

Song Exploder
The Album Leaf - The Outer Banks
Episode 2

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 Outer Banks" - by THE ALBUM LEAF)

Hrishikesh: In this episode, Jimmy LaValle, from The Album Leaf, breaks down his song, "The Outer Banks." The Album Leaf is primarily a solo project but, for The Outer Banks, Jimmy collaborated with members of the Icelandic band Sigur Rós. Coming up, Jimmy strips the song down to its parts and talks about the value of letting go of control during recording. Here's "The Outer Banks" by The Album Leaf on Song Exploder.

("The Outer Banks" - by THE ALBUM LEAF)

(Music fades)

Jimmy: My name is Jimmy LaValle and I do The Album Leaf. Sigur Rós, in 2001, asked me to tour with them. I had never heard of them at the time, and it was when the first record came out, *Ágæ...* yeah I'm not even going to say it, *Ágætis byrjun*, I think is what, is how you say it. Basically, they, I guess they picked up my record that was out at the time in 2001, which was *One Day I'll Be on Time*, at a record shop in Iceland. Then they all heard the record and invited me on tour. 2001 was my first tour with them, 2003 was my second. And, kind of, my band, my backing band for that 2003 European tour, turned out to be, you know, Carrie Maria and Orri from Sigur Rós which is who's on this song. Because of that tour, in 2003, they had their own studio in Iceland, Sigur Rós did, and invited me to come out and make a record at their studio. It's like, "Hey come out to Iceland, record at our studio. Our st-, It's great, it's beautiful, it's, you know, serene, it's magical, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. We have all this amazing equipment." "Sure. Of course I'll come out to Iceland and record a record 'cause that sounds like something I would really like to do" [laughter]. I had just got a loop pedal, Akai HeadRush, which I use to this day on my Rhodes piano. So originally,

(Piano)

Jimmy: The Rhodes loop that you hear that starts the song was basically a loop that I made, you know, with my HeadRush pedal.

(Piano loop)

Jimmy: So that loop is consistent the whole song, basically. And the whole song is, is kind of structured and written underneath that loop. I, with my MicroKorg, just, kind of, came up with a bassline underneath that loop.

(Piano loop and bass)

Jimmy: And I guess I tend to do that a lot, where the baseline is, kind of, more so the melody than the, than the top. That's another thing is obviously, I didn't have my own Rhodes piano that I normally used to record with, out an Iceland. So we borrowed this, actually it was a studio Rhodes, which are the ones with the speakers cabinets attached to the bottom, and I play a stage. And the pedal of the Rhodes squeaked, so that's also in the recording. We tried to like, make it, we tried to bring it up.

(Piano loop with squeak and bass)

Jimmy: [Laughter] And I was, kind of, conscious of it too, when we played it. So I'd be like, "Fuck! It scratch, it squeak- again!" But then I was like, I was into it.

Hrishikesh: So what made you decide to turn it up?

(Rhodes piano and bass fades)

Jimmy: I think it was just 'cause it was really cool. I was just like, "That's cool." I don't know. And it was natural to the take, it was natural to the environment, the memory, I guess, later. Like, you know, listening to these things, this was a song I recorded over 10 years ago, now. It's kind of cool just, like, remember, Oh yeah that's right, I can use my own Rhodes. I couldn't use my stuff. I had to use all of their stuff that was there. Yeah. It was all these things.

(Programmed beat)

Jimmy: During the 2003 tour, I just remember it's like I was always working on this song. Like, programming especially, 'cause I, kind of was a really, like, I was really anal about programming. And I use a program called Fruity Loops, which is what I did the majority of my programming in. And I would basically import those files into Vegas Video and do a lot of my tweaking and, you know, drum tricks within Vegas, 'cause you could pull, you could stretch out waveforms and have it do the, [mouth sounds] like all those, like, weird sounds that you can hear in the programming.

(Programmed beat)

Jimmy: And more Aphex Twin inspired things. Like, even like, Squarepusher and Aphex Twin and a lot of Notwist. And, coincidentally, ever since I changed to, switched to Mac and switched to Pro Tools, I have not done those sounds again 'cause I haven't found, haven't found a way to do 'em.

(Programmed beat)

(Programmed beat fades)

Jimmy: Essentially, when I got to Iceland to make the record, the song was the first half of the song as you hear it. Basically the Rhodes idea, the bass idea and the drums' programming, those three ideas, which is basically how the song starts and what you first hear throughout the first half of it.

(Glockenspiel)

Jimmy: I think the Glockenspiel comes in, kind of, to, kind of, tease on the melody. But that was something that Kieron had added in Iceland.

(Glockenspiel)

Jimmy: I think I was even gone to lunch or something and I came back and Kieron had put this Glockenspiel melody on there, which turned out to be, kind of, the main melody of the song. So there was that melody and then that melody basically turned into, I think, Maria, we just had Maria double it.

(Violin joins)

Jimmy: And I added a Prodigy, Moog on it and it turned out to be this:

(Moog Prodigy synth joins)

Jimmy: Orrie first came in and then heard this song, "Outer Banks," and was like, "Oh! I'll put drums on that."

(Glockenspiel, violin, and synth fade)

(Drums)

Jimmy: And I was really, really surprised by what Orrie did, you know, he, kind of, like, dropped in this beat that's, it makes it feel like $\frac{3}{4}$, what he's playing, and the rhythm that he's, it's just this weird off-rhythm that you, I did not expect at all.

(Drums)

Jimmy: So as you hear by themselves, it doesn't really sound like the beat or the rhythm of the song at all. But it's the way that he laid them down underneath the electronic beats, you know, it just creates this really cool counter, you know, polyrhythm between the two instruments

(Programed beat joins drums)

(Programed beat and drums fade)

Jimmy: Kierton also added a Hammond B3 Organ in there, which I think is really cool and really creepy.

(Organ)

Jimmy: And it's got, like, really honest mistakes because he didn't really know the song. He, kind of, was like, you know, learning it as he was tracking it. He kind of had, like, a starting point and was just like, "Oh okay. This, okay cool." And just kind of, you know, it's in the same key the whole time so he's just, kind of, like, you know, jamming over. And, you know, anticipated it, and, kind of, opened it, and drove it more. You know, with the, kind of, as the song builds, he builds the, you know, the tone of the organ too, which I think is really, really cool. I can play that snip where he kind of, like, goes from, you know, what it's, a nice soft organ and then turns it into kind of a really driven, as a song opens up.

(Organ)

Jimmy: As you can see, you can hear him, kind of, like, "Oh! Oh yeah it happens right there? Let me throw in that bass line now. Oh there it is!" You know? It's kind of, it's kind of, it's really cool and, like, kind of just weird, you know, kind of noodling around a little bit. Trying to find the right thing and then, but it, it really works and it's really, really cool.

(Organ)

Jimmy: I control a lot of what I do when I record, with the exception of, probably these two records. I think I started to get a little bit more controlled after these, after this record. Back then, I didn't really know how to edit like I do now, you know? And, and that's kind of a dangerous thing too because I'm pretty, you know, quick and, and can fix things that are slightly off. You know, I have to, kind of, always, like, let those things go. But when I record with people, you know, I kind of like things to be in the moment, and raw, and a lot of times that works and if it doesn't work,

I can always fix it. So, you know, back then it was just like, it works. There's no like, wrong note. He might not have, like, hit that D on the one, but he got there on, like, the two and a half, or something like that. You know what I mean? Like, not, not, like, right there, but it still is cool, and it's there, and it works, and it's awesome, you know?

(Organ fades)

(Beat)

Jimmy: I can, towards the end of the song, I think, Orrie and Orrie's meter, and the actual drumming, or actual programming of the song and the feel, Orrie really wanted to, you know, push it, and you can hear it to the end of the song. It, kind of, just gets kind of sloppy.

(Beat)

(Beat ends)

Jimmy: But kind of in a really nice way. And I don't think I would have let that slide today. I probably would have gotten in and, like, fixed it and, like, made it, you know, controlled but back then it was just like, "Oh this is rad! This is cool!" You know? I don't think there's been a show we've played since this record came out, that we haven't played this song [laughter].

(Instrumental)

Jimmy: I think still to this day, I mean I have, like, you know, I have a tattoo that's like, like an Iceland, kind of, reference. I am very fond of Iceland and my time that I spent there and I think that some of the melodies, there's a melody in this song that is like, a melody that means something to me. I don't know what it means, I don't know what it is, but I mean, I get, sometimes I get choked up when I play that, when I play that, when I hit that, when we hit that part of the song, I'll be like, "Oh yeah!" It's just like, it just feels like, it's like happy, or like, you know, it just like, "Oh this is, this part is so awesome to me!" You know, it just makes me feel good. It's, kind of, where the Rhodes, kind of, starts to, kind of, like you know, quote, unquote, "solo," you know? And then the melody, that main melody comes back.

(Instrumental with piano solo)

Jimmy: That moment, like, when those things happen together, I'm always just like, "Ah!" You know, there's just something about it, it's just like...[laughter] I don't know what it is, it's not like, my grandma died or my, blah, blah, blah, blah, or whatever. It's just like, "Rah!"

(Instrumental fades)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "The Outer Banks," by The Album Leaf, in its entirety.

("The Outer Banks" - by THE ALBUM LEAF)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net for links to more info on The Album Leaf, as well as Sigur Rós. You'll also find links to the influences that Jimmy mentioned, Aphex Twin, Squarepusher, and The Notwist. You can find all the past episodes of the podcast and subscribe to future episodes at itunes.com/songexploder. You can also find Song Exploder on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. I send out mixtapes on Friday's on my newsletter. You can find links to all of these at songexploder.net. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia from PRX. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway. Thanks for listening.

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