

**Song Exploder**  
**Nine Inch Nails - The Lovers**  
**Episode 124**

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.

*("The Lovers" by NINE INCH NAILS)*

Hrishikesh: Trent Reznor started Nine Inch Nails in 1988. He released eight albums, sold over 20 million records, won two Grammys and was nominated for 11 more. In 2010, Trent Reznor and his longtime collaborator, Atticus Ross, scored the film *The Social Network*, and they won an Oscar for it. A few years later, in 2016, Atticus Ross joined Nine Inch Nails as an official member. Now as a duo, their most recent release is *Add Violence*, an EP, and in this episode, Trent and Atticus break down a song from it called "The Lovers."

*("The Lovers" by NINE INCH NAILS)*

Trent: I am Trent Reznor.

*(Music fades)*

Trent: A year and a half ago, we decided that the next major Nine Inch Nails work, rather than one kind of lengthy album, we'd split it up into EPs. And that plan is three. The first of which was *Not the Actual Events*, very kind of aggressive return to guitars and confrontational type of music.

*("Branches/Bones" by NINE INCH NAILS)*

Trent: And it was fun, it was exciting.

*(Music fades)*

Trent: The current EP, *Add Violence*, which "The Lovers" is from, when we started that out, it was less defined what it was going to be. It wasn't going to be another punch in the face, we wanted it to kind of feel like it started at that point but went into more potentially experimental direction. The way "The Lovers" began is I had written a kind of poem, I guess. And what it was about was the inevitability of addiction or seduction where one could try to resist, but you're

going to wind up succumbing. And the setting was a visual one of New Orleans, a place I've lived for many years. Hot summer nighttime, gas lamp burning, hundred degrees at 2 in the morning, humid, earthy. And I know that feeling well. I also know the feeling of being a full-fledged addict living in New Orleans in the summer at night [laughter], you know, not wanting to do something but unable to stop myself. So that was where the lyrics took place, and that would end up being the verses.

*(Vocals: "I can hear you breathing / I've slipped out of time again / Leaving all of you behind / And I'm free / To return to the place where I already am / And have always been / If I just really looked and allowed myself / To see")*

Trent: I had these words for the verse, which was the denial phase and the chorus was going to be the release and succumbing to whatever it is. I had a blueprint of the shape of the song, but I had no idea what it was going to sound like.

Atticus: I'm Atticus Ross. Where we originally started was bringing to life a score for this thing that's come out of Trent's head.

Trent: We know each other really well and we're close friends, which is the foundation of our musical relationship. With that kind of familiarity, I can say, "Hey, here's these words that might be terrible and I think it's about this." I can share that with him with a medium amount of skin-on-fire feeling [laughter] that I couldn't do with somebody I didn't know that well.

Atticus: I had the lyric sheet, which I would look at and study. And then we start to piece together what might be the best toolkit to bring this to life.

Trent: We actually talk about it, "Hey, here's the setting of this song," sometimes a literal place or a visual or a vibe that we could both have our own versions of what that is visually in our heads. And it helps us choose arrangement, choose what type of instruments, how can we achieve that? How can we score that scene? How can we create the vocabulary of sound that would be right for that? Because what we've learned a long time ago was too many options lead to paralysis. So it needed that setting, and I know what that feeling is of being sucked into something in that environment. Then we instinctively kind of reach for things that we may not have reached at if we hadn't talked about it. In this case, he was saying, "Let's try the Luminist Garden, and set that up."

*(Luminist Garden)*

Trent: There's a manufacturer named Folktek that makes these weird little boxes that do a variety of things but one that we liked a lot, is

Atticus: The Luminist Garden.

*(Luminist Garden ends)*

Trent: It's like a cigar box with a metal plate on the top with some thick guitar strings kind of sticking out.

Hrishikesh: Just to clarify, if you couldn't tell from their description, the Luminist Garden is not a traditional musical instrument. I saw it in Nine Inch Nails studio before we started recording the interview, and I didn't really know what I was looking at. There aren't any notes to be played on it, it's more of a conceptual sound manipulator. I'll put a link on the Song Exploder website so you can see what it looks like.

Trent: Essentially, what happens is by tapping on that metal top, that gets picked up by a mic, which feeds through a delay and a reverb circuit, and that can create a loop. We kind of thought, "Let's make it sound like fingers tapping on a table, nervous. Something that adds an anxiety, like I'm in the throes of addiction." So we were doing things like dropping keys, and pencils, and hitting it with a hammer,

*(Percussion)*

Trent: banging the table real hard that it's sitting on.

*(Percussion)*

Trent: Just seeing what comes out and trying to make it kind of accidental, capturing these little bits.

*(Percussion)*

Trent: We'll be recording the output of that in Pro Tools. What Atticus will do then is, cut together two or three loops. I'll usually leave for the twenty minutes it takes for that process to happen, and go outside, and get some fresh air, and come in. And suddenly there's a weird tone happening.

*(Drone)*

Atticus: That drone, that's a snippet of the Luminist Garden where the reverb got engaged.

Trent: And that informed the key of the song. He's then cut together this cool polyrhythmic drum loop.

*(Beat)*

Atticus: The rhythm generated by hitting that thing.

*(Drone with beat)*

Trent: And arranged in a way that is much better than it was when I walked out of the room.

*(Music ends)*

Trent: The different mindsets or different hats one has to wear in this environment, one of them is the kind of subconscious, follow the muse, eyes closed; another one, that's radically different, is the editorial. What sucked? What was good? What's the piece that fits with that? I love having him do that part because I can stay in the other mode of not trying to analyze exactly what's going on and still stay subconscious in a way. It keeps this momentum going that neither of us are bogged down too much. And our skill sets complement each other. So it's him arranging stuff. I just kind of bang into things.

*(Drone with beat)*

Trent: The next thing that happened was tuning a kick drum to now sit with that.

*(Beat)*

Trent: Just to anchor it.

*(Drone with beat)*

Trent: That was what got us saying, "Alright, that's the foundation of one part of the track." We knew that was kind of the verse, "So let's see where that leads us."

*(Beat)*

*(Beat ends)*

Trent: So the rhythmic loop led to the tuned kick drum, which felt like a bass. How about an imprecise, unsure guitar that feels a little exploratory and a little apprehensive?

*(Guitars)*

Trent: I just kind of did this circular ascending, descending line of guitars around it,

*(Guitars)*

Trent: that was meant to be kind of serpentine. Like I'm just going to play and purposely kind of not have it be a four bar or eight bar thing. That was played single line a number of times. I was trying to remember what I'd done the time before, but not intensely. Did I stay on that note for three hits or two? And me not explaining to him, Atticus, my intention, just to see what'd happen. And when I came back in the room after he'd arranged it, he just left them sitting on top of each other so they got off, because I wasn't playing it the same way.

*(Guitars)*

Trent: But it sounded cool. The right kind of dream-like, hallucinatory feel like someone slowly spun me around and I'm not sure where I am.

*(Guitars)*

Trent: And it didn't sound overly dissonant. I wanted the whole song to feel seductive, but uneasily seductive. I'd love to take credit for that, but that was just his arrangement that pulled that off.

Atticus: There is a tactile kind of, the humanity has been left in. And I feel that it is an exploration of humanity in one way or another.

*(Guitars end)*

Trent: I think some people think we're real meticulous in the studio. We're not really. When inspiration hits and you get that thing that feels exciting, "Let's, as fast as

we can, see where it leads until it goes away.” You know, there’s plenty of time to bring out the “it sucks” hammer, you know. Let’s not overthink things at the beginning of a creative flow.

Hrishikesh: Did you have a different process back before you two started working together? Was it different when you were on your own?

Trent: We've been doing this so long now that this feels like it always has been this way, but with *Pretty Hate Machine*, there was a lack of understanding how to make a record and that came with its own set of inexperience and intimidation. And *Broken* was kind of the same way. *Downward Spiral*, there was a lot of fear involved because, well, I made a record that people liked.

(Drone)

Trent: And will I ever be able to do that again [laughter], you know? Being in the studio and creating was torturous, high pressure, self imposed. I'm going to work my hardest, but I don't enjoy the act of doing it. A few years later, *The Fragile*, now I'm in the throes of addiction, and my brain is not working at its best, and I'm scared [laughter], you know. So that record took forever, that was two and a half years, working on that album because of fear. I wasn't embracing the process of creating, I was trying to get through it. The pivot for me took place when getting clean, which is when I met Atticus.

(Drone ends)

Trent: Then I was scared if I could do it sober, you know, because I didn't know. And you told yourself enough, you validated terrible behavior by, “Well, I need it, I'm an artist, you know, and that's what these guys did” and that kind of bullshit. But, you know, to my amazement, that's when I feel like I kind of came into my own and I could embrace the process of doing because I was present and we ended up having fun in the studio.

(Synth)

Trent: So back to this track, “The Lovers.”

(Synth)

Trent: A trick we used quite a bit is having monophonic sequencers that don't loop in time. So if it's in 4/4, rather than having a 16 step sequencer, have it 10 steps. It's the same pattern but it's starting in a different spot, which makes it sound completely different as it sits over that drum loop.

*(Beat joins)*

Trent: It adds a complexity that still feels musical. And also, I like the way it rhythmically anchored that drum loop into something that felt like a good foundation that we could sustain for a while to let the vocal breathe.

*(Vocals join: "The center has moved on and all that's left is free / Finally / Finally / Everyone seems to be asleep but me")*

*(Music ends)*

Trent: With these lyrics, it was me allowing myself permission to examine period of my life that I consciously chose not to think about very much and immerse myself in it, in a kind of, "What if the path I'm currently on wasn't really the right one and I just went hard left the other way? What if my true nature is being denied?" It feels kind of dangerous to think about that, but I dared to allow myself to kind of deep dive into what that might be like.

*(Vocals: "To return to the place where I already am / And have always been / If I just really looked and allowed myself / To see")*

Trent: The difficult part of the song was trying to place the verse vocal. What's the right approach? We re-recorded it a couple times trying to find the right process.

Atticus: And a lot of that was to do with delivery as well, where the emphasis was put.

Trent: Let me hit record, I'm going to just talk, what feels kind of natural, drop it in and see how it sits over the music. Part of it is considering what the role of the verse vocal is, in terms of the narrative of the story. You know, it was written in a cut up style that wasn't necessarily linear so it wasn't a story you had to listen to every bit. What if we kind of made it overheard?

*(Vocals, synth, and beat: "I could stop it / Maybe I could stop it (if I wanted to) / But I'm not the one driving anymore / I know who I am")*

Trent: If you want to listen to it, it's there, but it's not in the way. And if you don't want to, you can ignore it like it's a TV set left on while you're doing something else.

*(Music fades)*

Atticus: And in verse 2, you might notice there's talking, and laughing, and whatnot, actually from a TV [laughter].

*(Laughter)*

*(Laughter ends)*

Trent: The whole song structure was meant to be a rhythmic jigsaw puzzle in the verse, that leads to the feeling of release when you got to the chorus.

*(Piano)*

Trent: When choosing sounds or instrumentation or what timbres we want to use, we are thinking about if there's something that feels electronic or unfamiliar, to juxtapose something that feels acoustic and sonically familiar, to avoid everything sounding like science fiction. And then that led to an acoustic piano would anchor it, and would have the kind of firmness, the kind of foundation that could hold the chorus together." It feels like, "Oh OK, I can exhale for a second."

*(Piano)*

Trent: But doesn't sound triumphant because you've given up the fight. You know, I've been resisting, resisting, resisting, "Ah, OK. I'm going to dive in. I'm going to say, if this is what I am, then this is what I am."

Atticus: To me, when I listen to it, I feel connected, emotionally, to this story and a huge part of it is how he's delivered the chorus.

*(Vocals join: "Take me / Into the arms of the lovers")*

Trent: I think I sang that twice and the second time was the best one. And then we didn't go back in and say, "Okay, let me micro-tune that note." "Leave it the way it is." That was him saying this primarily.



Atticus: Trent might feel a little insecure. But this chorus is excellent and not to be discarded because the voice cracked or whatever. A lot of what I like get from music is the humanity, is the imperfections, is the soul, if you like.

*(Vocals with piano: "Take me / Into the arms of the lovers")*

*(Music ends)*

Trent: As much as I enjoyed flirting around with self-destruction, and depression, and staring into the abyss, it caught up with me, and it took me to a place where it wasn't sexy, and it wasn't romantic. It was just, it was death.

*(Guitar)*

Trent: I really didn't want that and I would do anything to get away from that, and needed to make serious life changes, and kind of redefine who I am, and why I'm here. And I feel good about my life right now. I would be happy not ever thinking about that stuff again.

Hrishikesh: Does making a song like this allow you to feel like you don't have to think about it anymore?

Trent: I think I'd be just as happy not having opened that can of worms and thought about it, because I find myself, I dream about it now once in a while, because it's a fresh thing now.

*(Synth joins)*

Trent: I think we made something, artistically, I'm very proud of. But I'm not feeling like, "Man, I'm glad I processed that and was able to work that out of my system." I kind of welcomed it back into my system. I've re-experienced something that, even though, you know, I didn't physically go out and do anything, I have lived it in a way that it's part of me again.

*(Piano)*

*(Music ends)*

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "The Lovers," by Nine Inch Nails, in its entirety.

*("The Lovers" by NINE INCH NAILS)*

Hrishikesh: For more on Nine Inch Nails, visit [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net). You'll find a link to buy the EP on vinyl, and a link to learn more about that box, the Luminist Garden by Folktek.

*("Try Not to Breathe" by R.E.M.)*

Hrishikesh: Next time on Song Exploder, R.E.M. break down "Try Not To Breathe," from their classic album, *Automatic for the People*.

*("Try Not to Breathe" by R.E.M.)*

Hrishikesh: Song Exploder is produced by me, along with Christian Koons, with help from intern Olivia Wood. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a curated network of extraordinary, cutting edge podcasts made possible by listeners like you. Learn more at [radiotopia.fm](http://radiotopia.fm). You can find every episode of Song Exploder at [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net) or wherever you download podcasts. You can find the show on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram @SongExploder. Let me know what you think of this episode. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.

*("Try Not to Breathe" by R.E.M.)*

*(Music ends)*