

Song Exploder
tUnE-yArDs - Water Fountain
Episode 38

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.

Merrill: You know, I want my music to be a product of the world that I am growing up in and growing older in. So, if this song is going to exist as a tUnE-yArD song, it has to have some dirty nasty to it.

("Water Fountain" by TUNE-YARDS)

Hrishikesh: In this episode, Merrill Garbus of tUnE-yArDs, breaks down the song, "Water Fountain." It draws inspiration from the politics of drought and from dancehall reggae. Coming up, you'll hear how and why she tried to make the song less catchy. Despite that effort in 2014, the tUnE-yArDs album, *Nikki Nack*, climbed the Billboard Charts and got widespread critical praise.

("Water Fountain" by TUNE-YARDS)

(Music fades)

Merrill: My name is Merrill Garbus, and I make music under the name, tUnE-yArDs. Nate Brenner is a co-writer on most of the songs now that tUnE-yArDs creates. It was January of 2013, and I was like, "Okay, it's the new year, and I'm going to start to make a new album." And so, I kind of forced myself into this routine where I'd go into my little studio, which was a shipping container that had been made into a little rehearsal studio, so I was there in this like super hot metal box, sitting at a computer and trying to make [laughter] all these demos.

(Claps)

(Claps end)

Merrill: So I'd been taking a lot of walks around Oakland, and I was walking around Lake Merritt, which is just down the street from where we live. And I would just walk around that lake a whole lot, and passing water fountains, some of them working, some of them not working. And, you know, at that time I was hearing stuff about conservatives not wanting to pay taxes, and I just kind of let my brain

wander like, you know, *what if no one ever paid taxes?* And, *what if no one ever decided that it was worth it to put money into our greater good?* Seeing that through my imagination that, you know, no roads, no sidewalks, no, no water fountains. I don't know, there was something about the rhythm of my walking and the rhythm of that phrase that, [sung] "No water in the water fountain," that just like came out of that. The lyric, and the melody, and the sing-songyness of it, and the topic of it, I think all came bundled up into one.

(Claps)

(Claps end)

Merrill: When tUnE-yArDs began, I was really interested in rhythm being a huge part of that. I just am super obsessed with the interplay between rhythms and this creation of a greater rhythmic hole when you have these multiple rhythmic voices going on at the same time. So the three, two,

(Claps)

Merrill: and the other two, three.

(Claps)

(Claps end)

Merrill: And that was me, you know, in the hotbox [laughter], just layering claps over, one over another, and just saying, "OK, that's a start to something." And then, I kind of would just hear what was missing. Like where can I fill in even more gaps between those two clapping parts? And what I came up with was this [sings the clap rhythm].

(Claps)

Merrill: So it's really those three rhythms laid over each other.

(Claps)

Merrill: I love when things are human and not machine-like, obviously, as anyone listening [laughter] to this music would know, it is not perfect by any means. But

there's a tipping point at which I go, "Nope. I was a little bit too off the beat there for use in a song that I really wanted to be a dance song."

(Claps fade)

Merrill: The story of this song is basically that I almost threw it away because I thought it was dumb. It just sounded, like, really simple. I mean, think about me spending hours, trying to work out, laying my claps over one another. And then, coming up with the words like, "No wood in the woodstock."

(Vocals: "No wood in the woodstock")

Merrill: What the hell does that mean? And I was like, "This is so annoying, and I'm annoying, and everything sucks." And Nate had a hotbox across from mine and he would walk over every afternoon [laughter]. It would be like a sanity check, and I'd be like, "This sucks." And he'd be like, "No, no, it's cool." And he came in, and he played the first bassline that comes in.

(Bass)

Merrill: And I thought rhythmically, his bassline was awesome, but I thought, "No, it sounds too right. Like if you play in that kind of major key, then it's going to sound too right, and it needs to sound a little bit more wrong."

(Bass)

Merrill: We kind of fought about it a little bit [laughter] in our peaceful way. And then, he came up with, if he's playing in minor,

(Bass)

Merrill: and all of a sudden, the color of the song completely changes. And that was really important to me that the things that the song was talking about to me were really heavy and so, it didn't make sense to just keep the whole song in major. It was like, "This is disturbing." That's kind of where he was like, "Well, how about this? And I was like, "How about that?" And then, we were like, "OK both [laughter]."

(Vocals join: "I saved up all my pennies and I gave them to this special guy / When he had enough of them he bought himself a cherry pie / He gave me a dollar / A blood-soaked dollar / I cannot get the spot out but / It's okay it still works in the store")

Merrill: It's still this pretty simple major melody, but then you just make the bassline minor. And all of a sudden, it's like the stomach churning part of the song where all of a sudden, you know that something's going to go down.

(Vocals with bass: "Whoop! / Thread your fingers through my hair / Fingers through my hair / Give me a dress / Give me a press / I give a thing a caress / Would-ya, would-ya, would-ya / Listen to the words I say?")

(Vocals fade)

Merrill: [laughter] You know, now there are a lot of people involved in tUnE-yArDs, the record label and our manager, and they were like, "This is it, man. This is the single, this is the catchy one. Can you please just make it less dissonant?" And I was like,

(Bass ends)

Merrill: "No [laughter]! I really can't." I mean, tUnE-yArDs started when I was listening to a ton of dancehall reggae,

("Murder She Wrote" by CHAKA DEMUS & PLIERS)

Merrill: and there's something about the tradition of reggae that, for so many reasons, there's this dissonance and this kind of dub sensibility, where there are things that feel wrong or don't link up exactly, but there's so much implied in that disagreement between elements. There are some reggae albums where you feel like the singer came in, and sang, and couldn't hear the track and then, the track that they end up putting underneath the singer is like a totally different song with a different key.

("Murder She Wrote" by CHAKA DEMUS & PLIERS)

(Music fades)

Merrill: So I love that sense of wrong parts put together, but then when it comes back together as a whole, it has this whole different conversation of wrongness

[laughter]. You know, “No water in the water fountain” is, it's like a horrible concept, even more so now in California, but in 2013 too, we were talking about the drought, and it was terrifying to me to allow my imagination to go that far and think of life without water coming out of your taps. You know, even just talking about these things now, it's like this really uncomfortable tension in my stomach and I think that's the feeling that I love to evoke in songs, where I'm not writing pretty songs for people to fall in love to, necessarily, I'm writing songs that sound more like the truth of the world to me. And that has to mean that that's literally built into the song, that's literally built into the harmonies, or the friction, or that grating sense of the song. And that's kind of why, I don't know, I was listening to that drum machine STEM,

(Drum machine)

Merrill: and, at first, it's got the cute little cowbell sound. And then, throughout the song, as you get to the end of the song, it's like this crazy distorted mess of a drum machine.

(Distorted drum machine)

(Water bottle)

Merrill: I found this awesome water bottle at the thrift store. And it's just like these things that kind of fit into the world of the song. Like spare parts, kind of sounds, like a water bottle just evokes water somehow, even if you're not saying, “Oh,

(Water bottle ends)

Merrill: it's a water bottle,” there's just something about it that's like, “Yep. That fits in.”

(Laser)

(Laser ends)

Merrill: So, this is where the brilliant John Hill comes in, because [laughter] he introduced the laser sound. Now we were so nervous working with other producers, and I'm very possessive of the term “producer” because I feel like, you know, I am my own producer. But we took the song in, at the request of some of our label people, and played it for John Hill, who's worked on a lot of

cool stuff, Rihanna and M.I.A. And so, he had those lasers for us, and I played those lasers on, on a sample pad with a stick.

(Laser)

Merrill: So we all agreed that that was again, another dance hall element that amps up the song when it's like, "And now the lasers come in [laughter]!"

(Lasers)

(Rolls play)

Merrill: You know what it is?

(Rolls play)

Merrill: Oh my gosh!

(Roll sound)

Merrill: That's just me, and my voice, and my tongue making some crazy roll in there [mimics the roll sound].

(Roll ends)

Merrill: [laughter] But then sampled and played on a keyboard, so that we did with John Hill as well. And we sampled my voice, and then I was able to play it on a MIDI triggering keyboard, and I could play chords with my own voice doing that crazy gurgley noise.

(Roll sound)

Merrill: I am so captivated by music. The ability to speak without words, the sound itself is telling the story, and it's kind of like a big puzzle that even I am trying to figure out.

(Roll sound fades)

Merrill: [laughter] It's so fun. Recording is amazing.

(Beat with roll sound)

(Roll sound)

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Water Fountain," by tUnE-yArDs, in its entirety.

("Water Fountain" by TUNE-YARDS)

Hrishikesh: For links to buy "Water Fountain," and to learn more about tUnE-yArDs, visit songexploder.com.

In the next episode, composer Brian Tyler

("Avengers: Age of Ultron" by BRIAN TYLER)

Hrishikesh: tells the story of taking heroic elements, and turning them into something sinister to create the opening title for the movie, *Avengers: Age of Ultron*.

("Avengers: Age of Ultron" by BRIAN TYLER)

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. Find the show on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram @SongExploder. 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.

("Avengers: Age of Ultron" by BRIAN TYLER)

(Music ends)