.

(Piano and strings along with drum loop)

Dan: Then he turns the sample off and starts drumming for real again.

(Drum loop replaced with live acoustic drums)

(Live acoustic drums along with guitars)

Dan: Nick had like the musical lure of how to get guitars to sound great, but also how to get, how to make singers comfortable, how to push someone to a point of like not quite exhaustion and get a great performance, just right when they were the most tired. He definitely pushed me a lot.

(Dan's acapella vocals: "Closing time / One last call for alcohol, so finish your whiskey or beer")

Dan: He got very attached to the way my voice would break on the chorus of "Closing Time" and he'd be like, "Can we get you to do that break again on the chorus?" And I'd be like, "No, it just happened. I can't just do that," because I'm not a very trained singer. And he would say, "Oh, well just try it." So we'd try it a whole bunch of times and I would just get madder and madder, and then my voice would break at that point in the way that he liked [laughter] and then he would keep that when I was completely worn out. It can actually make the song feel so much more emotional because it's a struggle for the singer. It's not just like them being awesome, it's them trying to survive that moment, you know.

(Dan's acapella vocals: "I know who I want to take me home / I know who I want to take me home / I know who I want to take me home / Take me home / Ah")

Dan: That whole period of time of recording the album was a crazy blur for me because our daughter was in the hospital the whole time, and would be for, the many, many, you know, almost a whole year. She's still with us, she's a light of my life and I'm very happy about the outcome. But the process was crazy and I was very happy to have a meaningful activity to go to, I was very happy that I was doing it with people that I trusted and love. John and Jacob and Nick and the whole team around me were so supportive and so kind because I was hanging by a thread a lot of the time. Coco just took it out of us, you know. We were just limping from house to hospital to studio to hospital to bed. It was intense. The thing we tried to provide, like I would go a couple times a day and just like rock her. You know, as soon as we got permission to take her out of the isolette, we would just rock her for hours and then, you know, we'd have a friend or my parents would come and do the same, just to give that person in a little box human contact with family was a huge project. There's a very sad Robert Frost poem that, it's about a family that loses a child and the wife can't forgive the husband for still doing chores around the house and she hates him for like mending fences on their farm and kind of whistling while he works in a weird way. And you know, I look back on it and it is, I can identify with the characters in the Robert Frost poem. During that time when Coco was in the hospital, I felt like any kind of constructive activity that I could have would be a kind of a lifeline to staying sane and so I grabbed onto it and made the record with my guys, and also tried to stay super engaged with my family.

(Strings)

Dan: The connection between impending fatherhood, impending new life and "Closing Time" just continued in the craziest way. It never stopped being connected. The day she was scheduled by the hospital to come home, the day they scheduled the ambulance to take her home and set her up in our house was by chance the same day that MCA scheduled "Closing Time" to come out as a single, and there's no possible way these two giant impersonal organizations coordinated. When we got the gurney, with Coco on it, into the ambulance and the nurse sat back there with her and I sat up in the front with the ambulance driver turned in the seat so I could watch Coco and the nurse, we left the hospital and the ambulance driver turned to me and said, "I'm really sorry to ask this. I'm not supposed to ask this. Are you Dan Wilson?" And I was like, "Yeah, I am," and he goes, "You're in Semisonic," and I go, "Yeah," and he goes, "I love your band." "Oh thanks." He goes, "Craziest thing, I just heard your new song on the radio, the one that goes, "Take me home. I know who I want to take me home. Take me home," is your new single. I just heard it before you got

in here with your daughter.” And I was like, “Okay, this is never going to unconnect, you know, there's no like untangling it.”

(Piano joins strings)

(Piano and strings end)

Hrishikesh: And now, here is “Closing Time,” by Semisonic, in its entirety.

(“Closing Time” by SEMISONIC)

Hrishikesh: To learn more about Semisonic, visit songexploder.net/semisonic. You’ll also find the music video for “Closing Time,” and the link to buy or stream the song. Song Exploder is made by me and producer Christian Koons, with production assistance from Olivia Wood, and illustrations by Carlos Lerma. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a collective of independent, creative podcasts. Learn more about all of our shows at radiotopia.fm. You can find Song Exploder on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook @SongExploder. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.