

**Song Exploder**  
**Metallica - Moth into Flame**  
**Episode 93**

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.

*("Moth into Flame" by METALLICA)*

Hrishikesh: Metallica formed in 1981. They were teenagers. Since then, they've gone on to become one of the most successful bands of all time, selling over 110 million records worldwide. In November 2016, they released their tenth album, *Hardwired...to Self-Destruct*. In this episode, the song "Moth into Flame" gets taken apart by singer and guitarist James Hetfield and drummer Lars Ulrich.

*(Music ends)*

Lars: I'm letting you in on a lot of trade secrets here [laughter]. I've never really talked about this stuff in this detail.

Hrishikesh: It's Metallica on Song Exploder.

*("Moth into Flame" by METALLICA)*

*(Music fades)*

Lars: I am Lars Ulrich, and I am the drummer of Metallica.

James: James here. Singer, rhythm guitar player, Metallica.

Lars: About two summers ago in 2014, I was given an iPod by our on the road engineer that has about 1,500 ideas on it, accumulated from soundchecks,

James: just warming up on the guitar, or even just rehearsing. Or it's just, I get an idea and I just hum the riff into the tape, you know, [sings riff].

Lars: There's nothing that happens in this band these days that's not recorded.

James: And then, I kind of stepped back at that point. I've written the riff. I've done my part with that. I need some fresh ears to hear what's got potential and what doesn't.

Lars: And so, over that summer, I spent a lot of time listening to that iPod. And I presented James with my first pass at what I thought were potential main riffs for the next record.

James: I have a trust in Lars because he's got a really good musical ear, and he's a drummer, he hears the riff differently than I do. He's pretty good at picking out some of the best stuff.

Lars: There may have been 20 or 30 that I'd flagged. And one of them was called "Plow."

*(Guitar)*

Lars: Why was it called "Plow"?

James: I think it had that feeling of just, it can push through anything. It's like, "Okay, nothing's going to stop this riff." Every single song we do starts with just that,

*(Guitar ends)*

James: a riff.

Lars: We have a fairly traditional view of songwriting. We always try to build what we call a cycle. So a main riff, a verse, bridge, and a chorus. That's a cycle. A lot of what we do in our songwriting is kind of taking riffs, basically like a puzzle, just trying to connect them. There's a busier one, one that sort of moves around and has kind of more notes.

*(Busier Guitar)*

Lars: And then, a simpler one where the emphasis is kind of more on the right hand on the down picking.

*(Simpler Guitar)*

*(Guitar ends)*

Lars: So there were two of these riffs that sort of lived together. The busier one and the simpler one. And so, we were kind of jamming on these two riffs, and it just felt like there was kind of the cornerstone of a Metallica song.

*(Guitar)*

Lars: We had spent the better part of a couple decades kind of running away from what we were doing. But Rick Rubin, eight, nine, ten years ago, when we started doing stuff with him, he encouraged us to feel okay with referencing ourselves. And Rick encouraged us to embrace what we'd been doing in the past, and feel good about it.

James: So putting this song together, we're thinking old school. Old school as like, I think, "Disposable Heroes."

Lars: That's a song from back in the day.

*("Disposable Heroes" by METALLICA)*

James: That was just a reference like, "How did we arrange that song? What did we do? What makes that song work so good?"

*("Disposable Heroes" by METALLICA)*

Lars: In "Disposable Heroes" before the chorus, there's a guitar melody that comes in and plays kind of by itself to break up. So it's not just continuous vocals.

*("Disposable Heroes" by METALLICA)*

*(Music fades)*

Lars: So we thought maybe that kind of an idea would be applicable in this song. So in the pre-chorus there is that kind of melody that Kirk plays, based loosely on the similar thing in "Disposable Heroes."

*(Guitar)*

Lars: You'll hear that cycle three has a different sound, because I felt that it should maybe get a little more electric or a little crazier. So we re-recorded that melody in the third cycle with his solo sound.

*(Guitar)*

*(Guitar fades)*

Lars: We try to keep, as you go along in a song, to keep having an additional dynamic and additional thing, something that takes it to a different place, even if it's the same part.

James: We're all living in the Bay Area.

Lars: And we made the decision that we wanted to make this record start to finish at home.

James: HQ is a rehearsal space in the Bay Area that we used to rehearse at all the time. When we would go show up and rehearse their, you know, Journey was on the other side of the wall, rehearsing something, and people selling pot over [laughter] there. There was people squatting upstairs. It was kind of a hang. And around 2001, we decided that that was a place that we wanted to purchase. It's not a beautiful space [laughter]. It's very warehouse district, but when you walk inside, it's just a really comfortable, safe, sanctuary for all of us. So we all feel good there, and we're able to feel really creative.

Lars: We drop the kids at school at 8:15, 8:30, down at the studio at 8:45, and then we'll work until two o'clock, 'til we have got to go pick the kids up, and start driving them around to all their afternoon activities and all that stuff. The time is too precious, and we spend enough time touring and traveling, and we just want to be there to see the kids grow up and all that stuff. So it's like we have to be home. And the two tracking rooms at HQ are *really* big. So it gives you the options of many different sort of micing approaches. It's like, "Okay, here's some close mic's. Here's some overheads, here's some ambient mic's in a different time zone." But on this record we wanted the drums to be a little bit bigger.

*(Drums)*

*(Drums end)*

Lars: My good buddy, Brann, who is the drummer in Mastodon, you know, they toured with us for years on *Death Magnetic*. And I would sit and watch him play all these like crazy drum fills.

*("The Motherload" by MASTODON)*

Lars: We call him the like Mastodon Drum Fill. Occasionally, I get an urge to try to, at least, step in his direction. It doesn't happen often. But once in a while, I have fun with doing that.

*(Drums)*

Lars: [laughter] One take.

James: So I've got this riff in my head, and it plays over and over. And all of a sudden, a vocal line comes up.

Lars: When he starts getting the vocals, first there's the melody, there's the vocal melody. The last thing that happens is lyrics.

James: My voice is a percussive instrument. And then, I put meaning to it.

*(Vocals: "Blacked out / Pop queen, amphetamine / The screams crashed into silence")*

James: At first, it was like the anti rockstar song, shunning fame. Like it's an evil drug, you know, it's something I need to be abstinent from.

*(Vocals: "Light it up / Ah, light it up / Another hit erases all the pain")*

James: You know, we've seen lots of friends just go, because of the excesses out there, the escapes. You know, it takes lives that shouldn't have been taken, that could still be extremely talented and creative people. Anyone who's in the spotlight or in the public eye has a potential to go down a dark, ugly, lonesome path at the end. And I've grown up being in the spotlight, basically, from like 18 on. I don't know what it's like to go hang out in a festival, just in the middle of it all and just enjoy it. And I got lost in drink and the other excesses of the road. You can get lost in that and forget why you're doing stuff. It's a complete loss of reality.

*(Vocals: "Decadence / Death of the innocence / The pathway starts to spiral")*

James: There's no doubt I'm daily saved by music [laughs], and also daily challenged by the effects of music.

*(Vocals: "Same rise and fall / Who cares at all? / Seduced by fame / A moth into the flame")*

James: This saves my life daily. This is therapy for me. We're writing these songs because we need them. We need them to express ourselves. We need them to hear, to make ourselves feel better, you know? And when I write lyrics out and other people enjoy them, that gives a sense of, "Okay. I'm okay. I'm going to be alright."

*(Guitar)*

*(Music ends)*

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Moth into Flame," by Metallica, in its entirety.

*("Moth into Flame" by METALLICA)*

Hrishikesh: Visit [songexploder.net/metallica](http://songexploder.net/metallica) for more info on the band, and the link to buy this song, and to watch the music video for "Moth into Flame."  
Song Exploder is produced by me and Christian Koons, and is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a curated network of extraordinary, cutting edge podcasts made possible by the Knight Foundation and by MailChimp. Learn more at [radiotopia.fm](http://radiotopia.fm).

*("Cranes in the Sky" by SOLANGE)*

Hrishikesh: Next time on Song Exploder, Solange breaks down her song "Cranes in the Sky." You can find Song Exploder on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram @SongExploder. And you can find all the past and future episodes of the show at [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net) or wherever you download podcasts. My name's Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.

*("Cranes in the Sky" by SOLANGE)*

*(Music fades)*

