

Song Exploder
The Magnetic Fields - Andrew in Drag
Episode 51

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.

("Andrew in Drag" by THE MAGNETIC FIELDS)

Stephin: I'm Stephin Merritt, and I am the main member of The Magnetic Fields. I don't actually remember writing this song because I write songs in bars. Generally, these are gay bars, patronized by men of a certain advanced age who prefer to listen to disco music in the background while they drink cocktails. So it was in one such bar that I was hanging out, and I don't remember what happened next, but when I woke up the next morning I was at home. Looked in my songwriting notebook, and in fact I'd written a song, and it was "Andrew in Drag."

("Andrew in Drag" by THE MAGNETIC FIELDS)

Hrishikesh: Stephin Merritt has fronted the band The Magnetic Fields for over twenty-five years. In this episode, he'll break down the song "Andrew in Drag" from the 2012 album, *Love at the Bottom of the Sea*, even though he doesn't actually remember writing it. After releasing his triple-album *69 Love Songs* in 1999 to huge acclaim, Stephin stopped using synthesizers for the next three Magnetic Fields albums. Coming up, he talks about why he stopped, and why he started using them again, and why he doesn't write down his melodies.

("Andrew in Drag" by THE MAGNETIC FIELDS)

(Music ends)

Stephin: My home life is so busy that I can only make myself work in a bar or in a café. I find it very difficult to write music without other music playing because there's generally music playing in my head like a schizophrenic. I have voices in my head, and they're singing, and they're generally singing commercial jingles or songs that I don't particularly like. Often, it's the "Bumble Bee Tuna" jingle from the early seventies.

("Yum, Yum Bumble Bee Tuna" by BUMBLE BEE SEAFOODS)

Stephin: "Yum, yum, Bumblebee Bumblebee Tuna / I love Bumblebee Bumblebee Tuna," you know? I wish it were a little less in my head since I heard it in 1972, but I guess it turned me into this, sort of, songwriter I am, which is somebody who almost entirely writes songs in cafés and bars, getting good and drunk essentially [laughter], not really. I can't do anything after three cocktails, it's not like I'm a fiendish alcoholic. I wish I were so that I could get a lot more work done, but I'm kind of actually a lightweight at this point.

I have to say that it tends to be the good ones that I don't remember writing, because I guess I spent a lot of time on them, and felt that I was on a roll. So I would rather spend the money on a cab home than go home without finishing the song. I don't remember thinking about the plot of the song: a straight guy whose best friend does a drag show on a lark, and the straight guy falls madly in love with his best friend's drag character. I don't remember thinking about that, but fortunately I remembered the melody.

(Vocals: "I don't know why I even went, it's really not my bag / Just thought it might be funny to see Andrew in drag / The moment he walked on that stage my tail began to wag / Wag like a little wiener dog for Andrew in drag / Andrew in drag, Andrew in drag / Andrew in drag, yeah!")

Stephin: It's not really clear to me how I remember the melodies. I deliberately don't write it down because I want it to be memorable just from looking at the words. And if I don't remember it from looking at the words, then other people won't either. I was bored with the expectations of being a synthesizer band, so I put away the synthesizers for a few records. After the no synths trilogy of the previous Magnetic Fields records, I wanted *Love at the Bottom of the Sea* to be a triumphant return to electronics, because there were new instruments that could make sounds that had not been heard before, and in patterns that had not been heard before.

(Dewanatron)

Stephin: This, in particular, was the Dewanatron Keyed Melody Gin, invented by Brian Duwan and his cousin, Ivan.

(Dewanatron)

(Dewanatron ends)

Stephin: It makes melodies without you playing it, because it has 12 little wooden keys you can depress. But you're not making suggestions of what the notes will be, you're just making suggestions of what the algorithm will be.

(Dewanatron)

Stephin: I'm increasingly into adding chaos into the mix. We've heard all the notes, and I'm interested in the textures that will come from sounds that are not necessarily musically traditional sequences of notes.

(Dewanatron)

(Beat)

Stephin: There's no live drums on the record, except for tambourine. Real drums were verboten. I have a lot of drum machines and that rhythm unit sound actually went through a, kind of, walkie talkie plugin. I like things that sound different every time.

(Beat)

(Beat fades)

Stephin: I wanted this particular record to sound like a, kind of, demented party and I knew that all of the songs were going to heavily feature electronics. What I didn't know was that I was going to keep piling hand played instruments on top of the electronics.

(Ukulele)

Stephin: When we go to Germany, I always have to make clear to German journalists that we're not a lo-fi band. I don't record the guitar really, really badly, it's a ukulele. They don't have ukuleles in Germany, so they think it's a horribly out of tune, very badly recorded guitar. Ukulele is my default instrument. Ukuleles have an enormous variety, partly because so many of them are not all that well-made.

(Ukulele)

Stephin: Basically, the idea was ukulele sounding intentionally dinky on the verses, and then 12-string guitar comes in sounding full ecstatic and authoritative on the choruses.

(Vocals with guitar: "Andrew in drag, Andrew in drag / Andrew in drag, yeah!")

(Guitar)

Stephin: There was a lot of instruments that come in on the chorus. In each of the three choruses, everybody plays something different, which is why each chorus is a soaring explosion of joy, and each one is different from the others.

(Guitars)

(Piano and strings join)

(Piano)

Stephin: What mystifies me about the song is, why I have all of the lines have the same rhyme. Every single rhyme in the song is -ag. Why did I think that was a good idea? I don't know. It is unusual. If it's called a mono rhyme, it's not that unusual. It's not unusual enough to not have a name. The unusual decisions for "Andrew in Drag" are the fact that I'm singing as a straight person, where ordinarily I leave the sexual preference, and even the gender, of the protagonist to the listener's imagination. I don't know that I have very many songs, in which I'm explicitly a straight character.

(Vocals: "A pity she does not exist, a shame he's not a fag / The only girl I ever loved was Andrew in drag")

Stephin: I hear the word fag a lot. I hear a lot of gay men saying fag. I don't hear it from straight men very often anymore, but I think it was a good way of showing that this is not necessarily a person who doesn't care much about what the gender is anyway. This is an upsetting situation for our protagonist. If Andrew were susceptible then the protagonist would happily have some sort of intercourse slash romance with Andrew's drag character, but Andrew being straight also would not be amenable to that.

(Ukulele)

Stephin: I was worried that it would be seen as antagonistic. But in fact, it seems to have struck a chord with straight men in a way that I didn't expect it to. It's been covered by a few different singers, who, as far as I can tell, are straight men who find the song to be about forbidden love,

(Ukulele ends)

Stephin: I guess.

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Andrew in Drag," by The Magnetic Fields, in its entirety.

("Andrew in Drag" by THE MAGNETIC FIELDS)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net for more info on this song, and on The Magnetic Fields, including a picture of Stephin's Dewanatron and a picture of his studio. 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 this show on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram @SongExploder. Next time on Song Exploder, Deradoorian.

("A Beautiful Woman" by DERADOORIAN)

Hrishikesh: 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.

("A Beautiful Woman" by DERADOORIAN)

(Music ends)