

Song Exploder
American Football - The One With The Tambourine
Episode 49

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: Just a heads up, there is some explicit language in this episode.

Hrishikesh: The band American Football, had a short life span originally. They formed in 1997 and broke up in 2000. In that time, they released an EP and an LP to a small, but passionate fan base. But over the years since, more and more people found their music. 14 years after they broke up, they reissued their LP and booked some shows. The LP ended up being a surprise hit, landing on the Billboard charts, and their tour dates sold out. I asked if they'd do a song from the LP for Song Exploder, but here's guitarist Steve Holmes.

Steve: This is how unexpected that anyone would give a shit 15 years later. We don't have the master tapes. They don't exist. We, after we recorded the actual album, we left them at the studio. Can't find them. Don't exist. Probably lost or thrown out. So I happened to keep the single.

Hrishikesh: So, in this episode, the very first song recorded by American Football from their debut EP. It's called "The One With The Tambourine."

("The One With The Tambourine" by AMERICAN FOOTBALL)

(Music fades)

Mike: I'm Mike Kinsella, and I play the guitar and sing in the band, American Football.

Steve: And I'm Steve Holmes, and I also play guitar, but I do not sing. Mike and I were 20 to 22 when this was a band. That was sophomore through senior year of college, basically. So Mike was in a band with Steve Lamos before this band, and that broke up. As soon as our band broke up, I said, "Ooh, I'm going to steal Steve Lamos as my drummer and start playing with him." And then, I think the idea to have Mike join was because the previous band, if anyone's heard of it, The One Up Downstairs, the guitar player in that band was ridiculously good and Mike and I thought the two of us together would be as good as him alone so

(Audience laughter)

Steve: that was the plan.

Mike: Steve would go practice with Steve Lamos. He'd come home, and he, like, had a cassette, you know, he's like, "Oh, this is what we're working on." And it was this song. I was like, "Oh, that's a cool riff."

(Guitar with drums)

(Music ends)

Steve: Mike and I discovered alternate tunings, and it all took off from there. And he'd mess around, or tune this up, or I'm trying to hit a note that, "Oh, this will be much easier to hit if this string is half a step, lower or half a step higher," and you play until it sounds good. This song happens to be a big E major 7 chord, which I don't think I knew at the time. It just sounded cool. It's E, B, D sharp, G sharp, B, E. That's what I'm in, Mike is in a slightly different tuning.

Mike: So stupid, it's so stupid.

(Audience laughter)

Steve: The challenge of it is, you're now, you're stuck in that key, which, you know, you can't write 10 songs in that key because it'll sound ridiculous. But it sounds really cool for one song.

(Drums)

Steve L: My name is Steve Lamos and I'm the drummer in American football. I was teaching myself drums at that point. My father had a drum kit when I was a kid, and he had these 60s era books, kind of teach yourself different beats and Bossa Nova was one of the beats that I was trying to teach myself. And for whatever reason, it sort of fit with the riff that Holmes was playing, or at least the main part of it.

(Guitar joins)

Steve: That was the name of the song until we went to the studio and actually recorded it. We called it, "The Bossa Nova" [laughter] because that was the drum beat.

(Audience laughter)

Mike: I think Steve's drums, in particular, make these songs jazzy and unique. And I always said like, "If I was the drummer of this band, nobody would care because it would sound like every other band that exists."

(Guitar with drums)

Steve: That riff, and a lot of the American Football stuff, is me kind of stealing from The Sea and Cake. That was a big man for us at the time. That was my version of "Jacking the Ball" off the first Sea and Cake record.

("Jacking the Ball" by THE SEA AND CAKE)

(Music ends)

Steve: Doesn't really sound exactly the same, but sort of the feel we were going for. I do think that the idea not to rock out was intentional. I think going into this band, we knew what we wanted to sound like, and we'd been in loud bands, and we were kind of done with that.

Mike: We were so young and naive, and this was the first song, in this band, and sort of ever, I recorded vocals. Like, I was a singer in a band, by default, by the way, I don't think I joined to be a singer or anything. But now I'd be like, "Well, let's drop that song, like, six steps, so I can hit some notes." But at the time like, "Well the song's there, I have got to hit those notes."

(Audience laughter)

Mike: You're never going to just play my vocal part, are you?

Hrishikesh: Eventually.

Mike: No, you're not.

(Audience laughter)

Mike: I should've made you sign a thing.

(Vocals: "Days")

Mike: Fuck you, man.

(Vocals: "Weeks")

(Audience laughter)

Mike: Are you serious?

(Vocals: "gauge")

Mike: I thought it was going to be a guitar.

(Vocals: "years")

Mike: It was just like high school journal shit, all of it, you know what I mean? Like every, I mean like, even going to record all these songs, it was just sort of like, "Oh, I'll be a singer. And I guess it needs lyrics," and so.

(Vocals: "The memories of spending 17 with you")

Mike: And at the time, what was I like¹⁸? I was like, "Oh, I remember spending 17 with you, last year."

(Audience laughter)

Steve: Mike has a natural ability to write around other parts much, much better than I do, I think. The parts I would come in with would be, you know, a lot of times a high noodly part. And then, he would add the low end to it.

Mike: A lot of the shit he played is, like, stupid. Like if you heard it, you're like, that's not a thing.

(Audience laughter)

Steve: It's true.

Mike: I heard it. And I kind of heard where it can go, and there was no structure. So I was like, "OK, I'll put a structure on it." I don't know. It made sense to me.

(Audience laughter)

Steve: So there's only, there's the two parts, right? What would be a verse and the chorus, I guess. And then, a verse and a chorus. The second verse, Mike does not sing. And I don't know why [laughter]. I don't know that it was a cognizant decision, but in that second verse, it's just instrumental, and he changes his riff to this polyrhythmic thing going on.

Steve L: The second time we go through that [mimics guitar],

(Guitar)

Steve L: Mike starts doing this pattern-y thing over it that's in a different time, but, like, accents things, and moves things back and forth. Every time I hear that, to this day, I'm like, "Man, that's such a great part!"

(Drums join)

(Music fades)

Hrishikesh: Towards the end of the song, Mike plays a guitar solo. He recorded it using something called an EBow, which is a little handheld battery powered device.

Mike: It vibrates the strings, so it rings, and it's like a drone,

(EBow)

Mike: and you can just move the note. As you move the note, like it bends between them and stuff.

(EBow)

Steve: There's a cool harmony that comes in the second time.

(EBow)

Steve: One of the things that makes this band interesting is the fact that we were kind of learning our instruments still, at least, for myself. And Mike was being a frontman for the first time. And Lamos, as he mentioned, had been playing drums for maybe two years before this band started. I think we were just doing

the best we could with our limited resources and talents. And I think part of the stuff that sounds unique is because we didn't know any better, it just came naturally to us because we were novices in some respects.

(EBow)

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "The One With The Tambourine," by American Football, in its entirety.

("The One With The Tambourine" by AMERICAN FOOTBALL)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net for more on American Football and this episode.

("Hazeus View" by JOEY BADA\$\$)

Hrishikesh: Next time on Song Exploder, Joey Bada\$\$.

("Hazeus View" by JOEY BADA\$\$)

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.

("Hazeus View" by JOEY BADA\$\$)

(Music fades)