

Song Exploder
Tobacco - Gods in Heat
Episode 82

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.

("Gods in Heat" by TOBACCO)

Hrishikesh: Tom Fec has released four albums under the name Tobacco since 2008. He's also the frontman of the band Black Moth Super Rainbow, and he created the theme music for the HBO show *Silicon Valley*. In this episode, Tom breaks down his song "Gods in Heat" from his newest album, *Sweatbox Dynasty*, recorded entirely on cassette tape.

("Gods in Heat" by TOBACCO)

(Music ends)

Tom: I'm Tom Fec from Tobacco. I don't know any instruments, like I never learned. But my parents got me a 4-track when I was in high school, and I just played around with it so much until things started making sense.

(Synth bass)

Tom: I borrowed a MiniBrute synthesizer. I came up with that bassline. I think I was just trying to hear how dense it could be. So I was trying to find, like, the best, like the coolest bass sound I could get out of it. And that was it. And that was like hitting record right away, because I didn't want to lose it.

(Synth bass)

Tom: The drums are a MPC

(Beat)

Tom: straight into tape. I have this TASCAM cassette recorder, and I play the MPC straight into the cassette without quantizing, sequencing, anything like that. Because I like it to sound as real as possible. And because I'm not a drummer, it usually does sound pretty human for better or worse.

(Beat)

(Beat ends)

Tom: The drums have that crunch mainly from the tape machine, because I just run everything *really* hot. But they also get some of that too, when you're on an MPC and you lower the pitch. That's what I like about MPC so much, it gives you that nasty, it puts like digital dust on it.

(Beat)

(Beat ends)

Tom: The past few years, I've been listening to a lot of this weird lo-fi, I guess, it's like black metal.

("Himmelhvelv" by ILDJARN)

Tom: There's this guy Ildjarn, he's like one of the innovators of whatever this style is. To me, it sounds like it's almost recorded on a boombox, and the tape is like another member of the band almost, it's like so important.

("Himmelhvelv" by ILDJARN)

Tom: I probably listen to a little more texture these days than I used to. I'm getting old, I guess.

(Synth)

Tom: I pretty much always am recording on cassette deck. I think in electronic music, you're dealing in stuff that's usually clean and clinical. Anything you can do to make it breathe just helps so much.

(Synth)

Tom: It's an old, Oberheim chord synth. It just sounds really powerful. But the wobble in the chords is the tape machine.

(Synth with beat)

Tom: I didn't want there to be any guitar on this album at all at first.

(Guitar)

Tom: Because that guitar was supposed to be just like a placeholder. I wanted the album to be slimy, kind of like synth funk, but that changed [laughter] pretty drastically.

(Fuzz bass)

Tom: Fuzz bass, just because I didn't want it in there, it doesn't mean it wasn't perfect for the song.

(Fuzz bass with beat)

(Music ends)

Tom: So the vocals, that's always one of my sticking points. Lyrics are pretty ambiguous. It doesn't really have to mean anything. And when I was a kid, I always appreciated it when I didn't know the lyrics. It's the worst, like when you find out what the lyrics are, and they end up being, like, embarrassing. I want the vocals to read like vocals, but I want the melody of the vocals to be as good as a synth part. I think the problem with a lot of singers is they think in like where they're comfortable, you know, their vocal range, I guess. Where like with a synth in a vocoder, you don't have a vocal range. It's whatever you want it to be.

(Processed vocals: "I can make the sun down, sun down / I can make you hot as all hell / I can make you harder / I can make you harder")

Tom: Vocoder is just a keyboard, and you sing or talk into a microphone, you're playing along as you're singing or talking. For me, it's just an extension of my own voice because I can't sing, I don't really want to sing. Like on this song, I kind of went back to an older, more nasty kind of sounding vocoder that doesn't really sound like a real voice.

(Processed vocals)

Tom: I just, I don't think of the vocoder as a novelty. I don't think of it as like a, *I am a robot*, because that's not what it is at all. It's the easiest way for me to get my ideas across.

(Processed vocals: "I can make it be now / I let you be here / I can make it be now / Na, na, na, na, na / I can make it be now / I let you be here / I can make it be now")

Tom: I knew it needed like one more little thing, and I didn't know what to do. And normally when I like don't know what to do like that, I'll ask myself, "What would the Butthole Surfers do?"

("Birds" by BUTTHOLE SURFERS)

(Music ends)

Tom: And that gets me going.

(Synth)

Tom: And that doesn't sound like Butthole Surfers at all, but for some reason that question always works on me.

(Synth)

Tom: This was like the album where like I really learned to just kind of go with your gut, and like the first thing you do is usually the best. And it's usually the first thing you do for a reason.

(Synth)

Tom: And I stopped second-guessing.

(Synth)

Tom: First take Tommy, like everything I did, just keep it.

(Beat)

Tom: where normally like if I think something is coming off as listenable or good, then I spend a lot of time trying to break it down. This one, I just kind let happen, and let it be what it is.

(Synth with beat)

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Gods in Heat," by Tobacco, in its entirety.

("Gods in Heat" by TOBACCO)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net to learn more about Tobacco, and for links to buy this song. You can find all the past and future episodes of Song Exploder at songexploder.net or wherever you download podcasts. And you should follow Song Exploder on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram for news updates and giveaways. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a curated network of extraordinary, story-driven shows. Learn more at radiotopia.fm. This episode was edited by Christian Koons and me. My name's Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.