

Song Exploder
Stars - No One Is Lost
Episode 23

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.

("No One Is Lost" by STARS)

Hrishikesh: Stars is a band from Toronto, who have been making music together since 2000. Their seventh album was released in October 2014. For this episode, I spoke to several members of the band: singer Amy Millan over the phone, and to Evan and Patty in their studio in Toronto, along with their co-producer Liam O'Neil. Coming up, they'll talk about the inspiration for the phrase "No One Is Lost," which is the title of this song as well as the album. And you'll hear the original version of the chorus: one that they wrote, recorded, mixed, and finished but then, ended up changing completely.

("No One Is Lost" by STARS)

(Music fades)

Evan: My name is Evan Cranley. I'm in Stars. I play bass and synth.

Patty: I'm Patty McGee. I play drums.

Liam: And this is Liam O'Neil. I engineered and produced this with these guys.

Evan: Even though this track is the last on the record, it was the first one we started. The first music that was written was really that long sweeping filtered intro that you hear off the top.

(Synth)

Liam: So we put all of these different synths into this filter, and had it kind of sidechained from the bass drum, so

(Beat)

Liam: that it would kind of pump with the beat.

(Synth with beat)

(Synth)

Liam: To that, we added Evans' bass guitar.

(Bass)

Evans: I write music with my bass guitar. So a lot of my musical ideas actually come initially from the bass guitar. You still get this, like, human fingerprint-y sound on the strings. It has a human and a synthetic kind of quality all at once.

(Bass ends)

Liam: The filter is slowly opening up.

(Synth)

Evans: It's incredibly anticipatory. It's a really, kind of, amazing, anxious feeling.

Liam: You get that feeling of there's a party happening in the next room, and you're slowly walking down the hallway, and opening the door, and all of a sudden, you're there.

(Synth with bass)

(Music ends)

Evans: We had a sketch, and Torquil Campbell, one of the two singers, heard the verse, and as he was hearing the verse, he literally just sits there and writes in his notebook. He comes up with lyrics on the spot. Usually about 99% of the music, the lyrics that he comes up with are done on the spot. And what he writes is what you get.

(Vocals: "Another night, another weekend / Another message checker looking for a friend / You got a pulse, you got a problem / We know the real you so why do you pretend")

Amy: Torq will write verses, and he will be, he'll say, "Look, there's a chorus here, and I don't know what to do for the chorus. Can you write the chorus?" This is Amy

Millan, and I sing and play a little guitar in Stars. The chorus is actually really different when we originally wrote it.

(Original chorus)

Evan: It's a little bit more, kind of, songwriter-y. And then, we let a friend of ours

Amy: James Shaw from Metric.

Evan: mix another version.

Liam: And he listened to it, probably 30 times, before he called me. And he said, "What's happening in the outro of your song is actually your chorus." Amy was repeating that melodic hook.

(Vocals: "And no one is lost / No one is lost")

Liam: And he was like, "That's the bit that you need to hear on the choruses." There was a little bit of, like, a nothing to lose scenario where it's like, "Alright, well, Jimmy has an idea of something that could potentially make the choruses more exciting, why not let him do it, and see what it sounds like?"

Evan: And it was just about choosing what we wanted the song to be.

Amy: And now it just seems like one big hook, and less of a chorus. It's a banger.

(Hook)

Liam: But the drums that are on there, on the choruses, are the drums that Patty originally played to different music.

(Drums)

Patty: I admit, originally I found it somewhat traumatizing when I heard the Jimmy mix. I was so used to hearing the original version, that it took me a long time to finally hear it for what it was. But I wasn't there in the studio for when these changes were made. So everyone who was there was really enthusiastic about it, and really felt great about it. And I thought they were insane a little bit. I was like, "Don't you hear that that sounds wrong?"

(Drums end)

Patty: I had to throw that aside, and accept, and trust them. Like I was like, “I’m just going to have to walk away from this one, and believe in it. And that hope that my mind will switch, the synapses will start firing on the same [laughter] wavelength, at some point.

(Drums)

Patty: As soon as we started learning it for our live show, that was, I think, the first time actually, I could actually hear what it was supposed to be. And, for me, it was just getting back into it, and physically engaging with it. That allowed me to hear what was going on.

(Synth)

Amy: We had a friend who got diagnosed with Stage 4 cancer, and he’s really young. And we had to kind of go forward in blind hope that he was going to get better, and he was going to come through it in the end okay. And Torq wrote “No one is lost” on his t-shirt. He likes to write things on t-shirts. That was the inspiration of that song, was just the feeling that we had to have throughout the album, that no one was lost, and that we weren’t going to lose him.

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here’s “No One Is Lost,” by Stars, in its entirety.

(“No One Is Lost” by STARS)

Hrishikesh: You can find all the past and future episodes of Song Exploder at songexploder.net or on iTunes, Stitcher, or wherever you download podcasts. Find the show on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram @SongExploder. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a curated network of extraordinary story-driven shows. Learn more at radiotopia.fm. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.