

Song Exploder
Thundercat - Them Changes
Episode 45

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.

Thundercat: There's this moment where you realize that, "You know, am I making a funk song?" And you're like, "Yeah, you are."

("Them Changes" by THUNDERCAT)

Thundercat: [laughter] I was like, "Oh really?!" You just go, like, a 100% into that.

Hrishikesh: Thundercat is the alter-ego of bassist and singer-songwriter, Stephen Bruner. He's played bass for both Suicidal Tendencies and Erykah Badu, and helped shape Kendrick Lamar's chart-topping, critically acclaimed album, *To Pimp a Butterfly*. In this episode, Thundercat breaks down his song "Them Changes." He co-produced it with long-time collaborator Flying Lotus, with Kamasi Washington on saxophone.

("Them Changes" by THUNDERCAT)

Thundercat: I am Stephen "Thundercat" Bruner.

(Music fades)

Thundercat: Started playing bass around the age of four or five or so. You know, every time I go back and look at different pictures and stuff like that, I always had like a guitar, like, toy, you know? And I couldn't talk. I actually started writing in my early teens. A lot of the time music starts with the drums for me. This song, I remember, it started with the drum sample from the Isley brothers, you know, "Footsteps in the Dark."

("Footsteps in the Dark, Pts. 1 & 2 by THE ISLEY BROTHERS)

Thundercat: It's one of the most amazing songs, period, you know?

("Footsteps in the Dark, Pts. 1 & 2 by THE ISLEY BROTHERS)

Thundercat: When my generation, we grew up with “Today was a Good Day,” so it's like, of course, I would hear that more often, you know?

(“It Was A Good Day” by ICE CUBE)

(Music fades)

Thundercat: Ice Cube’s is so juxtaposed to theirs. I know it's a classic thing, you know, and I was, it's like, it's always like that weird feeling of like, “Oh God, here we go, sampling,” you know? Something that people have used before, but you know, it was like, I'm not going to not explore the options of what it has to offer me, you know? Because you could feel it, that drum, when those drums start, it's like, they're real heavy.

(Drums)

(Drums end)

Thundercat: I just started the drums and it felt right.

(Chorded Bass)

(Chorded Bass ends)

Thundercat: That's just me, chording on the bass. I play a 6-string bass to write with a lot. I have to, because there's no way I'd be able to play a lot of the parts on a 4 or 5-string, because some of the chords are really thick, like playing thirteens or like playing my bass with my hands really spread out.

(Chorded Bass)

Thundercat: It was a custom instrument. It's got a maple neck and a maple body. So it's like this really bright tone. That's the sound that people usually prefer to record with me. You know, like even Lotus, like anytime I start playing another bass, he goes, “Maybe you should get the other bass.”

(Chorded Bass)

(Chorded Bass ends)

Thundercat: Starting with the chords, and then following through just the bassline that goes with it.

(Main Bass)

Thundercat: It's the same bass. It's going through a Moogerfooger Envelope Filter. Those Moogerfoogers are, like, pretty intense for pedals. You know, it's like the amount of things you can do with them, it's like, it's, it's like, you're playing a synth. There's so many knobs, you know, you have got to learn how to use them. These things are really valuable for a reason. They're like the BMW of pedals. These Moogerfoogers have inspired different things in my playing.

(Main Bass)

(Music fades)

Thundercat: People have lots of nicknames for Flying Lotus, but I mean, me personally, I call him Lotus. You know, me and him have worked together throughout the years. It's always been like a pushing each other's limits. He told me I need to sing more and I was like, "You have got to be kidding me. I sound like I'm farting on a mic." And he's like, "Nah, man, you have got to sing."

(Vocals: "Nobody move, there's blood on the floor / And I can't find my heart")

Thundercat: The first part of the lyrics that came about was the first verse. I'm not, like, masking, like, some weird spiritual truth [laughter], but it is like, it's like, no, I just, I broke up with my girlfriend, and I drank a lot.

(Vocals: "When I'm sitting here knowing this ain't real (Ain't real) / Why in the world would I give my heart to you?")

Thundercat: Breaking up with your girlfriend has strange effects on you [laughter]. It's like, "let me get drunk, that'll help it." And it's like, totally doesn't help it at all.

(Vocals: "Deep in the cut, drowning in it pain")

Thundercat: You don't have to put your whole business out there, if you don't want to tell anybody anything, that's your business. But that's what makes it mine, you know? If you expect it to be worth anything to you, even, you know, it's like you have to be telling the truth. It has to be the truth.

(Synth)

Thundercat: Lotus takes part in this halfway through it, I would say. Even though there's a lot of work that's been done with the bass, we both know it's like, at some point, he's going to touch the music. He'll see different sprinkles or different synth sounds.

(Synth)

Thundercat: And he, kind of, bends and stretches the whole thing, you know, to different capacities. "Maybe you should breathe through this, maybe you shouldn't bring this straight in like this. Maybe you should shut up and let the beats play for a second," and add small nuances, you know? It was definitely Lotus' idea to put Kamasi on it.

(Saxophone)

(Synth joins)

(Music fades)

Thundercat: Sax was Kamasi Washington.

Kamasi: Hi, it's Kamasi Washington. I was just trying to say the part that, like, was kind of like a counterpoint to what Stephen was singing. You know, he had that whole choral thing he was doing.

(Vocals)

(Saxophone joins)

Thundercat: He has his own sensibility that you allow him to get to. There's no like, "Kamasi, you should do this." It's like, I've been playing with Kama-, I literally like, there's a picture of Kamasi holding me when I was a baby. So it's like, knowing that what he's going to play is going to be the right thing. You know, it's like, trust. "What like take a solo [laughter]?" That's exactly [laughter], it's like, yeah, that's exactly what he meant.

(Saxophone)

Thundercat: Crazy at the end, as it was fading out to, kind of, give it that kind of juxtaposition, fading it up while I was fading down, you know?

Thundercat: I was like, "That's amazing. That's exactly what it's supposed to be."

(Piano)

(Music fades)

Thundercat: The keys were recorded in my apartment with the person that I tour a lot with named Dennis Hamm. Dennis is amazing. And I was like, "Think like kind of ragtime, like you're playing around me singing. You're not just comping like it's a jazz song, and you're like, you know?"

So I was like, "Even rhythmically, you have to find a place that's not where my voice is."

And it didn't take too long because, like, Dennis, like, processes stuff really fast, and just destroyed it. And he wanted to do like 10 takes.

And I was just like, I was like, "You killed it the first time, man." I was like, "There's no point."

He's like, "Well, wait, let me try another."

And I was like, "Nope. That's one take of Dennis," just, and it's just like [exhale].

(Vocals with piano: "It must've fell when I lost my mind / Deep in the cut, drowning in it pain / Somebody help cause I can't find my way / Nobody move, nobody move")

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: Now, here's "Them Changes," by Thundercat, in its entirety.

("Them Changes" by THUNDERCAT)

Hrishikesh: You can find all the past and future episodes of Song Exploder at songexploder.net or on iTunes, Stitcher, or wherever you download podcasts.

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("Multi-Love" by UNKNOWN MORTAL ORCHESTRA)

Hrishikesh: 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.

("Multi-Love" by UNKNOWN MORTAL ORCHESTRA)

(Music fades)