

Song Exploder
Oneohtrix Point Never - Sticky Drama
Episode 67

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.

Hrishikesh: This episode contains explicit language.

("Sticky Drama" by ONEOHTRIX POINT NEVER)

Hrishikesh: Daniel Lopatin has been making experimental electronic music as Oneohtrix Point Never since 2007. In this episode, he takes apart the song "Sticky Drama" from his 2015 album *Garden of Delete*. Coming up, he'll break down how he created artificial voices, using software for the vocals, and how he sees his songs as pieces of science fiction. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway. You're listening to Song Exploder.

("Sticky Drama" by ONEOHTRIX POINT NEVER)

Daniel: This is Daniel Lopatin, aka Oneohtrix Point Never.

(Music fades)

Daniel: I wanted to conflate really aggressive music with sugary pop progressions, and also sugary textures, and create a psycho scribble, like the way a little kid will psychotically draw in his notebook, and it just has this live wire vibe to it. I got inspired by this particular plugin called Serum, it's just a software synthesizer. The main progression,

(Synth)

Daniel: it was a preset that we tweaked in Serum, and the sound tells you how to play it in a way. That's what I like about presets is they kind of beg to be played some way, and you have to decode them. The obvious way to use that preset was to play it on the higher octaves, and do a kind of like, a hard style EDM beat.

Hrishikesh: Like what, what's a good example?

Daniel: I don't know, I'll just go [mimics EDM beat].

(EDM beat)

Daniel: You know? It's just heinous. And so, let's find some other meaning for this or find some other way to deal with this.

(Synth)

Daniel: The lead vocals, it's a software synthesizer called Chipspeech. I like this sort of saccharin, cartoony, ridiculous voice.

(Chipspeech)

Daniel: The aspect of it that's nice is that I can, you know, input the lyrics, and then play them chromatically. You have these text lines in the window, and you put whatever you want, and essentially you press down on a note that means, read the first syllable. So everything has to be an individuated instance of the note to get through the phrase. So it creates all of these weird difficulties because it's not a natural way to play. Then from there, it got even more complicated and fun, where I can have this kind of gestural, contoured line within a phrase, or within a word. If you just played it on a normal instrument, it would just sound like garbage, but tailored to this, the way that this piece of software is thinking, it just sounds wild.

(Chipspeech)

Daniel: This song requires it like a bounty of, like, moods. So I thought it would be amusing to put the devil on the shoulder of this sugary voice, you know? And so, halfway through, you're introduced to this other character that's like the weird demon vocalist.

(Demon vocalist)

Daniel: What happened there was we used Chipspeech, but we put a vocoder on it as a filter, and then automated in a very granular way, like almost a microscopic way, these formant shifts.

Hrishikesh: If you're wondering what a formant is, if you've ever seen someone's voice displayed as a sound wave on a computer, the sound wave is made up of all

these peaks and valleys. Those peaks are formants, and they're what gives someone's voice its particular character. So that's what Daniel is manipulating.

Daniel: So as he's singing, these filters are opening up and closing on the voice, very small shifts layered upon each other, and with these different shifts at different times. Then redone again, iteratively over and over, until you get something very far away from the original.

(Processed vocals)

Daniel: Essentially, we were just messing around trying to get a different color and see like, "Well, can we get away from Chipspeech a little bit? You know, it worked there as the lead melody, but what else can we do?" Honestly, I didn't even really think it was going to work. I thought it was just going to be absurd at best, and then we can decide if it's music or not, but I was so happy with it.

(Processed vocals)

Daniel: That's a YouTube of, it's a girl who has a YouTube channel where she, I think she generally talks about makeup. She gives makeup tips and stuff. And this particular video, she's, like, having a really bad day. And she's just like, "I, you know, I just hate that, you know, you would be judged for whatever, like just messed up." And she has, like, a little breakdown. And I just loved her voice, but I also love the sentiment of just talking to your audience and being like, "What is wrong with the world?" And then, she reveals this deep existential frustration that she has. I don't know, I thought that that was touching. She is like the bridge between the light and dark, and her voice actually gets pitched down to match the plateau of evil that is that other demonic grind character.

(Processed vocals)

Daniel: I'm not a person that needs to have the WiFi off. I have like 12 tabs open. I'm talking to people, I'm looking at stuff. And so, I think naturally that helps me, it's like just another synthesizer in the room.

(Synth)

Daniel: Somehow I got the phrase "Sticky Drama," which was this website, it was like a gossip website about like kind of like online personalities. I liked that phrase because it was just like a double entendre to me of, that was like, "Oh, that's like

ejaculating for the first time is like sticky drama.” It's that moment where you're totally shocked. You have this new relationship to your body that you've never had that's very dramatic.

(Synth ends)

Daniel: Instead of making music that might work for films, I think of it as the complete inversion. I don't think this works at all for films; I think it works like a film. The way a director working on a film might make certain decisions about putting you in an environment, like you're looking at the most private, most inner thoughts of an adolescent teen and their desire. And this is like the music that might be generated out of those desires. That's probably the best way I can put it that it's some kind of hybrid of adolescent frustration. And then the entry, the way we enter into the piece of music, where you have those

(Piano with strings)

Daniel: layers of piano and plucks, and that's kind of like the Greek choir. That's kind of like the expository thing that says, “Okay, within this melancholic landscape where the sky is red and there's smoke everywhere, let's go very specifically now into this house where these things are happening.” So that's how I try to set things up and think, you know, almost kind of cinematographic style.

(Piano with strings end)

Daniel: Like, I don't actually love it to go too nuts with drums. I really just want them to almost be subliminal. They're just so easy to screw up, and I just liked the kind of knucklehead quality to it. That's all you want.

(Synth with beat)

Daniel: See, that's a thing that no one would ever really hear unless you isolated it, because it's so blended into the lattice work of that moment that's so thick. That was a synth called Enzyme, and it was like a really buggy synth that crashed all the time, but it was the most

(Synth)

Daniel: corrosive, gray, poisonous sound.

(Synth)

Daniel: I really love that synth. It's like a little sweetener for the phrase, but each one of those layers in that section are so strange, and so awesome, and satisfying, and ultimately you just hear it as like a big casserole. But it is kind of nice to hear it on its own.

(Synth)

Daniel: To me, what I'm doing is a bit closer to, like, what a science fiction writer does. My job, as like a science fiction musician, is to speculate on these kinds of imaginary modes of music that, to me, don't exist

(Music ends)

Daniel: yet.

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Sticky Drama," by Oneohtrix Point Never, in its entirety.

("Sticky Drama" by ONEOHTRIX POINT NEVER)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net for more information on Oneohtrix Point Never. Special thanks, this episode, to Breakmaster Cylinder, who turned Daniel Lopatin's description of hardstyle EDM into an actual piece of music.

Daniel: I don't know, I'll just go [mimics EDM beat].

Hrishikesh: If there are any linguists, speech pathologists, or acoustic engineers who would like to correct my definition of a formant, please send your angry emails to contact@songexploder.net.

Next time on Song Exploder,

Iggy: I'm Iggy Pop.

("American Valhalla" by IGGY POP)

Hrishikesh: Song Exploder is a proud member of the Radiotopia network from PRX. Radiotopia is made possible with support from Mailchimp, the Knight foundation, and you, the listeners. You can find Song Exploder and all the other Radiotopia shows at radiotopia.fm. Thanks for listening.

(“American Valhalla” by IGGY POP)

(Music ends)

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