

Song Exploder
Slowdive - Sugar for the Pill
Episode 111

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.

("Sugar for the Pill" by SLOWDIVE)

Hrishikesh: Slowdive formed in 1989 in Reading, England. They put out 3 albums between 1991 and 1995, and their sound helped define the shoegaze genre. In 2017, the band released a critically-acclaimed self-titled album, their first in over twenty years, and in this episode, singer and guitarist Neil Halstead takes apart the Slowdive song, "Sugar for the Pill."

("Sugar for the Pill" by SLOWDIVE)

(Music fades)

Neil: I'm Neil Halstead from the band Slowdive. We live by the coast in a place called Newquay in Cornwall, down by the sea. And we have a lot of seagulls around here.

(Seagulls)

Neil: This song, it has elements of where I live. And the first line, "There's a blizzard of gulls, drumming in the wind."

(Vocals: "There's a buzzard of gulls / They're drumming in the wind")

Neil: It's inspired by walking around the coastline here, and the very noisy seagulls we have [laughter].

(Seagulls)

Neil: The song, it originated from the sort of ascending guitar motif. Well, I was just playing it on an acoustic guitar.

(Guitar)

Neil: And I started playing it in some soundchecks, and then I added the delay on to it.

(Guitar with delay)

Neil: A lot of the songs start that way; they're often led by the kind of effects that are on them. Even like the first song we really had as a band, it was the song "Slowdive" it was, the effect on the guitar kind of provided the inspiration for the song almost, because it allowed something quite simple to sound somewhat more interesting.

Hrishikesh: Here's a little bit of that first song they ever wrote, "Slowdive," by Slowdive.

("Slowdive" by SLOWDIVE)

(Music fades)

Hrishikesh: OK, now back to "Sugar for the Pill."

(Guitar with delay)

Neil: I liked the resonance of those notes. You know, the initial guitar riff was something that had an emotional content for me. And I think that it then fed the rest of the song, and it fed the lyrics. We were in a rehearsal room, just jammed through it. And Nick came up with a great bassline for it.

(Bass)

(Guitar joins)

Neil: Nick's really good at coming up with these basslines that really add something to the song. He doesn't just hold the bass end down, there's something melodic happening there as well. So he came up with a really nice one.

(Bass)

(Bass ends)

Neil: Two months later, we went to Exeter, which is where Rachel lived. We recorded a version there.

(Guitar with drums)

Neil: It had Simon's drums, it had the bassline, and it had me singing the melody, but not a complete set of lyrics.

(Vocals and bass join)

Neil: And it had Christian's guitar, which was the other guitar on the track.

(Guitar)

Neil: I'm not sure what he used. His pedalboard is a mystery to me, and he does his thing [laughter], making these crazy noises. And I know not how he makes them.

(Guitar)

(Guitar ends)

Neil: With us getting back together and doing a new record, we wanted to do something that was different to what we'd done in the past. We'd recorded the song to a click track, and I wanted a cleaner drum sound for the tracks. So I replaced Simon's drums with electronic drums, which are the main drums that you hear. But then, when we mixed the record, we kept some of the live drums just in the background, and some of the skipped beats you can hear are Simon's live drums.

(Drums)

(Drums end)

Neil: I used to have a problem with guitars feeding back because we play very loud.

(Guitar)

Hrishikesh: Neil plays an Epiphone Casino guitar. It's a hollow-bodied electric.

Neil: And I always liked the sound of the Casinos, but because they're hollow bodied, and they're quite cheap guitars, but they're hollow bodied, I would, I realized that if I filled it a little bit with something, you could stop it feeding back, and it would still sound the way you wanted it to sound. So it has bubble wrap inside it

to stop it feeding back. After experimenting, I found that bubble wrap was a good filler. It's not very rock and roll, but it's sort of somewhat controllable. Without the bubble wrap, it's way out of control.

(Guitar)

Neil: We can hear Rachel's doing the harmony on the chorus.

(Vocals: "Anna rolled away / Said we never wanted much / Just a rollercoast' / Our love was never number one")

Neil: I'll get Rachel to sing on everything. We'll just decide between us which vocals to keep, or whether it's a song that she sings by herself, or whether it needs my vocal on it. With "Sugar for the Pill," Rachel sang the lead, and she sang the harmonies as well. So she did quite a lot of vocal takes, and we just made decisions down the line as to which bits to keep. It seemed to work with Rachel coming in on the first chorus.

(Vocals: "Sugar for the pill / You know it's just the way things are")

Neil: And then, she sings like a really beautiful harmony in the second verse.

(Vocals: "Cut across the sky / And move a little closer now / Lying in a bed of greed / You know I had the strangest dream")

Neil: There's backing vocals that kind of pop in and out.

(Vocals: "Anna rolled away (Rollin' in the deep) / Said we never wanted much")

Neil: What I tend to do when I'm working on a track, is I try and create situations where accidents happen, and Pro Tools is brilliant for this. It's an amazing sort of creative tool, as well as being quite a sensible editing machine. It's also just brilliantly insensible, because you can create situations that are really spontaneous, you know, because you can literally just drop a track up and throw bits of it all around the room, and just see what comes out of the chaos. And occasionally you get these really sweet little moments. So I'll just take a vocal track, I'll just move it somewhere further along in the song. And I'll just see what happens when I play it back. But that's actually the lead vocal that's just been shifted on the timeline.

(Vocals: "Sugar for the pill / You know it's just the way things are")

Neil: Just try and create accidents.

(Piano)

Neil: I was reading *Wuthering Heights* in 2014, it was the first time I'd ever read it. And I think some of that made its way into the song. There's a feeling of that kind of wild, Heathcliff quality in the song a little bit. The doomed romance of Heathcliff and Cathy's involvement, and it's very connected to the nature they live in. You know, they live in this up on a moor, wild, windy moor, you know, and it becomes, I suppose, a metaphor for their own relationship.

(Vocals: "Only lovers alive / Running in the dark")

Neil: There's a line, "Only lovers alive," which actually, my girlfriend told me, was a Jim Jarmusch film. But that for me connects more with the Heathcliff and Cathy scenario.

(Piano)

Neil: For Slowdive, it's always been quite impressionistic. A lot of the lyrics is just snatched.

(Guitar joins)

Neil: It's almost dreamlike.

(Vocals join: "Sugar for the pill / You know it's just the way things are")

Neil: As a child, I was given medicine on a sugar cube, you know, cough medicine or whatever it was, it wouldn't be dipped, sugar cube would be dipped in to make it more pleasant. It's the idea that this unpleasant thing that could make you feel better, needs to be sweetened.

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Sugar for the Pill," by Slowdive, in its entirety.

("Sugar for the Pill" by SLOWDIVE)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net for a link to buy this track, and to learn more about Slowdive.

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("Ti Amo" by PHOENIX)

Hrishikesh: Phoenix. You can find Song Exploder on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram @SongExploder. And you can find all the past and future episodes of the show at songexploder.net or wherever you download podcasts. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.

("Ti Amo" by PHOENIX)

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