

**Song Exploder**  
**Will Butler - Anna**  
**Episode 41**

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.

*("Anna" by WILL BUTLER)*

Hrishikesh: Will Butler is a member of the band Arcade Fire. He also co-wrote the score for the film *Her*, which earned him an Oscar nomination. In March 2015, he put out his first solo album, and in this episode, he breaks down the song "Anna" from that record.

*("Anna" by WILL BUTLER)*

*(Music fades)*

Will: This came out of a nonsense song. I was thinking about my son, whose name is Alvin. I always have my phone, so I just made an iPhone memo of it.

*(Voice memo)*

*(Voice memo fades)*

Will: The record I recorded at Electric Lady Studios in New York, the very top was Hendrix's old apartment, and it's like recording a record in your house. It's just carpets, and a piano, and couches, and a record player, and vinyl on the walls, and, like, a psychedelic wall painting. So I booked a week, and the first four days I had Jeremy Gara there playing drums. I had six songs, and we'd done all of them. And then, I had Jeremy for another day, so I was like, "Oh, we should do another song. What of these voice memos should be a song [laughter]?" And that one came up, and I was like, "Oh yeah, that just do that over and over. That melody over and over." And I said, "Just play drums like this: boom, cha, boom, cha, for, let's say, four minutes."

*(Drums)*

Will: We did two takes; once slightly slower than the record, and then once that is the tempo of the record [laughter]. And we're like, "Oh, we'll use the slightly faster one."

*(Drums)*

*(Drums end)*

Will: So we did the drums and the bass.

*(Synth bass)*

*(Synth bass ends)*

Will: It's a synth, it's a Korg MS-20.

*(Synth bass)*

Will: It's a classic synth. This one you hear it from the late 70s. I bought it before Arcade Fire recorded *The Suburbs*. So I've been playing it for a number of years now. And it's kind of my default, if I think of myself as a musician, that is the instrument I play, is the synth.

*(Synth bass)*

Will: If you look at the synth, it's a little horrifying because it's semi-modular, which means you can, like, patch wires from point A to point B and route it yourself, and make all kinds of god-awful sounds. So it's a little intimidating looking, but after playing around with it for a couple of years, you figure it out. So learning the subtleties of it takes a while, but you know, a moment to learn, a lifetime to master. Basically, I have a concept of how I want it to sound and then, you test the sound as you're moving towards it, just to leave a little bit of room for the Holy Ghost. The goal is to find the sound you were imagining, but just enough different that you're surprised by it and you're a little inspired by how it sounds like, "Oh, that's cool. Oh, that wasn't quite what I expected." And then, you're excited by it. The lead is the same synth, because it's the only synth I play [laughter].

*(Korg MS-20)*

*(Korg MS-20 ends)*

Will: And then, I just put up a mic. I was like, "Roll tape and I'm just going to figure out what the song is about." I was like, "Oh, it can't be about Alvin. That's weird." And then, I thought, "Oh, Anna, that also works, and little Anita, Anita is a name, and let's literally translate that to 'little Anna [laughter].'"

*(Vocals: "Hey, little Anna, you're the one / Risin' before the lazy sun / Bum bum bum bum bum bum bum bum")*

*(Vocals fade)*

Will: It's vaguely related to Anita from West Side Story. There's a little bit of that darkness, and she's like such a tough lady [laughter]. My sister-in-law's working at a bakery at the time. And so, she was always up at like 5:15 in the morning. So I think that there was some influence there where I was thinking of a New York character, and I was like, "Oh, alright, you always have to, like, wake up at like four in the morning and like go make your bagels."

*(Vocals: "Open the store and bake the bread / Leave all the dreamers with the dead / Bum bum bum bum bum bum bum")*

*(Vocals fade)*

Will: There's an element of religion in the song. And when you're thinking about religion, you're normally thinking about either death or what's going to happen after you die.

*(Vocals: "Take out the knife / Take out the knife / Sharpen it twice")*

Will: So she's, you know, sharpening her knives, being like, [grunts] [laughter].

*(Vocals: "Cause you got to get money (money money money...)")*

Will: I said, "I think we could just do some weirdo vocal effects and just go wild and see what happens." I really threw in the hands of the mix engineer, this guy, Mark Lawson, who Arcade Fire has worked with forever. And he's really great pushing elements when it felt like it was cool, and then leaving the fader, so there's stuff that disappears, and there's stuff that's pushed, and there's kind of stuff that pans from left to right.

*(Panned vocals: "money money money...")*

Will: I kind of wanted to keep "Anna" extremely stripped and spare, and there's still a ton of space in it, but because it's so electro and there's no guitars or anything, I wanted to add something else in there to bring it more back to humanity.

*(Saxophone)*

*(Saxophone ends)*

Will: You know, I think the saxophone is another thing that's edgy and cool and bleeding edge modern, and there's, it's super nostalgic; it conjures up an era instantly in everyone's mind. So I wanted to play a bit with the nostalgia and also a bit with just the sharp edginess of it.

*(Saxophone)*

*(Saxophone fades)*

Will: The piano part was done pretty off the cuff. The idea was just to keep things surprising. Ideally, it's a little louder than you're expecting, and you're just like, "what?! I'm in a completely different room right now." And then, it disappears, and you're back on a song, and then the piano comes back in.

*(Piano)*

Will: It was also a little bit, the song is so simple, it's the two basic chords and then two more basic chords. And I wanted to add these solos that were a little, just the notes weren't quite what you were expecting. They're like, "that doesn't seem to fit." After I played it, I was like, "Oh yeah, that felt weird in a good way." Like it, it really livened up the recording.

*(Piano)*

*(Music ends)*

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Anna," by Will Butler, in its entirety.

*("Anna" by WILL BUTLER)*

Hrishikesh: Visit [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net) for a link to buy this song, and for more info on Will Butler. I also put up a photo of that synthesizer, the Korg MS-20 that Will described.

Next time on Song Exploder, U2.

*("Cedarwood Road" by U2)*

Bono: So Edge had this big blues riff full of rage, and because we were talking about the early years, it was a natural fit for me to talk about my own rage.

Hrishikesh: You can find all the past and future episodes of Song Exploder at [songexploder.net](http://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](http://radiotopia.fm). My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.

*("Cedarwood Road" by U2)*

*(Music fades)*