

**Song Exploder**  
**Poliça - Smug**  
**Episode 9**

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.

*("Smug" by POLIÇA)*

Hrishikesh: Ryan Olson is a member of the band Poliça. Though he doesn't perform with them live, he put the band together, produces the songs, and co-writes them. I interviewed Ryan in his bedroom studio in Minneapolis. Coming up, he breaks down the song "Smug," from their 2013 album *Shulamith*. He also talks about two pieces of equipment that have helped shape the sound of Poliça, and how he was introduced to one of them by Justin Vernon of Bon Iver, and to the other by DJ Shadow.

*("Smug" by POLIÇA)*

*(Music fades)*

Ryan: My name's Ryan Olson, and I produce Poliça. The rest of the band is: Chris Bierden on bass, and then, two drummers Ben Ivascu and Drew Christopherson. Vocals is Channy Leaneagh. I had a project called Gayngs that I recruited like 25 people I knew to play soft rock, basically. And Channy was one of them. We played shows together with other bands or whatever. We knew each other in that way, but she asked me to do something, you know, I had already been doing like five other projects I was working on at the time. I wasn't really trying to start new bands or, no, I'm always trying to start new bands. That's like the funnest thing to do is just to start a band. And I said, "Alright, we need to get Ben and Drew on drums. Chris Bierden was over here playing bass on another project I was working on. I was like, "Ah, you want to try playing on this?" And he just slayed it. And I was like, "This might be an actual band." Because normally if I have someone come over to record at my house, I'm not trying to make a band for you or whatever, I just want to make studio stuff. But after we got done tracking, I was just like, "I might have to ask you to play this live. We might have to actually do this a little bit." I didn't know how much they were going to have to actually go out and do it. "Smug" is sort of a rare one where we

actually, and Channy and I were up here, actually writing. This is a song she had from a long time ago, I believe I'm not really sure. So she had like a keyboard part and like the vocal, how she wanted the song to go, basically. She started playing the synth, and I processed the synth as she was playing it. I messed around with arpeggios and stuff on it while she was playing it live. There's two synth parts in here. And they're both from the same take of Channy playing the keyboards. They're just both treated differently. One I made as an arpeggiated thing.

*(Synth)*

Ryan: And the other one is just more ambient-y.

*(Synth)*

Ryan: This is all soft, synthy, horrible things. After she played it, I wanted to work with it in that way, I guess. I didn't have a grand plan for it at all. It was just like, "Hanging out up here, getting drunk, and playing around on keyboards."

*(Synth)*

Ryan: I just like made a boom bap.

*(Beat)*

Ryan: A really basic thing. And then, the shaker part,

*(Shaker)*

Ryan: actually, I ended up running that patch, which is an 808 Ableton thing, and then I ran it through like my Pioneer EFX-1000, which is what I use to process almost everything. Yeah, there were like three of them in the band.

*(Beat joins)*

Ryan: All the pickups and smears and stuff that are happening are from the Pioneer. I don't program it, because that would be super boring, and not as fun, and not as fast. For this thing, it's this kind of loose, weird, digital dub scene, you know? Stuff's best just like played out.

*(Music ends)*

Ryan: I just think this is like one of the best delay pedals around. It's like one of the first pieces of gear I bought when I, like, first started doing electronic stuff in like 2000. I found it watching DJ shadow play once. And he was playing with the old EFX-500 and this is the kind of stuff he was doing.

*("What Does Your Soul Look Like (Part 1-Blue Sky Revisit)" by DJ Shadow)*

Ryan: I'm having this insane view of watching how he was doing his shit. And that pedal is kind of blowing my mind. I was like, "How? That is insane." It's unlike any other delay pedal. I mean, it looks like a horrible DJ tool, and it is for the most part, but when it's taken out of the DJ context, it's a really fun delay pedal. I go to it often for most everything that I guess I think in processing with the Pioneer. Yeah, it's definitely a big player in how I process music, literally and mentally. While we recorded the vocals, and the bass, and the drums, all at April Base in Justin Vernon's studio in Wisconsin. The studio's called April Base. He had these dividers in there, so we could play, have both the drummers play at the same time. It's a really a percussive band. The drummers took that beat and broke it up,

*(Drums)*

Ryan: alternating down and upstrokes on the hi-hats, so it's the same, they're both playing the beat together.

*(Drums)*

*(Drums fade)*

Ryan: The only other instrument, you know, melodic instrument is the bass. Bass is a major player in what the hell is happening, you know? So Chris gets to craft the songs just as much as we do, anybody else, really.

*(Bass)*

Ryan: Chris is just insanely talented in general, but his bass playing, he's got such a groove, and he's just such a smart musician. If we're going to have one stringed instrument, it's definitely worthwhile. His pocket is so perfect for it. And he's like

just sensibility in general. When we first started recording Gayngs, Justin Vernon laid down a part that is the first thing he did, is this song “Last Prom on Earth.” He, like, does a super like Bone Thugs-n-Harmony vibe thing that's all autotuned.

*(“The Last Prom on Earth” by GAYNGS)*

Ryan: And I was just like, “Ah, fuck. I don't want to do this, I don't think.” I just didn't want to be utilizing Auto-Tune at the time, but Justin kind of changed my grip.

*(Music ends)*

Ryan: He crushes it first off, so that helps. It's a pretty good sales pitch to anyone to keep playing with that pedal.

*(Processed vocals)*

Ryan: The Helicon, TC Helicon VoiceLive pedal, she was using it for Gayngs on tour, and then has had fun, you know, the idea of just having a weird processed voice is otherworldly. I think she was just really drawn to that as a new tool to, like, play with.

*(Processed vocals)*

Ryan: It has had a lot of depth to like what Channy can do or how she thinks about how her parts work, you know, just using the harmonies, just different textures, and she can add to her voice, has helped her, I think, in songwriting.

*(Processed vocals)*

*(Music ends)*

Ryan: We were just having way too much fun with it. Usually, I try to follow the fun compass as much as possible. And it's been the divining rod for everything. It's like, “What is exciting for us right now, you know?”

Hrishikesh: And now, here's “Smug,” by Poliça.

*(“Smug” by POLIÇA)*

Hrishikesh: Visit [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net) to find links to Poliça and their music. You can find all the past and future episodes of Song Exploder at [songexploder.net](http://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](http://radiotopia.fm). My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.

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