

Song Exploder
Phoenix - Ti Amo
Episode 112

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.

("Ti Amo" by PHOENIX)

Hrishikesh: Phoenix is a Grammy-winning band from Versailles, France. They started putting out music in 1999, and in June 2017, they released their sixth album, *Ti Amo*. In this episode, singer Thomas Mars and guitarist Laurent Brancowitz break down the song "Ti Amo," the title track from that album.

("Ti Amo" by PHOENIX)

(Music fades)

Branco: Practical details are very important in art. A few art critics get it, but the ones that do understand, you know, that, you know, Renaissance is linked to the pigments, you know, the oil they were using, all those things, they make a difference in the end.

("Ti Amo" by PHOENIX)

Branco: I am Branco. Laurent Brancowitz, and I play the guitar usually, but this time on this album, less guitar, more keyboard. Our process is based on stream of consciousness, so we are all sitting in a studio. It's a place called La Gaîté Lyrique in Paris, it's an old operetta theater. This song, it started with a loop, a percussion loop.

(Percussion)

Branco: This album is the first one we did with Ableton Live. We wanted something new, because the routine is what we are trying to escape, so when you learn a new software or a new instrument, you have this genuine feeling of being a beginner, and we love this feeling. We're always looking for this emotion, I think. This teenage emotion of being a semi-professional [laughter]. That's our motto, I guess. So we have 3 occurrences of Ableton that are linked, a network. It's not a centralized brain, it's like 3 brains, which for us is very important because we

hate, you know, the monarchic structure, we are more democratic, chaotic. So I could, for instance, this song, I would launch a beat. This is a sample from music from the Sahara, from North Africa. We listen to a lot of music from this part of the world. There's an influence that is very strong, actually. A Somalian band called Dur-Dur Band.

("Dooyo" by DUR-DUR BAND)

Branco: They are very funky, jazz influenced, and, for us, it's a field of pure beauty.

("Dooyo" by DUR-DUR BAND)

(Music fades)

(Percussion)

Branco: So I started with this loop, and I remember Deck, who was synchronized, he launched another beat on top of it,

(Drums join)

(Percussion fades)

Branco: like a straight drum beat. And this is actually a beat sample from

(Drums end)

Branco: ourself, it's from "Long Distance Call."

("Long Distance Call" by PHOENIX)

(Drums)

Branco: So yeah we sampled this actually from the record, it's not the stems.

(Drums)

(Beat)

Branco: If you hear carefully, I think you could hear the resonance of the crash.

(Drums)

(Percussion joins)

Branco: We love the loops, we love the mystique, you know, in the loop. We've been raised with samplers, and so, we love those very mathematical, endless repetition of the same.

(Music ends)

Branco: And then, I played this bassline.

(Bass)

Branco: I have a little keyboard for bass. It's connected to Ableton, and it's a sample of a Wurlitzer, plus added to a sample of a very cheap mini keyboard, the PSS series we loved, the mini keys from Yamaha. We sample a lot of our keyboards, like every note. It's a very long process, but it makes it possible for us to play all our keyboards on stage, which is amazing.

(Bass)

(Bass ends)

Branco: When we write, we do not judge. When we listen back, that's when the brain kicks in. But the first moments we really do not know what we are doing. We know that often our first instinct is wrong, so now we do not judge at all. We always record everything, you know, during actually the process of inventing it. We have this huge network recording technique that allows us to record everything we do in kind of multi-track.

Thomas: There's also a voice recorder that's there for ideas that Chris handles in the band.

(Voice recorder)

Thomas: My name is Thomas Mars, and I sing in the band. It had this quality that's almost like a, to me, like a Mediterranean disco type of feel, like something to the drums and the bass that sounds like you're in a Greek disco, imaginary Greek disco.

Hrishikesh: What is that like? I've never been to a Greek Disco.

Thomas: Me neither, that's why it's, you know, it's the fantasy. I've been to Greece, and I saw those disco during the day. I went there when my kid was a baby, so we'd stay at home, and I had friends that would go at night and would come back in the morning, and tell me how great it was. So, it's the fantasy of going there. So the Greek disco, those themes were starting to appear as we were going.

Branco: That's synthesizer.

(Synth)

Thomas: That's the Greek disco to me.

Branco: [laughter] Yeah, it's true, the Greek vibe.

(Synth)

Branco: So we would play this for maybe one hour, played around this vibe, and Chris has it all on tape.

Thomas: And if there's something we liked from that voice recorder,

Branco: Then we pick up the parts we love, and then, we try to turn all this mess into a song.

(Bass, percussion, and beat)

Hrishikesh: In the finished version of the song, it begins with just these bass and drum elements, but there's an EQ effect on it that filters out some of the frequencies.

(Processed bass, percussion, and beat)

Branco: The filter came very soon with Ableton Live. I had just a button with a filter on it. At first, it was to replicate the lo-fi speakers you would have in a supermarket, but then we used it more like a kind of EDM tool, you know. We love the fact that it was such a cheap trick that brought us back to when we are beginning to play music.

(Guitar)

Thomas: Chris bought a Fender 12-string guitar that ended up being on the record a lot.

(Guitar)

Branco: And then, there's this pedal-like harmonizer, Pitchfork Electro Harmonix. These pedals are really cool. The sound of the harmonies is weird, it's almost like synthesizers.

(Guitar)

Thomas: The fact that he had the 12-string plus the harmonizer, I couldn't tell what was doing what, so I think when you see in your other bandmate, you know, like, "What is that?" I think it's always motivating [laughter].

Branco: It sounded like he came up with some crazy harmonization, you know, on the spot, you know, weird fingering. But no, it was just a few notes [laughter] and the pedal [laughter].

(Guitar)

Branco: And it's from the original take. For some reason, we ended up using a very small, cheap amp.

Thomas: Something we bought for small acoustic sessions on the previous tour. And it was bleeding a lot.

(Guitar)

Branco: The muted guitars, it's kind of a trademark, so we get a bit tired of it, but with this pedal that was harmonizing, and suddenly it sounded fresh.

(Guitar)

(Guitar ends)

Branco: And then, the rhythm.

(Guitar)

Branco: "Clink, clink, clink, clink." That's more like triplet. That's one element that we felt was something that was new to our ear. It's like a question and response between like the [sings one guitar part] and the more rhythmic, "clink, clink, clink."

(Guitar)

(Guitar fades)

Thomas: The lyrics on that song, it's such the unconscious talking. I love the fact that I'm foreign to the English language, and when we write songs, we cherish those things, we try to highlight them as much as possible.

(Vocals: "I love you! Ti amo! Je t'aime! ¡Te quiero!")

Thomas: So, right there, I think the "I love you, ti amo, je t'aime, te quiero," that gimmick came quickly with the words, because that's the hardest for me on the chorus is when you don't have the words. To try to find what you're going to sing the loudest to, has to be genuine. You know, I always think of kids when they draw something, it's always beautiful, it's always innocent. And if you, as an adult, you try to reproduce a kid drawing, it always feels forced, and it's always ugly, and you're busted, like you can tell.

Hrishikesh: In your mind, who's singing these words? Who's the narrator?

Thomas: It's like this Italian bratty kid, who's really confident, territorial guy, does a lot of attitude. You know, "standing by the jukebox, Champagne or Prosecco?"

(Vocals: "I'll be standing by the jukebox / Champagne or Prosecco? / Playing classics by the Buzzcocks / Battiato and Lucio")

Thomas: The references are "Battiato and Lucio," it's Lucio Battisti. And what's on the jukebox is not, you know, "Hotel California," it's these Italian classics that felt really appealing to me.

Branco: The lyrics are always great in Lucio Battisti's songs. There's one where, it's a guy who's in love with this girl, and you know that she doesn't want him, you can feel it.

("Il Tempo Di Morire" by LUCIO BATTISTI)

Branco: The song starts, he describes his motorbike, “motocicletta.”

(“Il Tempo Di Morire” by LUCIO BATTISTI)

Branco: And then, he says, you know, the [speaks French].

Thomas: “How many horsepower?”

Branco: Horsepower, he describes, you know, like Craigslist [laughter]. And then, he says, “It’s all yours if you say yes,” you know, “I give it to you.” The lyrics in Italian, it’s, “Non dire no.” “Please don’t say no.”

(“Il Tempo Di Morire” by LUCIO BATTISTI)

Branco: We stole it, a bit, from him.

(Vocals: “Don’t tell me, don’t tell me no / Don’t tell me, don’t tell me no no”)

Branco: I mean, when you said, “Don’t tell me no,” you know the guy has already lost. That’s what I like. In this universe of values [laughter], of teenage values, the universe of young boys, you know, who are crazy, suddenly crazy in love, and what can they do, you know? It’s so powerful, this desire.

Thomas: To us, it’s a love song. It’s youth love. Confused. It’s teenage innocence with a huge distortion because boys and girls, their world are so different, they are so confused, where it’s just two worlds that don’t communicate, really. That’s something I could really relate to, worlds drift apart just because of one look or one story that you hear. Then there’s a thing that we thought of that could be strange and offensive because it comes from, you know, visually, something we don’t really do. So there was this part that was, “Open up your legs,” that was, to me, like a really harsh, but I really, the vision was, my brother-in-law, Roman,

Hrishikesh: That’s filmmaker Roman Coppola.

Thomas: created a cartoon that’s called *Sex City*, and in *Sex City*, you have this series of legs opening in cartoon, almost like a fantasy world, like a pinball machine type of reference. That was a genuine, pure loving, having those fantasy, so I think that’s a really visual part for me that I could never dissociate with that.

(Processed vocals: “Open up your legs”)

Thomas: I found interest in more effects that we played with on vocals. So the freeze functions of reverbs, these never ending frozen reverbs.

(Processed vocals)

(Processed vocals: "I don't like it as it is / A disaster scenario")

(Processed vocals: "No, no / No, no")

Thomas: Everything that could make your voice sort of a fantasy voice, or someone else being character. That was really interesting to me, like it felt like it was a new world opening. And also, you know, you get bored of your own voice sometimes. Later on, in the song, we wanted an airplane sound. So I Googled like, "747," and the first one that came up was like a KLM flight. Already, the flight was good like, you know, Amsterdam to Rio or something, and the sound was great.

(Airplane sound)

Thomas: And that ended up on the record.

Branco: There is a Morse code in it [mimics Morse code].

(Morse code)

Branco: Morse is a self-generator of rhythms, and so, we use it a lot, actually, as a tool to create patterns.

(Morse code ends)

Branco: We have this software that, you know, you put like sentences, and it transforms it into a MIDI file. So I didn't have to learn another actual Morse [laughter] system, which I couldn't, I'm too old now for learning anything. We just bought a Morse, you know, key, they call it a Morse key, from the Hungarian army, and we MIDI-fied it, so now I have a real Morse MIDI generator. It's like the perfect piano key, you know, you can adjust the distance. The best instrument ever, but it just plays one note like a triangle [laughter].

Hrishikesh: [laughter]

(Morse key)

Thomas: We played a lot with childhood references of French boogie, or, you know, remembering songs that we grew up listening to that had this perfectly off, always slightly awkward, playfulness to it. So whenever it was those small bits of spoken French,

(Spoken French)

Thomas: it's moments that are meant to be the most dishonest, you know, they're almost clichés of themselves, we use them as tools. We treat it like something that existed before, we always wanted to create something that existed in a fantasy world growing up. Not something that's original but find footage from our past.

(Spoken French)

Thomas: We used a Chinese conference mic, you know, like what they have at United Nations, that's like 30 dollars, I think. And it has a really small spectrum, it's high mids, and that's it.

Branco: It was actually a mic for announcement at this museum. We're always attracted to this weird, you know, they look sexy to us, you know, those weird little things. We used it a lot, and we struggled because it's such a bad quality that, during the mix, it was a struggle.

(Spoken French)

Thomas: That's the Chinese microphone. Something that sums up the way we function is that Chinese microphone is going into the Harrison mixing board that we bought that "Thriller" was made on.

(Synth, percussion, and beat)

Thomas: So, it's a combination of the worst

Branco: [laughter]

Thomas: and the very best [laughter]. Professional and amateur.

Branco: That's our life. That's our band.

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Ti Amo," by Phoenix, in its entirety.

("Ti Amo" by PHOENIX)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net for a link to buy this track, and to learn more about Phoenix. I recorded this interview with the band in the green room at Jimmy Kimmel Live before they performed on that show. I put up the video of them playing "Ti Amo" on that day, and you can see they're all playing the Morse key. So go to songexploder.net/phoenix to check that out. 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 the Knight Foundation and listeners like you. Learn more at radiotopia.fm. Next time on Song Exploder, Grizzly Bear.

("Four Cypresses" by GRIZZLY BEAR)

Hrishikesh: You can find me on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram @SongExploder. And you can find all the past and future episodes of the show at songexploder.net or wherever you download podcasts. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.

("Four Cypresses" by GRIZZLY BEAR)

(Music fades)