

Song Exploder
Big Thief - Cattails
Episode 162

Thao: 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 Thao Nguyen.

("Cattails" by BIG THIEF)

Thao: Big Thief is a four piece folk-rock band from Brooklyn, New York. In May 2019, they released their third album, *U.F.O.F.*, to critical acclaim. Pitchfork named it "Best New Music." In this episode, singer Adrienne Lenker and drummer James Krivchenia break down a song from that album called "Cattails."

("Cattails" by BIG THIEF)

Adrienne: I'm Adrienne, and I play guitar and sing and write in Big Thief.

(Music fades out)

Adrienne: When I first started writing "Cattails," we were just outside of Seattle at this studio called Bear Creek, and we had a bunch of songs that we were planning on recording, but this space was really inspiring and I found myself kind of writing in all the little pockets of time. And I had just gotten this 12-string guitar that I had bought when I was on a road trip by myself in New Mexico, at this little pawn shop, and I brought it with me to the session. And one night after we'd finished recording, everyone was kind of going to bed, I stayed up late and just started playing this chord progression.

(Acoustic guitar)

Adrienne: That picking pattern, it's one of my favorites. And it's particularly fun to play that on the 12-string. I just played it over and over again, and lyrics just started popping out. I was missing Minnesota, where I grew up, and I was thinking about my great-grandma. She died when I was about 20 and her name's Violet.

(Vocals along with acoustic guitar: "Violet's eyes, Violet plays / Going back home to the Great Lakes / Where the cattail sways / With the lonesome loon / Riding that train in late June")

Adrienne: "Violet's eyes, Violet plays," I'm just picturing her eyes, and picturing her playing like piano, playing guitar, playing bass. She picked up the electric bass in the

last few years of her life in her 80s, so I was just thinking of childhood and the way that she kind of took care of us. We'd like paint with her and she had a dune buggy and we'd like ride horses. And when I think about her, and this place in Northern Minnesota, you know, it makes my heart feel like open and heavy and sad and happy all at the same time.

(Vocals along with acoustic guitar: "And you don't need to know why when you cry / You don't need to know why / You don't need to know why when you cry")

Adrienne: I stayed up pretty late because I was excited. I had this buzz from this song that was coming, so I just woke up early in the morning and finished all the words and just played it over and over again, maybe like 30 times or something.

James: I went to bed and there was no song, and I woke up, and there was a song. I'm James, and I play the drums in Big Thief.

Adrienne: We had planned on recording another song that was on our list and I was just like, "Maybe we should just play this one for a little bit." And I just like walked into the live room and James was with me.

James: I was like eating breakfast and Adrienne was showing me this song and probably played it for me like twice. She was like excited and like smiling and kind of like, you know, standing up and bouncing.

(Acoustic guitar)

James: It just implied, make the drums bounce like that.

(Drums join)

(Acoustic guitar fades)

James: We didn't talk at all about the groove.

Adrienne: That's true. We didn't talk, like once. There was no talk about form. But James and I had been going on a lot of runs together during this session. And at one point I was like, "Oh, this is probably such good practice for interlocking our rhythms," because we're actually like breathing and running in time like at the same pace. So I feel like it's not just about the specific groove, like the pattern you're playing, as much as it was just like we're like walking in the same step.

(Acoustic guitar along with drums)

James: And so we messed around like next to each other for a few minutes.

Adrienne: There's usually this magic that happens right in the beginning stages of forming a song, the first few times you actually play it all the way through, and it feels good. And I was right on the cusp. I had just sort of played it enough to know all the words. James and I were just like hanging on, like I felt I could fall off the horse at any moment, like forget one of the words because they were so fresh, or mess up the groove or something. But we never did, we just like held on.

(Music ends)

Adrienne: When we finished, it was noticeably just like, "Whoa, what just happened," and then, before we knew it, Dom Monks, the engineer, he had sneakily been like setting up mics.

James: He was like rolling before we were even thinking about it.

Adrienne: Dom had captured it. It was just like, "That felt amazing. Oh, wait, you got that? You recorded that?"

(Acoustic guitar)

Adrienne: "Oh, cool," so it was just like a one taker.

(Acoustic guitar along with drums)

Adrienne: What I keep thinking of it as is like this gust of wind blew through the studio that was just like this magic wind. And the band, when they first heard the take,

James: We knew right away. It was pretty unanimous, like, "Oh, this feels amazing."

Adrienne: It was kind of undeniable like, "Oh, this is part of the record."

(Vocals along with acoustic guitar and drums: "And the clusters fell like an empty bell / Meteor shower at the motel")

Adrienne: So James and I recorded vocals and guitar and drums. And then Max and Buck added their parts after.

James: For this song Max tried some like normal-ish bass, you know like boom, boom, kind of stuff. But it was just kind of like, "Oh, this doesn't make it feel any better, it like weighs it down. It doesn't bring like the lightness that we all, we're like already in love with."

Adrienne: So he started layering these drones with his bass.

(Bass drone)

James: Max has this pedal called the Plus Pedal, which is sort of just a sustained pedal for guitars or basses or any audio you put through it.

(Bass drone)

James: And Andrew Sarlo, who was producing the album, he was guiding Max of like, "You know, try some high stuff now like do like a few takes of just really high stuff. Okay, now do one that's like super simple, find like notes that are just beautiful."

(Bass drone)

James: And then everyone kind of just sat down and just had a bit of a editing process where we just listened to a take and be like, "That one was really cool." And then we would just like save all the moments we really liked, just looking for like an enhanced feeling of a good feeling that's already there.

(Bass drone fades)

(Pianos)

James: Max and Adrienne are performing those piano parts simultaneously on two different pianos in the studio.

(Pianos)

James: This was like a very quick idea, you know, just to like, "Oh, maybe this will work sort of thing, and maybe it won't and so we're not going to like labor over it."

Adrienne: Also, I don't know how to play piano. So, I was just kind of randomly putting my fingers on the keys.

(Pianos)

Adrienne: We were just like bringing more energy, like just bringing that uplifted spirit, because that's actually what we were feeling.

(Pianos)

Adrienne: It was a blast. We were laughing. It was ridiculous. We were standing up. Neither of us knew what notes we were really hitting, and it was just like really fun, and so that energy translates into the recording.

(Pianos end)

Adrienne: Buck at one point in the session, he was staying in the tree house at Bear Creek. There was a little studio up there with Pro Tools, and he kind of took to doing some of his parts there isolated, and then bringing them back.

(Electric guitar)

Adrienne: He's got such a specific feeling. Even just in those notes, you can feel the swing.

(Electric guitar)

Adrienne: It's so beautiful.

James: Yeah, and I think he's sort of like playing off your melody.

(Vocals along with electric guitar: "And you don't need to know why / You don't need to know why when you cry")

Adrienne: Everything that I write is autobiographical in a way, but there's also fiction. I'm not just trying to convey like my personal experience in Northern Minnesota with my grandma. It's something deeper. So there's lots of memories and lots of montages of things that are real or that I'm like trying to describe. But there's elements of like also imagination and magic, and keeping a thread of a story.

(Vocals along with acoustic guitar: "Caroline, Caroline / I never could leave you to struggle")

Adrienne: This character, she, I, Caroline, she's hearing of somebody in her life who is very close to their time of passing. And saying, "I'll be there. Like, I'm just going to go."

(Vocals along with acoustic guitar: "I'll be there on the double")

(Acoustic guitar)

Adrienne: You're there to sort of hold them into the next realm. Hold them through that transition, reminding them of like the sweetness of this time, but also of the fluidity of everything.

(Acoustic guitar ends)

Adrienne: My own true feelings about an experience become more vivid and clear to me when they're described through a more fantastical lens.

(Bass drone)

Adrienne: It's kind of like when you take a picture of a sunset with your iPhone, and it's crisp, and it's HD. But then you take a picture on like an old film camera, and it's all like distorted and, but somehow that picture is more accurate to the feeling of that sunset.

(Piano joins)

Adrienne: My great-grandma's house up in Northern Minnesota, when we were there, it felt carefree. It was a really special time and since then, that house has been sold and that chapter has closed but it's encapsulated in my memory in this beautiful way that I can return to.

(Music ends)

Thao: And now, here is "Cattails," by Big Thief, in its entirety.

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Thao: Visit songexploder.net for more information about Big Thief. You'll also find a link to buy or stream this song.

Song Exploder is made by creator Hrishikesh Hirway, producer Christian Koons, and me, the guest host for the year. Carlos Lerma is our illustrator, he makes portraits for every episode, which you can see on the Song Exploder website. Special thanks to Zach McNees and Phil Weinrobe for their help on this episode. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a collective of fiercely independent podcasts. You can learn about all of our shows at radiotopia.fm. You can also find Song Exploder on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter @SongExploder. And you can find me @thaogetstaydown. My name is Thao Nguyen, thanks for listening.