

Song Exploder
Hrishikesh Hirway TED Talk - What You Learn When You Listen Closely
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.

Hrishikesh: Earlier this year, I gave a talk at the annual TED conference. My talk was about what you discover when you really listen. And it was based on how making Song Exploder has changed the way that I think about conversations and connecting with people. My talk came out today on the TED website and on the TED Talks Daily podcast. And the very nice folks at TED asked if I would also put the audio here as a bonus episode. I hope this isn't too meta to hear me discuss this show and what I get out of making it, on the podcast itself. But the talk also features some music, including some beautiful cello played by Yo-Yo Ma, so there's that to look forward to. And there's also a pretty personal story of my own. So here it is, my TED talk on what you learn when you listen closely.

Presenter: Please welcome, Hrishikesh Hirway.

(Applause)

Hrishikesh: I've been in love with music my whole life, both as a musician and as a listener. But as a listener, sometimes songs feel a little like houses to me, houses that you can only see from the street. You can stop and admire them from the outside. You can say, "Wow, look the architecture is amazing." You might be able to get a little peek inside through one of the windows, but it's this thing of beauty that you have to appreciate from a distance, because it's not yours. And as a musician, when you put a song out into the world, it can sometimes feel like you're trapped in the backyard of this house that you built. There might be people looking at it, but you never get the chance to show them anything inside. Inside a song, there are all these parts that get imagined and written and recorded that are so full of thought and beauty, but only the people who've made the song ever get to hear those pieces on their own. All those pieces get smushed together in the final version that comes out. Whenever I put out a song, I was always a little sad that no one else was going to get to hear the things that I had heard when I was making it. Let me show you what I mean, here's a clip from a song of mine.

(cello, drums, guitar)

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: OK, what's your experience when you listen to that? You might like it maybe, or you might hate it, or you might say, I don't know dude, it's 20 seconds of a song. What do you want from me?

(Laughter)

Hrishikesh: Which is fair. What I hear is impossible to expect anyone else to hear. It's not just the cello part, and the guitar part, and the drum beat. It's also all the things that I lived through in order for that music to exist. So in 2014, I started a show to try and solve this distance between the creator and the audience. I interviewed musicians about one of their songs, and then combined that with the different layers of music that make up that song. I thought this way an artist could bring a listener in and give them a guided tour of this house they made. They could point to the foundation and say, "This is how the song got started." And then, as more and more layers get built on top, eventually the full song gets revealed. The show is called Song Exploder. It's a pod –

(Applause)

Hrishikesh: [laughter] Thank you. Song Exploder is a podcast, and it's also a TV show that I adapted for Netflix. And over the years, I've gotten to talk to some of the biggest musicians in the world about their work, people like Fleetwood Mac, and U2, Lin-Manuel Miranda, Alicia Keys, Billie Eilish, The Roots, and Yo-Yo Ma, and over 200 others. At first, I was really looking at those isolated pieces of music to do the work of revealing the inside of their respective houses. But as I was having conversations with them about their songs, something happened. I realized that there were rooms to be discovered in the conversations themselves, doors that could be opened. And I started to wonder, "Could I try listening to people the way that I was trying to listen to music?" Because when someone tells you something, just like with the song, there can be all these layers within it. There can be all this context that you're missing as the person out on the street, outside of the house. So to get inside, I had to listen for those moments and those clues, where there was more to be discovered, where there was something below the surface of what was first presented to me. So I borrowed from my music listening brain. And now when I'm in a conversation, this is what I try to do. Be open to new ideas, stop multitasking. Let the other person know that you're engaged, and do it without taking your focus away from them and

turning it onto you. Because of making Song Exploder, I now listen to a much wider range of music than I used to. When I was younger, I used to actually pride myself on my music snobbery, but nowadays it just feels like I'm potentially cutting myself off from hearing some great ideas. And I think that's a prerequisite when it comes to listening to people too. You have to go into it open-minded and curious, and ready to learn something new. Also, the instinct to multitask is so hard to turn off, but it's so important that you do it. You know, when you're listening to music these days, most of the time, it's something that we do passively. It's in the background, it's the soundtrack to something else that we're doing. And I hate to say it, but between our phones and our smartwatches, and just our own wandering thoughts, it's easy to get distracted, and we tend to listen to other people that way too. But you can't really get immersed if that's the case. Imagine trying to listen to a song while singing a different song in your head, you can't do it or you can't do it well. And you can't fully appreciate what someone else is saying, if you're thinking about something else. I'm also a big believer in the power of nonverbal communication. Like just a simple act of a nod is a way to let the other person know that you're engaged and also invites them to keep going and say more. That kind of intentional engaged silence makes space for them. Sometimes though you do have to actually ask for more, you have to draw them out. But if you can ask for what's below the surface of what they just said, you might unlock some door for them and invite them to go through it with you. That also means turning off the instinct to talk about yourself. I used to think that this was actually the best way to show that I was really listening. Someone would tell me something and I'd say, "Oh man, you know, that reminds me of this thing that happened to me." And then I would tell a whole story of my own. But it's kind of like listening to half a song and then saying, "Oh, you know, this part reminds me of this other song," and then turning that first song off and going and putting on some other song, which is also something I've done.

(Laughter)

Hrishikesh: But you can't get deeper if you lose the moment like that. So it's a challenge to your impatience and to your selfishness to be engaged without making it about you. OK, and so now to ignore the advice about talking about yourself, I would like to talk about myself,

(Laughter)

Hrishikesh: and tell you a little bit about me, and that song that I played you a part of to hopefully illustrate what I'm talking about. Years ago, when I was making my first recordings, I would play my songs over and over and over again in my bedroom. My music career wasn't really something I could talk about with my parents. They were hardworking immigrants whose dream for me had been to become a doctor or a lawyer, but every now and then, I would hear my mom humming one of my songs, just to herself in the kitchen. And that felt like some kind of unspoken approval. And over the years, whenever I would hear my mom humming one of my songs, it made me so happy. Last fall, my mom passed away. And a few weeks after her funeral, I had a dream where I got to see her and talk to her, and visit with her for a little bit. And I woke up filled with longing and sadness, but also gratitude for this moment and this dream. And I ended up writing a song about it.

("Between There and Here" by HRISHIKESH HIRWAY feat. YO-YO MA)

Hrishikesh: In the bridge, I stopped singing for a little bit, and I just hummed the melody.

("Between There and Here" by HRISHIKESH HIRWAY feat. YO-YO MA)

Hrishikesh: I was thinking about my mom, and I wanted to try and represent her in the music in some way.

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: One of the people who I talked to about the song while I was making it was Yo-Yo Ma. I told him, this is what this song is about, and this is what the music is supposed to do in this part. And I asked him, "Do you think that the cello could represent my mom's voice?" And he listened to everything that I said, and then he played those notes.

(Cello)

Hrishikesh: OK, here is everything together again.

("Between There and Here" by HRISHIKESH HIRWAY feat. Yo-Yo Ma)

Hrishikesh: So now, what's your experience when you listen to that from inside the house? Every conversation has the potential to open up and reveal all the layers and layers within it, all those rooms within rooms. And personally, I hope that I can

keep looking for those ways in, so I can experience the depth and the richness of someone else's ideas, every chance I get to hear them. For now, thanks for listening to mine. Thank you.

(Applause)

Hrishikesh: So at the conference, after my talk, I performed my song live, solo, just me and guitar. But I thought here in this episode, I could include the actual recording of the song instead. So here's my song, "Between There and Here," featuring Yo-Yo Ma, in its entirety.

("Between There and Here" by HRISHIKESH HIRWAY feat. YO-YO MA)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net/ted, if you want to watch the video of my talk, which also includes the solo performance of the song. You can also watch the music video. Thanks so much to everyone at TED, especially Rebecca Lichtenfeld, who invited me to speak at the conference. And Chee Pearlman, who worked with me for weeks and weeks to help me put my talk together. If you want to hear more ideas, subscribe to the TED Talks Daily podcast, wherever you listen to Song Exploder. They post a new TED talk on there every weekday. I'm Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening. I mean, thanks for coming to my TED Talk.