

Song Exploder
Sleater-Kinney - The Future Is Here
Episode 165

Thao: 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 Thao Nguyen.

("The Future Is Here" by SLEATER-KINNEY)

Thao: Sleater-Kinney was formed in 1994 by singer and guitarist Corin Tucker and singer and guitarist Carrie Brownstein. Drummer Janet Weiss was a member of the band from 1997 until 2019. In *Time Magazine* in 2001, author and critic Greil Marcus named Sleater-Kinney "America's Best Band." Over the years, they've made nine albums, including this year's *The Center Won't Hold*, which was produced by Annie Clark of St. Vincent. In this episode, Corin Tucker and Carrie Brownstein break down how the song "The Future Is Here" was made. It began with a visit to the LA music venue, Zebulon.

("The Future Is Here" by SLEATER-KINNEY)

(Music fades out)

Corin: This is Corin Tucker from Sleater-Kinney.

Carrie: And this is Carrie Brownstein, also from Sleater-Kinney.

Carrie: So Corin was visiting me in L.A. and I said there's this really great performance art/comedy night that I go to once a month at Zebulon. It's called Weirdo Night, and we saw a performer named Joseph Keckler there, who is basically an opera singer.

("Strangers from the Internet" by JOSEPH KECKLER)

(Music ends)

Corin: There was a whole performance art aspect to his performance as well.

Carrie: Yeah, it was beautiful and funny and

Corin: Sad?

Carrie: Yeah, a little heartbreaking. Anyway, I feel like you wrote this song after that.

Corin: I did.

Carrie: It's really energizing to leave a night of performance, especially something that isn't necessarily right in your wheelhouse, and think, "Oh I want to go home and write music after this."

Corin: Yeah so I saw his performance and I was floored by his vocals, and we kept talking about like, "Oh, he's got such a gorgeous voice. What if we worked with him or someone like that? What if we had like a male voice on the album? You know what would it be like for me to write with like a male voice and a female voice? What if it's a duet?" And I just did it on a whim of like I got inspired by Weirdo Night and, you know, threw this thing down on my computer.

(Beat along with bass)

Corin: This was our first record that we had written this way, demoed in GarageBand. You know, it was really the first time where I had demoed a full song. I mean mostly, Carrie and I would work on things together and come up with guitar lines together, so this was a really different process for me. So I was kind of fumbling my way through it.

(Bass)

Corin: That bass is just one of the like very basic Apple bass sounds that you can do. And I literally am there on my like computer-typewriter keyboard.

(Bass ends)

Carrie: That is crazy to me.

Corin: [Laughter]

Carrie: I don't think I knew that. I'm going to buy you a keyboard.

Corin: I know [laughter]. That's just all I had and I was like brand new to like writing on the computer.

Carrie: I like the novice quality to me, I feel like we've played guitar for so many years, and sometimes that rudimentary relationship to an instrument is actually the most inspired one. And I think that's why we didn't, we wrote very few songs on guitar. We also needed to kind of have more of a proof of concept, you know, when you're sending things back and forth, you're not in the same room as your bandmates to say, "Well this is my idea," and you just start talking about it. You're really actually sending it to ostensibly an audience. They're your bandmates when they're in the room, but when they're just listening at home, they're an audience and you have to kind of prove something to them. So I think we went further in the demo versions than we usually did.

Corin: Yeah, I really loved it because I wrote the verse in a lower register than I've sang on a Sleater-Kinney record.

(Demo vocals along with beat and bass: "I start my day on a tiny screen / Try to connect the words, they're right in front of me")

Corin: And I think I sent it to Carrie and she was like, "Yeah, I like it."

Carrie: Yeah. I don't hear Corin singing very low. You know, she doesn't use that register. And you know, as someone who appreciates the high caterwauls, scrawling version of Corin's voice, we've called that the "tool" before [laughter] in our band, it's a very powerful singing voice. But you know when you've been working with someone for so long and you hear something that sounds different, I think your ear is drawn to that, and I was really enthused by it. And also, I don't know, it was kind of sexy but disaffected [laughter].

(Demo vocals along with beat and bass: "I read the news, I can't make sense of it / And I don't recognize what is my place in it")

Corin: And I was like, "Okay, well, should we get a hold of Joseph Keckler and ask him to sing it?" I think Annie was like, "No, I want you to sing it."

Carrie: The producer on this album is Annie Clark, who also goes by St. Vincent. She is a very accomplished singer-songwriter-guitarist Grammy winning actually, and a friend of ours. And this is the first album that she has produced so we feel lucky. It was actually Janet's idea to work with Annie. She's someone I've known for a long time, we've all known her. But also has a history with this band, was a fan, coming in to figure out a new way of putting things together with the same parts.

Corin: When Annie listened to the demo, she really liked it, but she was like, “Well, definitely you should be singing this.” I was like [laughter], “Really?” Because in my mind I definitely thought like we were going to have some other guest voice. I liked the idea of like a male perspective and a female perspective coming together and singing together on the chorus, it’s like they both are longing for connection. So for her to say, “Well no I really want you to sing it,” I was like, “Well it still needs, to me, to be two different characters.” So I wanted to make the two vocals very different from each other.

(Vocals alternating between lower voice and upper voice: “I start my day on a tiny screen / I end my day on a tiny screen / Try to connect the words, they’re right in front of me”)

Corin: I had this freedom on my mind that I was actually writing for a male singer but to then take that and explore just being that character myself was very freeing. There’s so many different voices that a songwriter can explore that don’t have to be tied to your own gender or your own body in any way. That’s a really freeing element of writing.

(Vocals: “I walk to work out on the city streets / No one speaks to me, their stony faces beat”)

Carrie: When I hear the stems on this song like of your vocals, I can recall Annie trying to elicit a very specific feeling and not just, “Let’s get the notes.” You can never just take for granted that your only job is to sing this melody you wrote.

Corin: I was having a really hard time with the low register. And she had me come back several times and on this one day, for whatever reason, suddenly just the clouds or whatever cleared for me, and I could hit all the low notes [laughter] that I had written.

(Vocals in the lower register: “I start my day on a tiny screen / Try to connect the words, they’re right in front of me”)

Carrie: The vocals kind of dictate where everything else is going to land, and what sort of space it takes up sonically. So Corin has this great melody, I’ll find my way into it, around it.

(Vocals in the higher register along with guitar: “I end my day on a tiny screen / I try to reach for you through the empty sheets”)

Carrie: I still think with Corin and I in terms of point/counterpoint and even when I'm not singing counter to her, which we haven't done on a couple records actually, I still think of my guitar as a conversational element in our songs, playing off her vocal melody.

(Vocals along with guitar: "Tell me if you feel like you are lost and alone / I am your friend, you can cover me / Just come over here and give me everything")

(Guitar)

Carrie: Those swampy, seasick chords. I think I had the tone turned down on the guitar, not having that brightness, but just really getting a sense of like the friction and the intensity with which you like strum, you know. I think when you roll tone off sometimes you can really sort of feel the weight of like the pick or fingers across the strings, and I like that.

(Guitar abruptly ends)

Carrie: Yeah that's an edit. Cutting that off, there's a lot of little moments like that, trying to mix things that felt kind of fluid with the sense of like abruptness. And so, there are a lot of things that felt sort of like prematurely stopped. That's a classic Annie production, she would just, you know. Cian Riordan was our engineer, and Cian would say like, "OK, we'll fade that." She was like, "No, no, no, a tighter cut, a tighter, you know like."

(Beat)

Carrie: I wanted something that was like kind of a backbeat for the song that sounded like this churning industrial city. So Cian programmed something and then, and then when Janet came in, obviously, Janet drummed on it.

(Drums)

Carrie: You know, if we were like sending stuff back and forth, we would send without drums. Because it's just like you want a drummer to have a sense of possibility. So it was like, "You can listen to this programmed stuff or here's the version without it to just come in fresh." And the songs would really take a leap with the real drums.

(Drums)

Carrie: Cian, the engineer, is great with drums and is a drummer himself. And when Janet was playing, she would ask him to put the effects in her headphones so that she could imagine and get into the world of the song, so that it felt like her drum kit was not just what was in front of her, but had endless possibilities. So I think some of the stuff you hear is probably what she actually was also listening to in order to come up with the part.

(Drums end)

Corin: Annie came up with a whole intro, I mean she wrote this beautiful, sad melody for the intro that I think really adds to setting the scene of the song.

(Synths)

Corin: Something that was really exciting about this record is that we were adding this low end that Sleater-Kinney's never really done before because we're a two-guitar band that never had a bass player on our records. And so by using these synth basses, we were able to just dip into this whole other area sonically that we hadn't done before and that we were really excited about.

(Vocals along with synths: "Na na na na na, na na na na na / Na na na na na na")

Corin: We definitely arranged with Annie in the studio. The na na's were a guitar line that I had as the bridge.

Carrie: Oh, right.

Corin: I had doo doo doo doo doo.

(Guitar)

Corin: And she was like, "Oh, that, we're going to do that"

Carrie: Right.

Corin: "in the chorus as a na na."

(Layered vocals: "Na na na na na, na na na na na / Na na na na na na")

Carrie: Lots of layering of those vocals. The verses speak of a sense of loneliness, they're sung alone. And it gets me every time when Corin says, "Never have I felt so goddamn lost and alone."

(Vocals: "Never have I felt so goddamn lost and alone")

Carrie: You know, Corin has always been able to cut through the BS lyrically and just say something so plaintive and earnest and still get you in the gut. And I just love, I love that line, I love how she sings it. It's so honest. It's just so laid bare.

(Synth)

Corin: Something that I think Weirdo Night was really good at showing was people who are just longing to be seen as who they really are and to be accepted for that. And it definitely brought out another level of exploration, of sadness, of depression, of longing for connection.

Carrie: So the choruses come in, and the narrator is joined by many, many people in order to uplift the song and this singer, and the listener as well. This song does deal with a lot of despair and themes that are murky and a little bit hard to wade through. So we wanted to counter that with catchiness and also with a bunch of people singing so that you might feel less alone.

(Vocals along with synths: "I need you more than I ever have / Because the future's here and we can't go back / I need you more than I ever have / Because the future's here and we can't go back")

(Music ends)

Thao: And now, here is "The Future Is Here," by Sleater-Kinney, in its entirety.

("The Future Is Here" by SLEATER-KINNEY)

Thao: Visit songexploder.net to learn more about Sleater-Kinney, and for a link to buy or stream this song. There's also info on Joseph Keckler, Weirdo Night at Zebulon, and a link to Annie Clark's own episode of Song Exploder, about a St. Vincent song.

This episode was edited by executive producer Hrishikesh Hirway. The team also includes producer Christian Koons, production assistant Nick Song, illustrator Carlos Lerma, and me, Thao Nguyen. I'm guest hosting the podcast

for the year. Special thanks to Joseph Keckler, Mac Burrus, and Olivia Wood. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a collection of independent podcasts. You can learn more about all of the shows, and find out how you can support at radiotopia.fm. You can also find Song Exploder on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter @SongExploder, and you can find me @thaogetstaydown. My name is Thao Nguyen, thanks for listening.

© 2020 Translucence