

Song Exploder
The Decemberists - Once In My Life
Episode 143

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.

("Once In My Life" by THE DECEMBERISTS)

Hrishikesh: The Decemberists are a Grammy-nominated five-piece band from Portland, Oregon. They released their first album in 2001, and since then they've put out seven more, including the 2018 album *I'll Be Your Girl*. In this episode, singer and guitarist Colin Meloy breaks down The Decemberists' song "Once In My Life" - from his first demo, to the final tracks they recorded in the studio.

("Once In My Life" by THE DECEMBERISTS)

Colin: My name is Colin Meloy, and I play in the band, The Decemberists.

(Music fades)

Colin: I was, you know, in one of those moments between songs, not really feeling great about stuff I was working on. I felt blocked, frustrated, not really feeling like anything was coming. You get to those moments like, "I'll never write another song again, like I've tapped out, that's all I have in me." And often I'll find if I'm stuck, you remind yourself that you just need an inbreath. And an inbreath can be watching a movie, reading a book, going for a walk. You know, just somehow taking in rather than putting out. So I decided I'd try to learn a Richard Thompson song, try to receive something and see what it creates.

("1952 Vincent Black Lightning" by RICHARD THOMPSON)

Colin: It was "Vincent Black Lightning."

("1952 Vincent Black Lightning" by RICHARD THOMPSON)

Colin: I loved the song and I wanted to learn it. It's basically the story of like a motorcyclist who falls in love with this girl, red-haired Molly, but he's like an outlaw.

("1952 Vincent Black Lightning" by RICHARD THOMPSON)

Colin: It's a great song. But I just could not play the thing.

(Music ends)

Colin: It's kind of a fingerstyle thing in a weird tuning. So I spent most of the time just trying to figure out what the tuning was.

(Guitar)

Colin: And so instead of learning the song, I just started strumming and moving my fingers around in this tuning, and the chord progression came out.

(Guitar)

Colin: This is just an iPhone recording. It felt really cool to me, really ringing open chords, open strings. And then the chord changes are really simple. And then I just started singing along to it. But it's kind of nonsense, sort of embarrassing to listen to.

(Vocals with guitar)

Colin: That "what if I" thing was the initial idea, and then free association off of that, "once in my life" came out the next time around.

(Vocals with guitar)

Colin: So I was really attached to the chord progression, and then that melody line over the top, it felt like there was something there to work off of.

(Music ends)

Colin: I think one of the best descriptions of songwriting is in Winnie the Pooh. And I discovered it, reading it to my kid. He's making up a song, Winnie the Pooh does, and he's going along, it's got a full verse and he gets stuck. And he tells himself, "Well, what if I just go back and start it again, and maybe I'll trick myself into whatever word will come next. And then I'll have a song." And actually, it kind of rang a bell because I feel like that's how I tend to work, I'll just repeat something over and over until I find myself accidentally going into the next line

[laughter]. You're the only obstacle really, and often if you remove that obstacle you'll land somewhere kind of interesting. I guess if you told me to sing, "Once in my life," you know, as a prompt, I would say, "Oh god, if something would just go right."

(Guitar)

Colin: So I tricked myself into singing, "Once in my life would something go right."

(Vocals with guitar: "Could just something go / Could just something go right?")

(Guitar)

Colin: And in the in-between time, I had found that other chord in there and found what I consider to be the chorus to kind of finish out the complete idea.

(Vocals with guitar: "I've been waiting all my life / All my life")

(Guitar)

Colin: After having done that, I remember thinking, "Is this still a fragment? Does this song need a different chorus?" It's certainly lyrically the shortest thing I've ever written. But I felt like the over-the-top-ness of those three lines was enough to compel the whole thing forward. And in fact, the more I thought about it, the more interesting it was to have it be just that one singular sentiment. Any other words would just dilute it. I thought the interesting thing about it was its simplicity.

(Guitar ends)

Colin: Typically I'll finish a song, and I'll play it for Carson, my wife. She's always the first listener and my first editor and critic. I remember playing it for her, and then being like, "Oh, for once in my life, could just something go right?" "Can I sing that? Does that make sense?" I mean, look at me, I'm like a professional musician, I have two wonderful kids, I have my wife, I'm fairly happy [laughter], I feel like so many things have gone right for me and I have so much gratitude for that. Where do I get off saying, "Oh, for once in my life, could something go right?" And we talked about it a little bit and I still believe in the end, it's a universal enough feeling, I think it's something that everybody should, regardless of their situation, should give themselves license to really throw themselves into

every once in a while. It's sort of gloriously self-indulgent in a really ham-handed way. But I also feel like it's genuine. I grew up on loving Morrissey.

("Heaven Knows I'm Miserable Now" by THE SMITHS)

Colin: And, "Heaven knows I'm miserable now / I was looking for a job and then I found a job / And heaven knows I'm miserable now," you know, one of the greatest lyrics of all time.

("Heaven Knows I'm Miserable Now" by THE SMITHS)

Colin: So the next step was making this song, which is basically three chords, and two sentences into a song that felt like a journey took place. That there was a beginning, a middle, and an end. So I played solo acoustic for everybody while we were on tour, and we worked it out in soundcheck. There's a handful of songs on the record that we actually kind of, you know, road-tested, and "Once In My Life" was one of them.

(Drums sticks tap)

(Guitar)

Colin: It was really a puzzle, an exercise in creating build out of something where there is just one line, you know. So it was all about how the guitar starts, where the bass comes in.

(Bass joins)

Colin: Each little level, how it builds to its crescendo, peaks, draws back and then comes back out.

(Vocals and drums join: "All my life / My life / All my life")

(Music fades)

Colin: As I was just playing it and playing it over and over trying to find the right sounds, it reminded me of this Yo La Tengo song called "Barnaby, Hardly Working," which is one of my favorite songs of all time.

("Barnaby, Hardly Working" by YO LA TENGO)

Colin: So we are playing it live, and I felt moved one night to sing the last two lines of “Barnaby, Hardly Working.” “Lays down by the river, face down by the river.”

(Vocals, guitar, bass, and drums: “Lays down beside the river / Face down beside the river”)

Colin: I thought it was an interesting coda.

(Music ends)

Colin: The arrangement we had done in the live version was very kind of folk rock. And it felt like it was cool but it also was following patterns that I felt like we had gone to over and over again, sort of starts with a strummy guitar, build with bass and drums, B3 Hammond, and then like ripping guitar, which is all well and good, and, you know, it’s something we could have continued on, and I’m sure some people may have preferred that, but I think at that point, that felt a little tired to us. So I knew we needed to try something different. And I figured working with a different producer, and working in a different studio is the way to go. And so, guy named John Congleton produced this record. And we recorded this at a studio called Halfling. A guy from Nike Skateboarding, this guy Sandy Bodecker, took this old warehouse that was in northwest Portland and turned it into this amazing massive multi-use art space. And one of the parts of that was a studio. This place also has like an event space, it has an indoor skate bowl, and actually the drums on this song are beautifully spacious, and they were recorded in the skate bowl. We set up the drums inside the skate bowl and then mic’d it.

(Drums)

(Drums end)

Colin: The phaser? That’s all John Congleton. He does a lot of sneaky things, I think, in the mix. A lot of like flange and phase and distortion that he threw in there, that’s not really common for us in our mixes, so it was kind of novel and neat to hear it.

(Drums)

(Drums fade)

Colin: The other members of The Decemberists are Jenny Conlee, Nate Query, Chris Funk and John Moen. And so, Jenny had brought in some synthesizers. And I just remember walking into the main room, and Jenny was going through

patches and seeing what would stick, and she hit this sort of obliterative synth pad.

(Synth with drums)

(Synth with drums fade)

Colin: And we all just went “Yes! That’s it.” I think there’s something really sweetly sort of nostalgic about it. I mean, wholeheartedly, admittedly like kind of John Hughes movie. And it was sort of like, “Wow, do we really want to do that? We haven’t done that before.” But that matched with the sentiment of the song, it just seemed appropriate, and I feel like we had created this environment where we had license to really try some different things, and that was certainly one of them.

(Synth with drums)

(Synth with drums end)

Colin: So at that point, we were taking that tack. And it was clear that was the direction. Like a ripping Chris Funk guitar solo did not make remotely any sense anymore. And so, he, searching around for something, landed on this chorus-y guitar.

(Guitar)

Colin: Which fit in really nicely with the synth.

(Synth joins)

(Guitar)

Colin: Yeah, so that’s a baritone guitar. That was Jenny’s idea. Because the only thing that’s doing anything melodic is the synth. And it needed some more melodic information and a baritone guitar felt like the right timbre to do that.

(Vocals with guitar: “Oh, for once in my / Oh, for once in my life”)

Colin: That’s Nora singing backing vocals.

(Vocals: "Could just something go / Could just something go right?")

Colin: We have two background singers who've been with us last couple records, that's Kelly Hogan and Nora O'Connor. That was a really deliberate part of the build, like when those backing vocals should come in, when the three-part should come in.

(Vocals: "I've been waiting all my life")

Colin: And then, they break away and start just repeating the phrase.

(Vocals: "Oh, for once in my / Oh, for once in my life")

Colin: And so, all of a sudden, you get a kind of a new lease, a little bit, on that idea. It then breaks apart and all of a sudden that line becomes a refrain, and then I'm sort of extemporizing over it.

(Vocals with guitar: "All my life (Oh, for once in my) / My life (Oh, for once in my life) / All my life (Oh, for once in my) / All my life (Oh, for once in my life)")

(Guitar)

Colin: "Oh, for once in my life could just something go right?" I honestly do think when you feel that way, it is all-encompassing, it is that feeling can erase everything else.

(Guitar)

Colin: To feel that put-upon, even if it's, you realize you're blowing things way out of proportion, I think it's okay [laughter] to do that, you know? There's something therapeutic about the celebration of feeling that sorry for yourself. And as somebody who tends to do that [laughter], sometimes I need to be able to celebrate it.

(Synth with guitar)

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Once In My Life," by The Decemberists, in its entirety.

("Once In My Life" by THE DECEMBERISTS)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net to learn more about The Decemberists, and for a link to buy or stream this song.

Next time on Song Exploder, Blood Orange.

("Saint" by BLOOD ORANGE)

Hrishikesh: This episode was produced and edited by me, along with Christian Koons, with help from Olivia Wood and Nick Song. The illustration for this episode was done by Carlos Lerma, you can see that on the Song Exploder website too. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a collective of fiercely independent podcasts. You can learn about all of our shows at radiotopia.fm. I'd love to know your thoughts on this episode. You can find Song Exploder on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter @SongExploder. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.

("Saint" by BLOOD ORANGE)

(Music fades)