

Song Exploder
Courtney Barnett - Depreston
Episode 61

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.

("Depreston" by COURTNEY BARNETT)

Hrishikesh: Courtney Barnett released her debut album in March 2015. By the end of the year, she had been nominated for a Grammy for Best New Artist, SPIN named her the Songwriter of the Year, and she had won four ARIA Music Awards in her native Australia. In this episode, Courtney Barnett breaks down her song "Depreston," which began with a visit to an open house, on a house hunting trip she took in the town of Preston. Thanks to Sonos for letting me record this interview at the Sonos Studio in Los Angeles.

("Depreston" by COURTNEY BARNETT)

Courtney: My name is Courtney Barnett. I'm a songwriter from Melbourne in Australia.

(Music ends)

Courtney: Preston is the suburbs of Melbourne, trees and bigger backyards. So I went and looked at this house, I was house hunting. And in the car ride home, the whole idea kind of came to me in that moment. It wasn't a song or an idea I'd been sitting on for a while. I had the idea in the car. And then, I went home and was sitting around with my guitar, and I'd just been trying to teach myself this Go-Betweens song called "Streets of Your Town."

("Streets of Your Town" by THE GO-BETWEENS)

(Music fades)

Courtney: And it's got this kind of riff in it.

(Guitar)

(Guitar fades)

Courtney: And the riff for “Depreston” was kind of born out of playing around with those chords and those, that melody.

(Guitar)

Courtney: I kind of just sat there at my desk, and played it over and over. And the words just kind of came straight to it. I was kind of just dwelling over what had just happened in my head.

(Vocals with guitar: “We drive to a house in Preston / We see police arresting / A man with his hand in a bag / How’s that for first impressions? / This place seems depressing / It’s a Californian bungalow in a cul-de-sac”)

Courtney: That kind of house hunting experience, that kind of open home, I feel really intrusive a lot of the time going in; looking at all their stuff on the shelf, like you’re supposed to be looking at the room size and the whatever. But I look at their, like, record collection and their [laughter], and what books they have on the shelf. So it feels kind of intrusive. I mean, you instantly paint a picture of the person who’s there, but this one was different because it was this lady who’d passed away. Some of her stuff was still in there, and it was this extra layer of intruding. I guess that was a kind of catalyst, and it opened up all these other thoughts, and I, instantly in my head, I thought, you know, *who was she? And who was her family?* And just all those, kind of, little questions. So it’s not that, you know, the house was stunning or anything like that, it was just the kind of emotion that it pulled.

(Vocals: “Then I see the handrail in the shower / A collection of those canisters for coffee, tea and flour / And a photo of a young man in a van in Vietnam”)

Courtney: The real estate lady showing us around, just dropped that it was a deceased estate, and the family was trying to sell the house and move on. We were looking at their house as a property, not as someone’s home and the kind of nostalgic memories that go with it. And then, when she said the thing, you know, like, “you could just knock it down and build a bigger one or a better...” Not that it’s disrespectful, but just that this place that someone’s built, you know, means nothing. It’s just a kind of physical thing that you could just, you know, wipe out and start again. She said that, so that instantly stuck in my head, and it’s such a, kind of, throwaway comment that has so much kind of built into it. Yeah.

(Vocals: “If you’ve got a spare half a million / You could knock it down and start rebuildin”)

Courtney: I could always hear a kind of group singing that refrain, kind of coming in one by one. That was my idea. But when I actually did it, it didn't sound right. We deleted a couple of the other voices. It didn't feel right. It felt a bit too like, "Okay, right now, let's sing the ending bit." Bit too cheery, a bit too kind of Sesame Street. So I think we just kept it pretty simple. Bones, the bass player, is the second voice.

(Vocals: "If you've got a spare half a million / You could knock it down and start rebuildin' / If you've got a spare half a million")

Courtney: Sometimes I dwell on an idea for ages, and I kind of have the general story in my head, but the journey to the end of the story can sometimes take, like, years to write. But this one, the words just kind of came out, and the story kind of wrote itself. I had, you know, extra verses, and it was just about cutting it to tell the story in a perfect way. But then, even though it was quite easy to write, it was so hard to record, and I just couldn't get it sounding right. I think because it's so minimal, and it's quite bare and vulnerable that everything just stuck out so strongly. So yeah, we tried to record it a couple of times, and I just like, threw them in the bin. I was like, "No, I've ruined the song. I can't release that."

(Drums)

Courtney: The secret in the end was we tried to keep it as live as possible to capture that, I don't know, it's kind of like, you feel like you're tiptoeing around that song because it is so bare. We use brushes, you know, on the drums, tried it lots of different ways, and it's kind of too violent with sticks.

(Drums)

(Drums fade)

Courtney: This one doesn't have a chorus or, it's only got two chords. So it doesn't really go anywhere, but I knew that it was done, you know? It didn't really feel like it needed that much. I guess the thing is like, not every song needs a chorus, or, you know, like there's no rules in songwriting. And even if there was, I wouldn't know what they were [laughter].

(Guitar)

(Guitar ends)

Courtney: The guitar solo is kind of the only moment where, you know, something happens or it changes. Dan Luscombe does the solo, he was one of the producers as well. He was so kind of in tune with the emotion of the song, his guitar playing really echos it, you know? Answers it truthfully. So that guitar solo's like, it's so emotional, I reckon. It's like weeping, it's like a crying lady [laughter].

(Guitar)

(Guitar ends)

Courtney: The term, "Depreston," I always thought that that was funny, like that wasn't my invention. A couple of my friends said it, because I was like unemployed for a little while, and I had to go to "Depreston," I mean, to Preston [laughter] once a week to do, like, job seeking stuff. And it was a pretty dark time, you know, I didn't have any money, and I was pretty down on myself, and I had to get the train there, and my housemates were like, "You going to Depreston today?" So it always kind of stuck in my mind, you know, for that. It's not a bad place at all, but it has that kind of memory for me of that time specifically. But, you know, the geography is kind of irrelevant. This song's obviously kind of about looking for a house, but it's not really what it's about. I think it's just about mortality. You feel this life, you work to make money, to get a house, to raise your family in, and then you die.

(Guitar)

(Guitar ends)

Courtney: You know, like I said, I looked at the house, and I went home, and then started writing the song. And then, a couple of weeks later, I showed it to Jen, my girlfriend, and she was like, "That house was in Coburg, not Preston." [laughter] Because we'd looked at a couple of houses, and I got my houses muddled up. So it's not even about Preston [laughter].

(Guitar, bass, and drums)

Hrishikesh: This song has a fade out. Feels like a really rare decision nowadays.

Courtney: Yeah, the fade out, because it was such a kind of simple idea, I don't think I knew quite how to end it. We did an ending that wasn't a fade, but I don't know. It just, it feels right. It feels like it kind of, it just disappears and gets smaller and smaller, and it kind of reflects the song itself, you know? Like life goes on and on and on, and just kind of fades out [laughter].

(Music fades)

Hrishikesh: Now, here's "Depreston," by Courtney Barnett, in its entirety.

("Depreston" by COURTNEY BARNETT)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net for more information on Courtney Barnett, including links to buy this song.

Next time on Song Exploder, MGMT break down their song "Time to Pretend."

("Time to Pretend" by MGMT)

Hrishikesh: You can subscribe to Song Exploder on iTunes or wherever you download podcasts. You can also find Song Exploder on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia from PRX. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.

("Time to Pretend" by MGMT)

(Music fades)