

Song Exploder
Death Cab for Cutie - El Dorado
Episode 44

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.

Ben: This is maybe a very predictable chapter in my life story, going from indie rocker to, "married to a famous person," to divorced, and then writing a divorce record.

("El Dorado" by DEATH CAB FOR CUTIE)

Hrishikesh: Death Cab for Cutie released their eighth album in March 2015. The song "El Dorado" was written in the wake of a breakup between lead singer Ben Gibbard and actress Zooey Deschanel. In this episode, Ben talks about the metaphor of the city of El Dorado, and how it fit the story he wanted to tell. Plus, he talks about how a few pieces of equipment ended up shaping the creative process.

("El Dorado" by DEATH CAB FOR CUTIE)

Ben: My name is Ben Gibbard, I'm the singer and guitar player in the band Death Cab for Cutie.

(Music fades)

Ben: I found myself, a couple years ago, trading a number of instruments into this guitar shop in Tacoma that a friend of mine works at. So I ended up picking up a Fender Mustang guitar, and then they, kind of, threw in this rhythm master drum machine with it, which is one of those, like, little wood panel drum machines that has seven presets on it, a tempo and a volume. That was it. And I was like, "Okay, well, I guess. Yeah, I guess I'll take that drum machine too." And then, I ended up writing the majority of the songs on the record with this particular Mustang guitar and this Rhythm Master drum machine. So El Dorado started with just this drum machine,

(Drum machine)

Ben: and then playing this arpeggiated guitar part that, kind of, starts the song.

(Guitar joins)

Ben: This is a song that I had an acute case of demoitis with, because I was so happy with the demo and I knew, even being happy with a demo, I knew that in its state, it wasn't something we could just put on the record the way it was. The original demo is really sleepy and kind of half-time. But I was so attached to the demo, I had a really difficult time breaking out of those tropes.

(Music fades)

Ben: But I think what really saved the song was, you know, Jason ended up going into the drum room,

(Drums)

Ben: and just, kind of, laid down this double time beat that played against the drum machine.

(Drum machine and Drums)

Ben: And when we came back, and the next day we're like, "Oh my God, that's great. That's it. That's how we're going to do it. That gives the song a drive that didn't have before."

(Music ends)

Ben: I only realized now I had kind of gotten away from writing particular types of guitar parts over the years because I started playing a guitar that had a much wider neck, and I have kind of like stubby fingers. And, you know, in the early days, I played these Fender Bullet guitars, which had a very kind of slender, thin neck. So playing this Mustang, I, my hand started moving in a fashion that was similar to the way I used to write guitar parts 15 years ago.

(Guitar)

(Guitar ends)

Ben: I really don't think I would have written a riff like that, had it not been for the Mustang. So with this particular song, I just found myself, kind of, singing the melody against the guitar part, which was something I tend to do maybe to my detriment at times, is play a guitar part, and then sing a version of what I'm already playing on guitar [laughter].

(Vocals with guitar: "Seems you finally found, finally found El Dorado")

Ben: The metaphor of El Dorado has been used a number of times, but I kind of liked this idea of, you know, the city of gold is actually just like a lot in Culver City.

(Vocals: "Over in Culver City, shining bright, name in lights / And I tried")

(Vocals fade)

Ben: You know, it's kind of a nod to the entertainment industry, and the fact that, you know, a lot of studios have their lots down in Culver City. So there's this notion of like one finds their kind of their El Dorado in somewhere on a studio lot, you know? El Dorado is the promise of something mythical, and, kind of, exciting, and grandiose in a fairly mundane world. It is a mirage.

(Guitar)

Ben: We all kind of reach milestones in our lives where we sit back and it doesn't feel the way we thought it was going to feel when we used to dream about getting there. And that just leaves us all underwhelmed and questioning our motives for wanting a particular kind of accolade, or car, or house, or wife, or kids, or whatever it might be. I mean, I'm as guilty of finding myself in that position as probably anybody else is. In this particular song, the narrator is saying like, "Yeah, it seems like you've found your El Dorado, and it's just right down the street and I'm trying to be excited for you, but I know this is going to change us." Not only your relationship to that person, but also kind of, it will change them as well.

(Vocals: "So why does it feel underwhelming, barely real? / And I tried to be hyped for you / Oh I'm trying to be hyped for you / As you slip away behind the gates / Behind the gates")

Ben: Rich Costey, our producer, hit me to this piece of gear called a VoiceLive. Very early in the record, he kind of dumped this piece of gear on my lap and said, "figure out how to use this," because he had just finished producing a record for Kimbra.

(VoiceLive)

Ben: She is apparently like a genius with this thing.

(VoiceLive)

Ben: She just got these crazy, crazy vocal sounds with that thing. And so, those really high vocals that are way higher than I could ever sing, they're pitched up via the VoiceLive.

(VoiceLive: "El Dorado / El Dorado")

Ben: In a song like this that is so minimal on the lyric front, this one was a perfect candidate for doing something with the vocals to kind of make them sound a little otherworldly.

(VoiceLive: "El Dorado")

(Synth pad)

Ben: I found myself going through a very painful and abrupt separation and divorce, and it existed somewhat in the public eye. And it's not an experience I would wish on my worst enemy. You find ways to, kind of, unpack all of these really complicated emotions in writing, and, in my case, in songwriting. Even though there are not a lot of lyrics in the song, I think that the specificity is really important to me. When I'm writing a song, I need to see it in my mind's eye. I need to, kind of, you know, see the subjects of the song, place them like in a little diorama, so to speak, and then have them interact with each other. Going into all the songs in this record, I kind of knew the questions I was going to get asked about them: "Is this song about your ex-wife? Is this song about your ex-wife," you know? That it didn't feel like it was worth trying to veil these songs.

There are, you know, a number of songs throughout recorded music that we know who they're about, but they've only survived because people over the years have found their own meanings and their own subjects for the songs. And that's, kind of, what kept me from thinking too much about pulling back in some of these songs.

(Piano)

(Music fades)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "El Dorado," by Death Cab for Cutie, in its entirety.

(“El Dorado” by DEATH CAB FOR CUTIE)

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.

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