

**Song Exploder**  
**The Mountain Goats - Cadaver Sniffing Dog**  
**Episode 159**

Thao: 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 Thao Nguyen.

*("Cadaver Sniffing Dog" by THE MOUNTAIN GOATS)*

Thao: John Darnielle has been writing and recording songs as The Mountain Goats since 1991. He's released 17 studio albums, and also written two books of fiction. In April 2019, the Mountain Goats released the album *In League with Dragons*, and in this episode, John Darnielle breaks down a song from it, called "Cadaver Sniffing Dog." We'll hear his original demo, and then, hear how the song evolved at Blackbird Studios in Nashville, with the help of John's band, some incredible session musicians, and producer Owen Pallett. Also, stick around after the song to hear more from John in our new segment, Instrumental.

*("Cadaver Sniffing Dog" by THE MOUNTAIN GOATS)*

John: My name is John Darnielle. I am the singer from The Mountain Goats.

*(Music fades out)*

John: I keep little notebooks. They're not that much bigger than a credit card. And I've been carrying those around for over 10 years. The notebook has grocery lists, and it has notes I take if I'm watching a movie. But there's one page that just has song titles. I just write them when I get an idea. And "Cadaver Sniffing Dog" had been around for a while. I think it probably came at an airport. I'm in airports rather a lot and they have drug-sniffer dogs, and you're not allowed to pet them, and it sucks [laughter] because you want to give the dog a little pet, let them know it's doing a good job [laughter]. They have to wear little yellow jackets that say like, "Drug sniffing dog" or something like that. And I had crime stuff in my brain, you know. So I had the title, and I'm reasonably certain that it was Christmas Day. And I just started riffing with the guitar.

*(Demo guitar)*

John: The way that I write, usually, is I'll be playing a riff and I will just sort of ad-lib a line and go from there. And if this song is going to have that title, I was like, you know, crime scene will be the obvious place.

*(Demo vocals along with guitar: "Hustle up the spiral stair / See if anyone's left up there")*

John: So I had the riff, I had the couplet. And then I put down the guitar.

*(Demo ends)*

John: And I sit there with my pen and notebook asking myself what happens next that makes narrative sense. So I asked myself whose voice is this? Who's speaking? And I said, "Well it's a crime scene investigator of some kind, or, you know, a detective. Detective, it's a detective, right?" What's he describing? Then I write a couplet in the same metre.

*(Demo vocals along with guitar: "Teams on the scene from several stations / Everybody adjust your expectations")*

John: And I went back and forth like that between the notebook and the guitar asking myself questions that allow the rhyme to further explicate the line just before it.

*(Demo vocals along with guitar: "Stray clumps of hair and blood and brain / Fragments of bone in the drain")*

John: The speaker is looking at a scene of utter devastation. He's inviting the investigation to continue and insisting there must be dead bodies in here. That's how bad things are; there can be no question that if there's anyone in here, they're dead. And I am interested in what it's like to be that speaker, what it feels like to inhabit that speaker's skin for three minutes. It's a theatrical experience, essentially.

*(Demo vocals along with guitar: "Rookies trying to keep the airway clear / But the damage is too severe")*

John: Sometimes the chorus takes a long time. But I knew I like the phrase too much not to absolutely put it to work in the chorus.

*(Demo vocals along with guitar: "Bring in the cadaver sniffing dog")*

John: What a great thing to say [laughter]! Like I wanted to sing it a bunch of times.

*(Demo vocals along with guitar: "Bring in the cadaver sniffing dog")*

John: And I had the idea for the vocal harmony also.

*(Demo harmonized vocals along with guitar: "Bring in the cadaver sniffing dog")*

John: And I really enjoy getting elaborate with the backing vocals in Garageband.

*(Demo harmonized vocals along with guitar: "Bring in the cadaver sniffing dog")*

John: And I remember it was nearing dinner time, and both kids are swarming me. But I kind of liked the way that the tempo and the pace in the song reflects that I'm trying to get the idea finished as quickly as I can.

*(Demo ends)*

John: So this is one of those songs where unless I tell you what it's about, you're not going to know, right? We're looking at a wrecked room, bodies that are hardly recognizable, where you have to bring in a dog to determine where the body is in the first place. There's nothing in that that can telegraph to you what I'm thinking about is a relationship where there's nothing left to save. It's a collapsing relationship song, but it's also in the guise of a noir of a detective crime scene moment. That's the metaphor. And you can take the story at face value. But my assumption is that there will be some listeners who will intuit that, who will go, "Oh, this song is actually about a relationship in which none of the motivating quality that brought these people together survives." This is a person checking for signs of life in something that is visibly dead. And that's always been one of the saddest things to think of for me. It's like when relationships collapse, a thing that used to seem worth preserving no longer seems worth saving to one or both parties. And if that's true for one party, it's necessarily true for both parties. It's just that one has the wrong idea about it, right? And that to me is a scene of great pathos. My parents divorced when I was 5, and my world cracked open when that happened. It was very, you know, I remember the moment they told me. The first time I became aware that people separate romantically, it was a catastrophic moment for me personally. It was just horrifying to me because I had never thought of it before that. It was like, when you're 5, you don't think, well, maybe one day you won't live with one of these people [laughter]". It's like you don't, that wasn't on the table for me and so I think, you know, I always return to that. And so, me and my band: Matt Douglas, Jon Wurster and Peter Hughes, and Owen Pallett producing, met at Blackbird. And we tracked this one first in the session because I wanted to make sure we

got it right. So the setup is John and Peter, drummer and bassist, are out in the big room with a baffle between them.

*(Drums along with bass)*

John: The rhythm section is very deeply in the pocket on this track [laughter], you know, it is locked in. Owen was really encouraging us to underplay a lot. So we went with something like kraut-rock where it's the drums and the bass play exactly what they play, and they play it in a line. And me and Matt are playing the exact same acoustic guitar part.

*(Acoustic guitar)*

John: You know, often when you write something and you play, you sort of try to dress it up a little bit, play it as well as you could. But it sounded so nice to just like have Owen go up and like, "Play less. Let the song be itself. We can add more stuff later."

*(Drums and bass rejoin)*

John: And so you get much more motoric-styled basics, which actually give you the freedom to turn the next layer into whatever you want.

*(Music ends)*

John: We tracked by ourselves for the first two, or maybe three days? And that's when the other musicians came in and did other stuff.

*(Electric guitar)*

John: There was Thomas Gill who's such a great musician. I do not remember which electric he was playing. But I have this pedal, it's by a company called Farm, and it's a distortion pedal, it's an overdrive. And the reason it's called Farm is the guy who makes them is a farmer and he sells these pedals to help pay for like grain and stuff to keep the farm going. And he advertised one as, "Jerry Garcia '78 Tones." I am the target market for this pedal [laughter]. You know I saw that and was like, "Really, you have a specific Dead tour whose tones you're trying to emulate, and it's pre-'81? Then I am with you." So I said "Thomas, try this pedal." And he did and he liked it as well as I did, the sound of it is real nice.

*(Electric guitar with pedal)*

John: And then I said, "Well, you know, I've always thought we'd have a guitar solo here." And I want to play guitar solos desperately, but I am not a good enough musician to actually properly solo. And so we handed the guitar to Thomas and let him loose.

*(Electric guitar solo)*

John: With a guitar solo, you can be basically playing scales over the changes. But another thing you can do is have something to express the aggression of the song or to elaborate on the lyric, or to take the sentiment of the lyric to a place that language can't take it to by itself, which is what I think Thomas does in this one. That he just takes the violence inherent in the scene and takes it to this sort of no wave, downtown New York early 80's kind of place.

*(Electric guitar solo)*

John: He's rhythmic but it's kind of choppy. We were all going nuts. The thing that's fun about having people play solos in the studio is everybody else gets to sit back and be in awe of the other musician right? And that is so fun.

*(Electric guitar ends)*

John: This is our second album we made at Blackbird in Nashville. And one of the big reasons to record there is if you want to hire session musicians to play on your record, you will have them in any degree you want, and you can have them in half an hour. And I knew that I was going to want to hire Robert Bailey, he and his dudes are the guys doing the actual backing vocals. And session musicians are the true stars of this industry in my view. They can do anything. Every last one of those 4 guys are better singers than me by incomprehensible orders of magnitude. And it's very hard to learn how to go, "You know that's good, but if you did something a little different." Because they're so good that you want to just say yes to everything they do. But I had already written the part on this one. And so we sat around and listened to the demo and they said, "So is that what you want us to do?" I said, "Yes that's what I want, but I want you guys to sing it in 4 part," I think mine was in 3 part harmony on the demo. And so he stands there in the tracking room with his guys and he goes, "Okay so, "bring in the cad- [sung], who wants that one?" "I'll take that one." "How about you try this, "bring in the cadaver [sung]"?" "No no, there's a unison there." And he looks at

me and he goes, "Do you mind a unison, or do you want all harmony?" And I say, "Well I want what you think sounds good." "I'll try a unison." So they get an idea together and then they all go and stand in front of the mics. And what they did is they took what I wrote and made it 3D.

*(Backing vocals: "Bring in the cadaver (Bring in the cadaver) / Sniffing dog")*

John: You should see what it's like in the tracking room when Robert and his guys show up to sing. It's like everybody just sits back and just revels in the pure pleasure of music. These guys, they sing on Garth Brooks records right? And to have them singing my somewhat strange lyrics is really fun. It's so great to be taking something that is strange and occupies a sort of strange space musically and then treat it the same way that you would treat something that had more commercial potential.

*(Backing vocals: "Bring in the cadaver (Bring in the cadaver) / Sniffing dog")*

John: With my vocals, my instructions were to not emote. And younger me would be "No, no I must express my feelings!" But no. If you trade that desire to be expressive in the service of the song, you get it back doubled. If you actually serve the song instead of asking the song to serve you emotionally.

*(Vocals: "Hustle up the spiral stair / See if anyone's left up there")*

John: It's probably my purest metaphor song ever in that I never offer any indication that it's a metaphor [laughter], right? I'm the last guy to find the metaphor in somebody else's song because I'm too taken in by details. But that's also my strength as a writer, is like I have so much interest in the details, that if I have a governing metaphor, I can make it pretty real because I can populate it with all these little things happening at the edges.

*(Vocals: "Wait 'til you come up on the smoking wreck / And even then, you check")*

John: I don't need to emote about it, I can just tell you what I saw. The physical details seem to me sufficient to communicate anything else that the scene might need to communicate. And I can assume that if I give you a good enough description of what I saw, that the emotional reality or the spiritual reality underneath it will become manifest.

*(Vocals along with electric guitar and bass: "Veterans on their hands and knees / Nobody's ready for days like these")*

*(Electric guitar along with bass)*

John: I think the speaker here is an egotist. This is the funny thing like when I start analyzing my own lyrics, I'm generally fairly critical of the narrator [laughter]. It's like to me, the solution to this narrator's problem is right in front of his face. He should start thinking about things other than his own reactions.

*(Electric guitar along with bass end)*

John: This song, it was one of the ones I had flagged for strings because Owen Pallett writes string arrangements and plays. We did pre-production on a fair bit of this stuff. And he did guide tracks on a Minimoog in the control room, just to indicate what the string parts were gonna be.

*(Minimoog strings)*

John: And then I think he liked them. And so he kept the Minimoog in.

*(Minimoog strings)*

John: That's one thing you would never have gotten away with with me earlier is like, "Oh let's see if this sounds cool and maybe keep it later." I've always been very much about, "Think about your decision first, then play it, right?" And with this record, I let Owen actually produce and make decisions like, "I'm gonna lay down this thing" and then later say, "You know it sounds kind of cool, let's keep it." It was so awesome that I want to do it this way from here on out, it's like writing the songs, relinquishing control, handing them to a friend I know well, to Owen, and say, "Now tell me what you hear in these songs and you tell us how to play them." It was really liberating for me. The strings were on like day six or seven. And I wanted to get a tattoo. So I booked a tattoo because I thought, you know, it would be better if I'm not around to give input, if I let Owen do his whole thing. He has some people he works with in Macedonia, a full symphony orchestra. And he wrote charts by himself up in Canada where he lives, and then he had sent them to them, and they learned them and rehearsed them. And then they hook up via Skype, and it's a fully conducted live orchestra. So I went and I got a tattoo of a crab holding a pair of glasses in tribute to the time I was holding my 2 year old in the ocean, and then a wave came and knocked my glasses off,

and we joked that a crab had taken my glasses. I did that during the string tracking [laughter]. So when I got back, Peter was like “Oh my god dude, it was the greatest.”

*(Strings)*

John: Ah and I cried [laughter], it’s just like I cried.

*(Strings)*

John: My first ideas about music were about symphony orchestras. When I was 5, I wanted to be a conductor. It's such a high form of music to be able to hear an ensemble all at once in your head and do an arrangement like Owen has done. And then it's such an accomplishment to even play in an orchestra like that, to be able to subsume your own talents into the service of a broader vision. It's what makes orchestral music so beautiful. It's an expression of human cooperation.

*(Strings)*

John: As a lead singer type, as a guy who both benefits from and is burdened by his sort of native ego-centrism, people generally just want to talk about my feelings about stuff. And like, that to me is no longer interesting, I'm much more interested in the other musician's work. You know, there's some songwriters who insist that they told every musician every note what to play on the record, and I believe none of them. I don't believe any of that. Music is the story of people making something together that outgrows all of them and is bigger than them, and of which they should all be in awe.

*(Strings end)*

Thao: And now, here is “Cadaver Sniffing Dog,” by The Mountain Goats, in its entirety, and after the song, we’ll hear more from John.

*(“Cadaver Sniffing Dog” by THE MOUNTAIN GOATS)*

Thao: Visit [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net) for more information on The Mountain Goats. You’ll also find a link to buy or stream this song. Coming up, more John Darnielle for our new segment called Instrumental.



In our segment, Instrumental, we ask artists about the tools that shape how they write, play and think about music. Here is more with John Darnielle.

Thao: Is there an instrument you have that's been really important to you?

John: There's this Hawaiian guitar, and this is the most important instrument in The Mountain Goats development so it has a place of honor for me. So I was working at Metropolitan State Hospital in Norwalk. I was paying off a court bill [laughter] that I owed in the State of California, a lot of money, but I was also living in employee housing right? And employee housing was already very cheap, and then periodically like once a year, the union wouldn't see eye to eye with the state and we'd be out of contract, and my rent would have to go back to whatever the rent had been prior to the first contract, I don't know how that worked. But so for several months a year, my rent would be like \$31 on the studio apartment in a very old building that was on the grounds of the hospital where I worked. So I was paying down this court bill but living on fairly cheap rent and I didn't have any expenses, I wasn't married. So when I would get a paycheck, I would go shopping, and my needs are modest. I would buy tapes, and at the shopping center, there was an instrument store, and there was not a lot of foot traffic in this store that had probably been in the strip mall for as long as it had been there, which probably would have been the early 70's, and this is the mid-90s in California. So and it was just crammed ceiling to floor with instruments, like new Cimar guitar from Korea, \$71. I bought one of those and those are actually the, that's the guitar you hear on the first tape. But the other guitar you hear on the first tape is this Hawaiian guitar, that was up on a shelf, and I asked if I could see it. And they didn't trust anybody, you'd say, "Can I see the guitar?" "You're thinking about buying it?" "Well, yeah [laughter], yes." "OK well here, you know, that's a nice one." And I bought it, I didn't know anything about it, I wondered what makes it Hawaiian. It's basically a slide guitar, but an acoustic slide, right? So the strings are raised high enough that you can use a bottle neck or a proper slide to play chords. You tune into a chord and you move the slide up and down right? But it was a whole new magic world of sound for me and I was writing poetry at the time, I wasn't doing The Mountain Goats. But I had extra money, you know, and I thought bought this \$50 guitar. And then I figured out it was tuned to a chord so I could play 1 4 5 right? Standard blues progression, and do something. And I didn't have any lyrics so I grabbed a poem that I had been working on called "Going to Alaska," and just sang it over a very simple progression and that became the first de facto Mountain Goats song.

*("Going to Alaska" by THE MOUNTAIN GOATS)*

*(Hawaiian guitar)*

John: You can hear in that track how I don't have the 4 and 5 memorized. There's little dots to tell me where to go but I don't know what I'm doing. This one only ever saw play on the first two tapes, and then I had sort of moved on, but it is the origin story guitar. It's the one I bought, "Ah I'll just buy this Hawaiian guitar, what do I care [laughter]?" And I wouldn't be sitting here today if I hadn't sort of made that rash decision.

*(Hawaiian guitar ends)*

Thao: Song Exploder was created and is executive produced by Hrishikesh Hirway. This episode was produced and edited by Christian Koons. Carlos Lerma made the artwork, which you can see on the Song Exploder website. 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. You can also find Song Exploder on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter @SongExploder. And you can find me @thaogetstaydown. My name is Thao Nguyen, thanks for listening.