

Song Exploder
The War on Drugs - I Don't Live Here Anymore ft. Lucius
Episode 221

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 Don't Live Here Anymore" by THE WAR ON DRUGS ft. LUCIUS)

Hrishikesh: The War on Drugs is a band from Philadelphia who formed in 2005. They won the Grammy for Best Rock Album in 2018. This year, they put out their fifth album, *I Don't Live Here Anymore*. Adam Granduciel is the singer and lead guitarist in the band, and I talked to him at his recording space here in L.A. In this episode, Adam breaks down the title track from *I Don't Live Here Anymore*. He explains how the song was influenced by Bob Dylan and his own newborn son.

("I Don't Live Here Anymore" by THE WAR ON DRUGS ft. LUCIUS)

Adam: I'm Adam from The War on Drugs.

(Music fades)

Adam: We had just had our first child, late July of 2019. With "I Don't Live Here Anymore," it started basically as me sitting in the nursing chair in Bruce's room, when he was about six weeks old. He would just be on his little blanket. I would be in the chair, just strumming an acoustic lightly.

(Guitar)

Adam: And I was just strumming these two, these two chords that were cool. I mean, it wasn't even that exciting. It was just B-flat to C in this way that had a nice, little vibe to it. And he's making a bunch of sounds.

(Baby sounds join)

(Baby sounds end)

(Guitar fades)

Adam: And so, that night, I went downstairs. Bruce had been asleep for a couple hours and the point was to just record this little idea. And I just did a quick drum machine, four-on-the-floor, 808 kick.

(Beat)

Adam: When I sit down to the mic with my headphones on, they're really loud usually. When I'm demoing something, I work so fast, so I put one mic up, and that's for the vocal and the guitar, in that moment, you know? Just so I can like capture whatever is happening.

(Guitar joins)

Adam: I go into another world when I have my headphones on. It really puts me in like a totally different place to channel whatever idea I have for this song. I started singing.

(Processed vocals join)

(Processed vocals end)

(Synth, bass, and drums join)

Adam: Things happen in those moments that I've never been able to explain. I'm not thinking, I'm just, like, enjoying the moment. And it's just me, and a microphone, and my fun effects. And that's all it is.

(Processed vocals join)

(Processed vocals end)

Adam: The original demo was basically nine verses. When you go somewhere for eight or nine minutes, you really only get one shot. If I said, "Let's do another one," I probably would have started thinking about it too much. And when you start thinking, is when you just, you lose the plot. That's kind of the joy as painstaking as it can be, is starting with this thing where you're just improvising, and then spending weeks, months, years parsing through that moment.

(Processed vocals join)

(Music fades)

Adam: I liked the vocal melody. I liked the mood, but there was still something that didn't excite me in the way that another song might. Robbie Bennett plays keyboards and piano in our band. And Robbie had asked if there was anything I was working on. It was right before Thanksgiving 2019, and I sent him a link to this demo. And five, six days later, Robbie, he's like, "I sent you back something, it's probably all garbage, you know." And I took it in stride. I'm like, "Cool." And it was Thanksgiving, so I was walking into, by a, like a roasting pan for some Turkey that I was going to overcook because I'm petrified of salmonella. And I'm walking in, and I'm like, "Oh, let me just grab my headphones and listen to this thing Robbie sent."

(Guitar, synth, bass, and beat)

Adam: The second I heard it, it blew my mind.

(Guitar, synth, bass, and beat)

Adam: When Robbie added the riff, it immediately changed my whole vision of the song.

(Guitar)

(Guitar fades)

Adam: In January of 2020, the band had just come out to Los Angeles, and we'd go to the studio for 14 hours a day, and write, mess around, have fun, shoot hoops. That's what we love to do. And so, Dave is sitting there in a fold-up chair, and says, "We should work on "I Don't Live Here Anymore."" I was like, "Oh, oh, okay. Yeah, maybe. Yeah, well, I guess so." I don't know why I was so hesitant. I think I just knew that it was going to be like a journey. Once we tapped into that song, maybe I wasn't ready to go there, or I don't know. But we got a general BPM going, we were messing around in the room. Robbie was playing the descending part on the piano, but it was like, it had already strayed so far from the vibe of that demo that me and Robbie had done. But our friend, Eric Slick, from Philadelphia, who drums in the band Dr. Dog, he was with us for a couple

days. And we walked in the control room, and then, the room mics were up. They were jacked for some reason. And he hit a drum out of nowhere.

(Drums)

Adam: And all of a sudden, I was like, "We got to make the song on that drum sound."

(Drums)

Adam: I worked on it for the next month. There was like the drums, and I committed to Robbie's demo guitar and synth.

(Guitar and synth join)

Adam: My demo bass was in there.

(Bass joins)

Hrishikesh: And one day, it just snapped into focus.

(Vocals, guitar, synth, bass, and drums)

Adam: And we decided to just bring in Lucius, Jess Wolfe, and Holly Laessig. They sing on "Pain" on the last record. They're just both hilarious, and we hit it off immediately, and really musically on another level, and just fantastic singers.

(Vocals)

Adam: Their first thing is to kind of lay down just some pads, kind of like I would lay down a synth.

(Vocal pad)

Adam: They've known each other for so long and just musically, they're so connected that Jess is doing one thing, Holly's doing this other thing, and they're totally in tune

(Vocal pad)

Adam: sonically, but also just mentally, they're just there.

(Vocal pad)

Adam: And then, at the end of the session, they're like, "You want us to do anything else?" And I was like, "I haven't done the vocals yet, and I haven't written anything down," but I was like, "There's these two lines I think might be in the chorus. So why don't you just sing these lines? I want to find out everything I need to know, and we're all just walking to this darkness on our own."

(Vocals: "I wanna find out everything I need to know")

(Guitar)

Adam: They did the vocals before I even did my vocals. So the song for a while was just basically no vocals except for their vocals in the chorus.

(Vocals, bass, and drums join: "We're all just walkin' through this darkness on our own / We're all just walkin' through this darkness on our own / We're all just walkin' through this darkness on our own")

(Music fades)

Adam: I remember doing all the vocals for this song in two days. And I remember listening to the demo, and picking through some of those impromptu moments, and trying to grab what I could from whatever came out in that moment.

(Vocals with guitar: "When we went to see Bob Dylan / It blew our fuckin' minds")

Adam: When I played it for Dave, he got a kick out of that line. He thought it was funny that I had used like a proper noun, and it's not something I usually do, but I liked talking about Bob Dylan. So I still had that line when I was doing the vocals, but I wasn't sold on the "fucking mind" part, because it felt like you're wasting a line, because anybody could have blown your fucking mind. You know, it's like you could have gone to see monster truck rally. So why use Bob Dylan's name, you know? But I remember the second day of those vocal sessions, I came back. I was like, "I want to punch that line to, and then I had to, "We danced to "Desolation Row"."

(Vocals with guitar: "Like when we went to see Bob Dylan / We danced to "Desolation Row" / But I don't live here anymore / But I got no place to go")

Adam: I had visions of when I'd seen them and just specific people that I had shared that experience with. It meant something to me. It just put it in a place that was real. You know, it's like maybe the most real thing I've ever written because I'm a huge Bob Dylan [laughter] fan. And I did go to see Bob Dylan. So why can't I just expand on this a little bit? Still, you know, I'd been collecting those verses like, "I was lying in my bed / A creature void of form."

(Vocals with guitar: "I was lying in my bed / A creature void of form")

Hrishikesh: Adam's referencing the end of the first stanza from Bob Dylan's song "Shelter from the Storm." The lyrics there go like this

Adam: "You came in from the wilderness / A creature void of form / "Come in," she said, "I'll give ya / Shelter from the storm." I think I was using it to fill the space at first, but then I was like, well, I have this Bob Dylan line, and maybe I can just use the "shelter from the storm" line, because why not?

(Guitar)

Adam: In a lot of songs of mine, there's always been like somebody on the other end of the vocals, it's a conversation. I never took for granted.

(Vocals join: "I never took our love for granted / You never left me wanting more / But you'd never recognize me, babe / I don't live here anymore")

Adam: So I did a couple verses, and I remember taking a break in the choruses and knowing I needed to come back to those. And then, I remember sitting there playing the song back, and I was singing along like under my breath, and every line just fell out of my mouth. Like it never had really happened before where it became very clear to me, in that moment, what I was writing about, and how to write it, and how to say it. I was just writing about pushing through everything that tries to drag you down, everything that tries to like push you off your path. In that moment, I was writing those lyrics, and the line was there at my fingertips before I could even finish saying it.

(Vocals: "Beating like a heart / I'm gonna walk through every doorway, I can't stop / I need some time, I need control, I need your love / I wanna find out everything I need to know / I'm gonna say everything that there is to say / Although you've taken everything I need away / I'm

gonna make it to the place I need to go / We're all just walkin' through this darkness on our own")

Adam: I enjoy recording so much, I enjoy the process of sculpting the song so much, because I don't sit down and write the words, and have it immediately exist on the page as a song. Some songs are crafted, and then we record them live in the studio. But this felt like one that was going to be like a home recording through and through. The song started in that tiny little music room of mine. And then, it went to Robbie's basement, and he gave me this beautiful riff, and it needed to end up back in my headphones. I needed to take that to my little room and get in there with my own sounds.

(Electric piano)

Adam: I just have this kind of cheap Kurzweil electric piano that I bought to demo with, and that's like the bell, like the chiming bell tones.

(Electric piano)

Adam: When I ended up putting the lead guitar in the song, the baby was sleeping. So I wanted to work on music, but I couldn't crank an amp in our house, obviously. So I used this digital amp that pretty much models a hundred different amps, but it's silent. And I just had headphones on, and I found this setting that was like a cranked Marshall.

(Guitar)

Adam: And it ended up being like, kind of the perfect sound.

(Guitar)

(Guitar ends)

Adam: I feel like, with our music, it's like, you want to have a great song, but it's like the sound like, is it one sound? You know, it's not like the bass player's doing this,

(Bass)

Adam: and the drummer's this,

(Drums)

Adam: and the rhythm guitar's here.

(Guitar)

Adam: No, it's all one pulsing sound.

(Guitar, bass, and drums)

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: My sense of you, before meeting you today, was someone who's very meticulous.

Adam: Yeah.

Hrishikesh: Is that fair? Do you think that's right?

Adam: I think there's a difference between being meticulous and being a perfectionist. I don't want anything to be perfect, you know? I want there to be rough edges, I want there to be like a weird note. In fact, on the album, the real recording of this song, the last line of the first verse, there's no, I mean, if you ask me, "What are the words?" I don't have words.

(Vocals: "I never wanted anything / That someone had to give / I don't live here anymore / I went along in will")

Adam: There's no, it's like I drag it out. It's like, "I went along in will," but it's not, it's nothing. I was never able to like finish it. And I went back at the end when we were finishing the record. I was like, "Alright, let me just go punch that last line. I need to just figure out the word." I was like, "It's silly that I've always just used this line that just sounds like something." I was sitting there with the headphones, it was on loop for 20 minutes, this one line. And I was just like, "You know what? It's fine. It is what it is."

(Vocals: "I went along in will")

Adam: I think there's an element of it being a song about growing into something and growing out of something, like growing into a newer, more realized life or a version of yourself that you're seeing take shape.

(Synth with guitar)

Adam: I can see evidence of my evolution just from settling into being a dad, you know? All of a sudden now, what's important to me, something had clicked. It makes going deep on music that much more enjoyable because now it's like, I want to have these songs to share.

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "I Don't Live Here Anymore," by The War on Drugs ft. Lucius, in its entirety.

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Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net for more information. You'll find links to buy or stream "I Don't Live Here Anymore," and you can watch the music video. This episode was made by me, with editing help from Craig Eley and Casey Deal. Artwork by Carlos Lerma, music clearance by Kathleen Smith, and production assistance from Chloe Parker. 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.