

Song Exploder
The Thermals - No Culture Icons
Episode 18

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.

("No Culture Icons" by THE THERMALS)

Hrishikesh: The band, The Thermals, originally began as Hutch Harris's solo recording project. He sang and played all the instruments on the 2003 Thermals record, *More Parts Per Million*. In this episode, Hutch breaks down his lo-fi recording of the song "No Culture Icons." The track was later mixed by Chris Walla, who's best known for his work with Death Cab for Cutie, and we'll hear some thoughts from him as well. I spoke with Hutch in front of a live audience at the XOXO Festival in Portland, Oregon.

("No Culture Icons" by THE THERMALS)

(Music fades)

(Audience applause)

Hutch: This just started as a recording project that I was just doing by myself on a 4-track. Just recorded at my old house. So this was, like, the start of the whole band. Like there was nothing, and then, I recorded a bunch of songs on a 4-track, and that became the band. Maybe when I was 17 or 18, I got a 4-track, and a lot of friends, I, you know, this is before Pro Tools, so everyone I knew was recording songs on cassette because it's cheap mainly. And then, it's easy, you know, it's cheap and easy to use. A cassette costs a dollar, so I think I could fit like three or four songs on a cassette, so really the record costs about like \$12

(Audience laughter)

Hutch: to make. So if you can accept that the recordings are really lo-fi. You know, to me, it's like, if you have a really good song, especially a good, like, punk song or a simple song, you don't need a really expensive recording. And this is just something I had done a lot, just recording songs very quickly, you know, without

a lot of thought, and planning, and not knowing what was going to happen. It was just like a project I was doing.

("Roger And The Hair" by ELEVATOR TO HELL)

Hutch: The liner notes for the first Elevator to Hell record, he says that each song was just written and recorded in one day.

("Roger And The Hair" by ELEVATOR TO HELL)

(Music fades)

Hutch: Yeah, I loved the music that he made, and I thought that was a really good way to approach a project. That's a really good way to work. You write something, you record it, and then, you're just done with it. At the end of the day, you don't overthink it. You don't overwork the song. What I would do is, you know, come home from work, figure out something on guitar. I would do a click track, and then, put the guitar, and then, fill out all the other instruments, and then, go sit, and just sit on the porch, and write lyrics. And then, you know, at the end of the day, you have a song finished, which is, it's a really satisfying and gratifying way to work as long as you can deal with, you know, it's very lo-fi obviously. So you kind of go for the stream of consciousness, lyrically. You don't, the point is just to not think too much, but, you know, you can, in making anything, you can just overthink it to the point where you lost the excitement of the original idea. It's weird because I never got back to the same place. So now I like stress for years over, you know, lyrics, and try to make everything perfect. And it's, sometimes it works a lot better, but a lot of times, you know, people relate to things that you're, you know, for me, sometimes I'm not even, like some of these lyrics, I could tell you what it means. A lot of them are just like, "Eh, it came so fast. I really don't know." But people, that didn't stop people from liking it.

(Vocals: "Hardly art, hardly starving / Hardly art, hardly started / More colored liquid / No scent, no skin / More stained paper / More parts per million")

Hutch: To me, "More Parts Per Million" just meant, it's whatever we're working with is going to be totally saturated. And I, yeah, I really liked that idea. Eventually, what represented The Thermals the best was the kind of like, "Everything is falling apart, and everything is kind of, it's just madness," but you're, it's more of like a celebration of it, as opposed to letting it get you down. So I had one microphone, one preamp, and the 4-track. So the same mic and pre is used for

the vocals, drums, and guitar. You know, there's just one mic in a room, it's not fancy.

(Guitar)

(Guitar fades)

Hutch: You know, it's just kind of nice and gritty. And just on the preamp, everything is just cranked like all the way up.

(Audience laughter)

Hutch: It was more that I was modeling the guitars of other bands, like specifically like 80s punk bands, like Misfits.

("Astro Zombies" by THE MISFITS)

(Music ends)

Hutch: It's so funny because Danzig is so tough, and The Misfits are kind of a tough band. But when you actually get down, I mean, a lot of their songs, listen to the chords they are playing, you know, it's just mostly these kind of sweet major chords that are, it's not tough at all.

Hrishikesh: Except they have distortion on.

Hutch: Yeah, it's a lot of distortion, and he's going to eat your skull or whatever.

(Audience laughter)

Chris: My name is Chris Walla, and I am a guitar player and record producer, I guess. My most salient memory from [laughter] mixing that record was the fact that, on Hutch's 4-track, so you can adjust the pitch on the 4-track, right? There's this little knob that's like [inaudible], and there were all these pieces of masking tape around the knob, and each of them had a line on it. And what I remember is that Hutch had this, like, piece of paper in his back pocket that had all the titles of all the songs on the record. And then, each of the song titles corresponded to one of the lines, on one of those pieces of masking tape. And I remember getting into a couple of songs, and him being like, "Oh, something's weird. This doesn't sound right." He pulled out his code key thing out of his pocket, and he looks at

it, and he's like, "Oh, it's the wrong one." So he reaches over, and, like, speeds the tape up [laughter]. I'd just never seen anything quite like it before. It was kind of amazing.

Hutch: So a lot of times when I was tracking, you know, I'd make the song. And then, when I was getting ready to sing it, I would just want the song to be a little faster, so you just pitch it up. To me, the fact that I had recorded all the instruments myself, there's kind of no honesty left after that, because this is not something real. This is not an actual real band, at this point, that could go perform these songs, you know, so it's all, and it's not magic. It's just, just doesn't, it's cool that way. And that's what I liked about the Elevator to Hell recording. This is something that doesn't actually exist. It only exists once this one person has, like, layered all these tracks together.

(Guitar with drums)

(Music ends)

Hutch: It sounds like Pebbles and Bamm-Bamm to me.

Hrishikesh: [laughter]

(Audience laughter)

Hutch: It's like, if you had cavemen kids making a song, but I love that. Like, for me, when I started these recordings, I was like, "how simple can something really be? Like simple to the point where it's kind of dumb, actually, just the drummer going [grunts]." Like [laughter] drumming is so dumb already, but you can always make it a little dumber, you know? And it's so funny, like

(Audience laughter)

Hutch: we've had a lot of people play drums with us, and like these songs that I made, you know, a new drummer comes in, and they have to learn older songs that you've made. This one, and there's a couple others on this record, have been really difficult for people to learn to play drums the correct way. They'll have like a hard time playing like, "Can you play it like my stupid way?" Like, they're not, it's a little, it's hard for them. Mixing probably took two or three days. We went up to Seattle. For Chris Walla, you know, who's, you know, he's in Death Cab for Cutie. He's recorded and mixed almost all of their records. He's done a ton, you

know, he's done Tegan and Sara records, like, he's used to doing stuff like, you know, very well. He does,

Hrishikesh: [laughter]

(Audience laughter)

Hutch: He's good, he's good at recording. We met, like, the owner and a couple of the higher ups at Sub Pop for dinner. And they were like, "How's the mixing coming?" And he was like, something like, "Oh, we got five songs done." And they were, like, so shocked. And he said, "Well, it's on a 4-track. There's, you can only do so much, you know,

(Audience laughter)

Hutch: so, yeah, it's going to be quick."

Chris: The only directive that I got from anybody was just, "Make sure you can understand the words." I think I approached it with, "Make sure you can understand the words," sort of, tattooed on my forehead.

Hutch: In any recording, there needs to be something that you focus on. What people relate to when you're listening to a song, is usually the vocals. It's usually the vocals, and then, the drums. The vocals, it's something like, if you can't play any instrument, you can still sing, even if you can't sing well, I mean, if you're just, like, listening to a pop song. So the vocals need to, if you can't hear the vocals to sing along, then you're kind of like, what are you, you know, what are you going to grab onto with the song?

(Vocals: "No new deafness / No self-reference / No getting psyched on / No culture icons / No one ideal / Know what I feel / No two the same name / Two with the same name / No one ideal / Know what I feel / Oh, oh, oh!")

Hutch: This whole record, especially this song for me, all like the, "No new deafness, no self-reference," you know, my dad is a musician, and he's a songwriter, and he had always, like, helped me, like, create rules, like just your own personal rules. I feel like everyone has this when you're creating anything, you just have things that you want to do, and things that you won't do in making anything. And then, for me, you know, I'd already been in bands for like 10 years or something when I made this. And so, for me, this was about throwing away, like all these rules

that I had made for myself. And then, just “No culture icons,” was just about any kind of, like, worship I had for anyone else's art, I was going to throw away.

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's “No Culture Icons,” by The Thermals, in its entirety.

(“No Culture Icons” by THE THERMALS)

Hrishikesh: For more information on The Thermals, including a link to buy this song, visit songexploder.net.

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