

Song Exploder
The Microphones - I Want Wind to Blow
Episode 13

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.

("I Want Wind to Blow" by THE MICROPHONES)

Hrishikesh: The Fall of 2001, Phil Elverum released the album *The Glow, Pt 2* on K Records. *Pitchfork* named it the Best Album of the Year. In this episode, Phil recounts how he created the first song on the record at Dub Narcotic Studio. He spoke with me from his home in Anacortes, Washington, about his love of being alone in the studio, evoking nature through music, and where the name The Microphones comes from. Plus, we'll hear from Calvin Johnson, founder of the legendary record label, K Records.

("I Want Wind to Blow" by THE MICROPHONES)

(Music fades)

Phil: My name's Phil Elverum, and I made a bunch of records under the name, The Microphones. And now I make records under the name Mount Eerie. This song is called "I Want Wind to Blow," and it's the first song on my record, *The Glow, Pt 2*, which came out in 2001. I recorded it in Dub Narcotic Studio in Olympia, Washington on January 1st, 2001. I just noticed that when I dug out the track sheet. I just recorded all the time. That was my life back then. I lived a block from the studio and I had a key. So I would just, kind of, be in there whenever it was available. So Dub Narcotic Studio is sort of the in-house studio of K records in Olympia. And I moved to Olympia ostensibly for college, but I only lasted two quarters there, because I just got so involved in all the other cool music and punk stuff that was going on downtown. Calvin Johnson invited me in to work in the studio, and gave me a key for some reason, I still don't know why. But I had access to this amazing studio, and I would just be in there at all hours doing experiments. I was obsessed.

Calvin: I mean, it was great that he was able to work with all this stuff, and make things work for himself. My name is Calvin Johnson. I work with K. I mean, the studio's

just there. People are doing all kinds of things in there. There's recording, there's people doing silk screening, you know, it's just a room full of stuff happening. I said to Phil, I said, "Here's the key to the Dub Narcotic Studio." I just figured if he didn't know what he was doing, he was figuring it out, and he's just, he's good at it.

Phil: That's kind of how I continue to work to this day, is just, you know, making mistakes and discovering crazy accidents.

Calvin: Once the record was done, I was like, "Woah, this shit's good."

(Guitar)

Phil: I remember writing this song in Philadelphia mid-tour in my friend Mirah's parents' upstairs bedroom. I just have a distinct memory of waking up, noodling around in the morning, and coming up with the melody of like [sings guitar part]. It just happened. Sometimes it just comes out. This song is kind of an exception because, customarily, I don't have a song when I start recording. You know, it's based on experimentation in the studio. And I probably had played a version of it a few times on that tour. So I came home with this pre-formed thing.

(Guitar)

Phil: When I recorded it, I decided to break it down into just the low G's on one track.

(Guitar)

Phil: And then, the higher melody on another track.

(Guitar)

Phil: So I was kind of figuring out, it would sound unnatural in a way, but interesting. So that's kind of what I was doing with this guitar part. I've always been really into utilizing the stereo spectrum. Music comes out in stereo. People listen to music in stereo. There's a lot of opportunity there to play with spatial stuff and two speakers. There's two speakers everywhere. It's amazing.

(Guitar)

Phil: I used to have a musical group with a girlfriend called The Thunderclouds.

(The Thunderclouds cover of "Don't Worry Baby" by BEACH BOYS)

Phil: It was like a Beach Boys cover band, and we would just figure out Beach Boys songs, break them into two-part harmonies. And, you know, we played a couple of shows around Olympia. It was very fun. So the first words in the song are, "The Thunderclouds broke up,"

(Music ends)

Phil: which is about us breaking up as a couple, and also about the changing weather. You know, it's multiple levels of meaning about weather being a metaphor for my emotion. So that was kind of what all my songs were about back then, and [laughter] arguably still are.

(Vocals: "The Thunderclouds / Broke up / And the rain dried up, the lightning let up / The clacking shutters just shut up")

Phil: And then, there's three other vocal tracks, which only come in on these, like, few words that make this kind of elongated chord.

(Vocals: "I want wind to blow")

Phil: Yeah, I've always recorded analog and I still do. So, in preparation for this interview, I had planned to go down to Dub Narcotic and make digital backups of the reels, which I have never done. They're still just sitting there, but because they're 12, 13 plus years old, the reels of tape are deteriorating. There's a thing that happens with certain tape of a certain generation, I guess, where the adhesive starts to break down. And when you rewind it or fast-forward it, or play it on a tape machine, it doesn't play properly. But there's a workaround where if you bake them at a low temperature for like two days, then you get one or two more passes out of them on the machine. So we were able to salvage the tracks for this interview.

(Drums)

Phil: I'm playing all the instruments here. I guess I prefer it that way. I get kind of crazy when I'm deep in a recording project, where I'm not really communicating in words [laughter] or anything. I know, I'm so immersed in this sound idea that if I had to talk about it to someone else or tell them what I'm trying to do, that it

would throw me off, I think, which leads to a lot of logistical complications running back and forth to hit the record button [laughter].

(Walking in the studio)

Phil: And the sound you can hear is me walking, getting the headphones on, and walking back after I finished the piano. The alternative is me going back and erasing all of the sounds of me walking over to the piano, walking back to press stop. I like the sound of human life going on in between the, you know, the quiet parts between performances. You know, there's just two piano tracks, but I put the mic, like, 50 feet away, and just, like, slammed the notes down, let them resonate in the room. So they feel huge.

(Piano)

Phil: The song is about tumultuous feelings. This song sort of builds and morphs into this explosion. And I feel like that's maybe where the power of this song comes from, is this tension that is building for the whole thing. There's this, like, pulse. And finally, there's this release.

(Piano ends)

Phil: I had this hollow body electric guitar, this Kay guitar. I was aiming for, basically, the sound of water.

(Guitar)

Phil: You can hear the pick sound almost. I mic'd the strings, as well as an amp. Two different delay rates on the right side and the left side, to sort of create this disorienting, watery waves, hitting each other effect.

("Vocals join: "There's no ship on my sea")

Phil: It's the last line I sing and so I go out to sea with the instruments.

(Scraping sound)

Phil: This recording is me alone in the studio, scraping the bottom [laughter] of a snare drum. I heard that sound first in my head, and I was like, "I need this, like, weird kind of scrape," without thinking about snare, or thinking about whatever it

was that could make it. And then, I'll look around the studio. "Where can I find those sounds in this room?"

(Scraping sound ends)

Phil: I was going for this thing for this song of new characters appearing all the time and then vanishing.

(Accordion)

Phil: I wanted there to be people poking their heads, not people, instruments poking their heads in the door.

(Accordion)

Phil: I remember discovering that I loved recording. That breakthrough when I was in high school, getting to record for the first time. We had a simple 8-track studio set up in the record store where I worked. And just staying after work and experimenting, realizing what was possible with recording. And also realizing that so much of orthodox recording ideology [laughter] is about capturing a thing perfectly. And I just was never interested by that because it seems like all of the other ways around that perfect sound are much more, you know, there's a vast world of possibilities. So I guess I, maybe, developed a tendency to work in the opposite direction of trying to do it the right way. In fact, every time I've ever recorded a drum set, I've probably put the mic's in a different place, just because they're going to sound enough like drums, and why not have them sound characteristic and new if possible. That's why my project was called *The Microphones* at first, was because it wasn't even songs, really. It was just sound and recording. And the early songs were literally about recording, about gear. Sort of in a metaphorical way, like my heart is the preamp or whatever. You know [laughter], I was in high school. So lay off, man [laughter]. I loved recording and that was how I got into doing this, not because I wanted to write songs. Of course, I've developed a love for writing songs since then. But yeah, it was that breakthrough of self-recording, which changed everything for me.

(Accordion)

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "I Want Wind to Blow," by The Microphones, in its entirety.

("I Want Wind to Blow" by THE MICROPHONES)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net to see Phil Elverum's original recording chart from January 1st 2001. You'll also find links to buy this song, and to learn more about The Microphones, Mount Eerie, and Dub Narcotic 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. 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.

© 2020 Translucence