

Song Exploder
The Arcs - Put a Flower in Your Pocket
Episode 55

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: This episode contains explicit language.

("Put a Flower in Your Pocket" by THE ARCS)

Hrishikesh: The Arcs is a new project from Dan Auerbach of The Black Keys. He started the band with some of the musicians and producers he's worked with over the years. For this episode, Dan and his bandmates, Richard Swift and Leon Michels, break down how they made the song "Put a Flower in Your Pocket," and how its title was inspired by a three-year-old girl.

("Put a Flower in Your Pocket" by THE ARCS)

(Music fades)

Dan: This is a live performance. The bass, the guitar, the keyboard, and the drums, it's live. There's no edits. Second take. You know, this thing just happened. We didn't even have to think about it. My name is Dan, and I played bass and sang on this song.

Richard: I'm Richard, and I play drums and some background vocals. We produce a lot of records outside of Arcs, but this was, like, too easy, like somebody has a riff and we just kind of know instantly, like, what to do.

(Guitar)

Richard: And that's Russ.

Dan: Yeah, Russ Pahl, our friend from Nashville. He's great. He's on all those

Richard: [laughter]

Dan: top 10 hits, country hits, but he's so out there, and he loves coming to our studio and making music with us. Russ was on guitar, literally just started playing it. Pretty much we heard that, and then we knew what to do.

Richard: Somebody gets behind the drums, somebody picks up a bass.

Dan: We're all kind of like orbiting around Russ.

(808, drums and guitar)

(Guitar ends)

(808 with drums)

(Music ends)

Dan: It's really nice to kind of be able to mix up the sounds. Playing old instruments, but we can get really modern sounds. The kick drum has like 808s layered underneath.

(808 with drums)

(Music ends)

Richard: One thing that we've started to fall back on is like a lot of like spring reverb hits, that's become our new crash.

Dan: It's a spring reverb unit, an old spring tank that I just bang it on the ground.

(Spring reverb hit, 808, and drums)

Dan: That's become our thing apparently, because we

Richard: Yeah.

Dan: can't really record a track without doing [laughter] it.

Richard: Yeah.

(Spring reverb hit, 808, and drums)

(Music fades)

Dan: We did this on our free time. This was like a project for friends to be together, to just make music. So we never really set up a session. It was always like, "Oh Leon, I'm going to be in New York city for two days. Let's get together."

Leon: I'm Leon, I played keyboards.

(Ace Tone Organ)

Leon: That's an Ace Tone Organ, and it's just two like major seventh chords. The Ace Tone's a little broken, which, you know, it's always good.

Dan: And that's part of the thing that we love about recording, is like the flaws, you know, that's why we like to capture the live performance, because it's the human element that makes it feel special and alive.

(Ace Tone Organ ends)

Dan: If shit is played to a click and perfectly in tune, 9 times out of 10, I'm not going to be interested.

(Ace Tone Organ)

(Ace Tone Organ fades)

Dan: So Leon and I got together, and started throwing ideas out. What are we talking about? And he mentioned something that his daughter said.

Leon: She was just picking flowers, and she's like, "I'm going to put a flower in my pocket."

Dan: [laughter]

Leon: And I felt like, "I'll put a flower in your pocket," that's like a cool, like, Temptations song title or something. So I just gave that to Dan, and then he turned it into something else.

Dan: I just thought about somebody putting like a dime bag in their pocket, and

Leon: No,

Dan: we [laughter] turned it

Leon: it's not a kids song.

Dan: into basically a

Richard: [laughter]

Dan: drug dealer anthem.

Richard: [laughter] Yeah.

(Vocals: "Put a flower in your pocket / If you see them boy you drop it / And you run / Run")

Dan: The way that we record these songs, I'm not testing to see if the key is, like, appropriate for my voice. But sometimes it just works, and this, the chorus was right at the top, where my natural voice wanted to break up a little bit.

(Vocals: "They may pretend they like you / But man's best friend will bite you / Just for fun / For fun / If they're gunning for you boy / You've already won")

Dan: I like to have my voice double tracked a lot of times, so I did that on this song. It has that haziness that I like. Leon and I were writing a song where we had an idea to have this mariachi part instrumentation. So when we went to New York City, the next session, we called up a mariachi band.

Leon: Flor de Toloache.

Dan: And they came to the studio, and they showed up, and it turned out to be an all-girl band. We didn't know ahead of time so we, you know, we thought that was interesting, but then they played and they were great. They came up with parts really quickly, and then we had put them on another song, and then we put them on another song. And then I said, "Hey, can you guys sing?" And they say, "Yeah."

Richard: "Yeah, we can sing."

Dan: "we can sing."

Richard: "Of course, come on."

Dan: And then, I put them on the song, and they fucking killed it.

(Vocals: "Put a flower in your pocket / If you see them boy you drop it / And you run / You run")

Dan: We use fuzz bass to mimic, kind of, trombone parts, brass parts.

Richard: Yeah.

Dan: Just replace those with fuzz [laughter] bass.

Richard: [laughter]

Dan: And that's what we're doing.

(Fuzz bass)

(Fuzz bass ends)

(Guitar)

Dan: This song happened so quickly, and I don't know just, it felt so right on, it's,

Richard: Yeah.

Dan: like we couldn't record it fast enough. When it happens like that, it's exciting. That natural feel that Swift and Leon and I have when we play together, it's special. It's a special thing and we're just starting to grab a hold of it, and make sense of it.

(Guitar)

(Guitar ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Put a Flower in Your Pocket," by The Arcs, in its entirety.

("Put a Flower in Your Pocket" by THE ARCS)

Hrishikesh: For more on The Arcs, visit songexploder.net. There's a link to buy this song, and you can watch the music video, which is really, really good. You can find all of 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 Fridays 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.