

Song Exploder
The Shins - New Slang
Episode 215

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 has some explicit language.

Zach: What are you listening to?

Natalie: The Shins. You know them?

Zach: No.

Natalie: You have to hear this one song, it'll change your life, I swear.

("New Slang" by THE SHINS)

Hrishikesh: That's Natalie Portman and Zach Braff in the movie, *Garden State*, which came out in 2004. And this song, the song she says will change your life, is "New Slang" by The Shins. Singer, songwriter, and producer James Mercer wrote it when he was living in Albuquerque, New Mexico. It came out as a single and then he re-recorded it for The Shins' debut album *Oh, Inverted World*, which came out 20 years ago, in 2001. After *Garden State* came out, that album went gold, and the soundtrack to the movie won a Grammy. Nowadays, James Mercer lives in Portland. I spoke to him from his home studio, and he told me how The Shins actually first started as a recording project, a side project, while he was in another band called Flake Music. And in this episode, James breaks down "New Slang" and looks back at how his songwriting and his early home recording skills came together to make this iconic song.

("New Slang" by THE SHINS)

James: My name is James Mercer.

(Music fades)

James: Back in, I guess '89, I moved here from the UK. My dad was stationed at a RAF base over there. I just moved back to the States at 18 and, just by default, went

to UNM. And I met this guy, Neil Lankford. Neil and I were listening to the same sort of music so Neil and I decided to start our own band.

(Flake Music)

(Music fades)

James: You know, we had fuzz pedals and it was loud and it kind of had some relationship with the Grunge vibe of the early 90s. So that was Flake, it became Flake Music because another band was called Flake. I was introducing certain songs that I had written to the band, and it was aesthetically different, you know, it was just different enough that the guys weren't that into it. I could just sense it. I started to realize, I think maybe I should really learn how to record, maybe get some equipment and I can just, kind of, put these things together. So '96 really is when I came up with the idea, The Shins. I asked Jesse, our drummer in Flake, to join me. And the early Shins stuff was upbeat and kind of noisy.

("Those Bold City Girls" by THE SHINS)

James: So the very first stuff I put out, that I self released, it's pretty rock and roll and garage-y, I guess I would say.

(Music fades)

James: And I don't know where I got the gumption to do sort of a folk song. I just kind of got deeper into recording and then the songwriting started to change. I was experimenting with the acoustic guitar and I think it's about '98 when I happened across this chord progression that I really liked.

(Guitar)

James: So I just created this little set of chords and a melody for it.

(Vocals with guitar)

(Vocals)

(Vocals end)

James: I remember showing it to Jesse, standing in the kitchen at 1620 Silver Street in Albuquerque. I didn't have lyrics though so I was just scatting for him. But he was cool. He liked it. And it gave me some confidence in the song. But I didn't know what to do with it. So it kind of floated around for more than a year with me just being frustrated. But I had gone and bought a Hewlett Packard, really not a super powerful computer. And then a buddy of mine gave me a copy of a program called, Cool Edit Pro. And I started messing with it and it was just so fun. There were just so many things you could do. And basically, I had an SM57 Shure Microphone, it was the most expensive, nicest microphone I could afford at the time when I was starting this up. So on the demo,

(Vocals with guitar)

James: the tone and fidelity is sort of predicated on that.

(Vocals with guitar: "New slang when you notice the stripes / The dirt in your fries / Hope it's right when you die / Old and bony / Dawn breaks like a bull through the hall / Never should have called / But my head's to the wall / And I'm lonely")

(Guitar)

(Guitar fades)

James: John Poneman, the owner of Sub Pop, he, you know, loved the demo and in fact, put out the demo as a single on Sub Pop. But when I was recording the record, he just felt that if you could get something that would give it more clarity. You know, he was pushing for that. And I was hesitant to attempt it.

(Music ends)

James: I didn't get much feedback from the single's release. But one thing I did know was that the girls around town, they would come up and talk to me and tell me like, "That's just a great song." And I was like, "Oh, now you're talking to me [laughter], you know?" So Jonathan's idea of re-recording it, combined with the fact that I was getting this new attention from people in Albuquerque just really liking the song, I just felt, man, I should put whatever effort I can into this, you know, and just get it as well recorded as I can accomplish here, at my tiny micro studio in my little studio apartment, you know. So I switched microphones from the SM57 to a Rode NT1. So you get more fidelity on the guitar.

(Guitar)

James: I think I was really just experimenting, figuring it out as I went along. But I recorded just the first bare vocal.

(Vocals: "Gold teeth and a curse for this town / Were all in my mouth / Only I don't know how / They got out, dear")

James: But of course then doubling the vocal is a no brainer. As soon as I figured out I could do that, "That's great. Let's do that [laughter]. Every song."

(Vocals: "Gold teeth and a curse for this town / Were all in my mouth")

James: It's awesome.

(Vocals: "Only I don't know how / They got out, dear")

James: It's sort of a song about the frustration that one feels when they don't have their finger on exactly what they are aiming for. Everything in my life was uncertain at the time. Ending up in your late twenties, you can hardly take psychedelics anymore because there's this stress on you now. You can feel 30 coming, where you're supposed to have your shit straight. Trying to come of age, and not succeeding [laughter]. And it's partly just addressing some omnipresent, social culture that I was immersed in. The scene, all my friends, all the people who were in other bands. There's a line in the song that says, "Godspeed all the bakers at dawn / May they all cut their thumbs / And bleed into their buns / Until they melt away [laughter]." That was based on this imagined rivalry that I had with this woman, Amy Linton, much better songwriter than me, who's also from Albuquerque. She started a band called, Henry's Dress, that was super hip. It was just so cool, you know?

("Target Practice" by HENRY'S DRESS)

James: Great songs and cool sounds. You know, they were cooler than us.

(Music ends)

James: I don't know, she gave me hope. But at the same time, I was like, "God dammit, I want to do that too, you know?" Amy was just a big inspiration and there was

also this sort of angst that I had about that. And she was a baker so I kind of in my mind thought, that's at least honest for me to use that phrase.

(Vocals with guitar: "Godspeed all the bakers at dawn / May they all cut their thumbs / And bleed into their buns / Until they melt away")

(Beat with percussion)

James: I had a keyboard, something you buy maybe for the kids, you flip a switch and now we've got all kinds of sound effects! So there was a kick drum on there that sounded way better than anything I could [laughter] engineer with mics and, and a real kick. It really did. So [laughter] it's me on a keyboard and a tambourine.

(Bass with percussion)

James: Dave Hernandez, who put together that bassline and performed it on the demo, he had moved to Portland. And so I had to sit down and learn his bass line and perform it and record it. But there were harmonic moments in his performance that I loved, and I just couldn't get. I would lose the bass during certain parts of the song. So what I did, my solution was,

(Music ends)

James: use the cheesy bass sound on the keyboard

(Keyboard bass)

James: and tuck it in with it.

(Bass, keyboard bass, and tambourine)

(Vocals join: "And if you took to me like / A gull takes to the wind")

(Music fades)

James: In the chorus, I'm throwing this sort of lonely, pining vibe into the song. Just seemed like that was the moment where you need to give some vulnerability.

(Vocals: "Well, I'd've jumped from my trees / And I'd've danced like the king of the eyesores / And the rest of our lives would've fared well")

James: It was a difficult song to sing. I mean, I hadn't put that much work into my vocals before that. There's just a lot of learning when you start recording, you're just really putting the magnifying glass on all of these parts and your own playing, your own ability. You know, for me, it was a little bit embarrassing, you know, it's like, "Oh God," and just daunting. But what it was was just my recording skills developed enough and you know, you get a chance to look in the mirror a little bit when you listen to the song back. And so I think it facilitates the creative process to be able to sort of examine your work instead of just sitting and writing. You know, you can throw it down and then I think you get a little more adventurous all the time.

(Woodblock mouth sound)

James: This song, you know, it has a bit of a, there's some texture to it that feels Western so it inspired

(Woodblock mouth sound)

James: Just with my lips. I just didn't have a woodblock and I probably thought, "Oh, it's kind of cute that I'm doing it with my mouth, you know [laughter]?" But it sounds pretty cool when you record it and add a little EQ, it passes, you know.

(Woodblock mouth sound)

(Woodblock mouth sound ends)

James: And then I created the guitar solo. It starts off with a little, I don't know like a guitar trick that I had learned like the year before.

(Guitar solo)

(Guitar solo ends)

James: So I started there, and you know, I'll walk around the house whistling all the time, and even like hearing a song on the radio, I have a tendency to fill the gaps between the vocals with some sort of little line, you know. Usually they're really cheesy [laughter] and my dad used to do it all the time, whistling or humming. So it's sort of inbuilt.

(Humming)

James: And so that's me just kind of filling the gap.

(Guitar solo)

(Humming joins)

(Music ends)

James: So the tambourine, the final hit.

(Tambourine)

James: And what I did was I took the last one, and you open up a whole new sort of interface for Cool Edit Pro, and then you can start manipulating it. You know you can shift it up, you can speed it up.

(Processed tambourine)

James: It's really cool, I mean I miss it. This aspect of that program. I think recording for me, you know, it does become something you get better at like an instrument, you know, adding those sound effects and stuff is integral to the quality of the song, of this song. Looking back on this song, and its origins, and the time of my life that spawn it, that is a particular moment in my life where this song was expressing something unique. I hope it's unique in my life because I was just totally miserable about so many things that were going on.

(Guitar)

James: I was striving to do something somewhere else. I wanted to quit my job. My relationship wasn't quite what it could have been. And I had regrets about that, and it's just, I was just, I needed something new and that's, I'm begging for it in this song.

(Vocals with guitar: "I'm looking in on the good life / I might be doomed never to find")

(Guitar)

James: It's interesting to look back and think about those times, and just how things have changed. I think a lot of bands have that one song that stands out and it becomes a bit of a thing, you know, like you're just that band who did that one song, or whatever. And that may be the case with us, but it doesn't change my affection for the song and my understanding of its importance in my life.

(Guitar with percussion)

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "New Slang," by The Shins, in its entirety.

("New Slang" by THE SHINS)

Hrishikesh: To learn more, visit songexploder.net. You'll find links to buy or stream, "New Slang," and you can watch the music video. This episode was made by me with editing help from Teeny Lieberman and Casey Deal. Artwork by Carlos Lerma, and music clearance by Kathleen Smith. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a network of independent, listener-supported, artist-owned podcasts. You can learn more about our shows at radiotopia.fm. You can follow me on Twitter and Instagram @HrishiHirway. And you can follow the show @SongExploder. You can also get a Song Exploder t-shirt at songexploder.net/shirt. I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. Thanks for listening.