

Song Exploder
Thao & The Get Down Stay Down - Astonished Man
Episode 69

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: If you haven't heard the news yet, Thao Nguyen, from the band, Thao & The Get Down Stay Down, is taking over for me as the host of this podcast, starting in January 2019. I'm going to step a little further into the background, and she'll be the one interviewing the artists, and you'll hear her voice introducing each episode. So I wanted to reissue the episode from April 2016, where she was the guest, breaking down one of her own songs. You can get to know her better if you missed it the first time around, or re-listen to it, if you heard it then. Thao and I have hung out a few times in person. But when we did the interview for this episode, it was over the phone, and it was the first time we'd spoken. By the time the hour had passed, it seemed clear to me that she was a kind, smart, and sensitive person who was thoughtful about art and process. For all those reasons, I'm so excited that soon she'll be hosting Song Exploder in my place. OK, here we go. This episode contains explicit language.

Thao: My name is Thao Nguyen of the band, Thao & The Get Down Stay Down. I was reading Marilynne Robinson's novel *Gilead*, and there is this character who is a black sheep or an outcast of his family, and he's returned after several years of being completely out of touch. And he's about to leave again and, basically, break his father's heart. And there's this passage where he's asking forgiveness from a family friend.

("Gilead" by MARILYNNE ROBINSON: Then he stopped, and looked at me, and said, "You know, I'm doing the worst possible thing again, leaving now. Glory will never forgive me")

Thao: This character, and the way that he's developed and rendered struck me so deeply. And it reminded me so much of my dad in this one passage in particular, sort of brought me closer to understanding my dad, and gave me a kind of compassion and a curiosity about him that I hadn't entertained before. Wondering what kind of person he had been all these years that I didn't know him. And I just started weeping. And I immediately started writing "Astonished Man."

("Astonished Man" by THAO & THE GET DOWN STAY DOWN)

Hrishikesh: Thao & The Get Down Stay Down released the album *A Man Alive* in March 2016. Coming up in this episode, Thao talks about working with Merrill Garbus of Tune-Yards, and why their friendship was so important to the production of the song. But first, here's Thao talking a little bit more about the subject of this song "Astonished Man," her father.

("Astonished Man" by THAO & THE GET DOWN STAY DOWN)

(Music fades)

Thao: He was very charismatic, and he was around when I was a kid, but not necessarily a responsible figure. He actually was very reckless, and a source of great turmoil and turbulence for us. But I adored him, and then he left when I was a kid, 11 or 12 or something. And then, he just kind of, just kind of phased out. I named the record *A Man Alive* because he is alive and well, I assume, and that I am, and that we're, you know, that we could both physically be capable of being in touch, but we don't, and it's very peculiar to me. I went up north, I live in San Francisco, and I went up north outside of the city and I, a friend of mine let me borrow his cabin. I just trapped myself with a couple instruments and a notebook, and tried. I demo as soon as I'm done with the lyrics.

(Vocals with guitar: "Decades to decide I need decision / Decades to decide I will never be satisfied / With how I have been living / I must find and capture an astonished man / Hold him 'til he knows he is forgiven")

Thao: And then, I sent it to Adam, our bassist, and Merrill. Merrill Garbus produced this record, and she is Tune-Yards,

("Water Fountain" by TUNE-YARDS)

Thao: and is a really great friend of mine. I had an idea that this record would be very personal, and I couldn't have done it without a very good friend at the helm. And she knows, you know, she knows me very well, and knows my history with my dad. And so, that part was imperative. And, sonically, Merrill embodies this kind of fearlessness and this raw energy, and that kind of fearlessness I wanted to tap into.

("Water Fountain" by TUNE-YARDS)

Thao: In pre-production meetings, I would say to Merrill, the drum sounds that she had on her records I loved, and I want stuff to sound fucked up. I overemployed the term “fucked up” because [laughter] I, in a way, it felt like it was the most accurate thing to say, or is the thing that communicated the most effectively, super blown out, I want it to kind of eat you up. I wanted the drums to be the first thing that was felt, and the thing that would hook you in.

(Drums)

Thao: Jason Slota is our drummer, who's incredible.

(Drums)

(Drums end)

Thao: One dimension that it acquired, that I wasn't envisioning, was a very substantial synth bass part. You know, it's like a pillar of the song, and it's also high in the mix, and it's one of the hooks of the song.

(Synth bass)

(Drums join)

(Music ends)

Thao: I remember just loving all of the drum and bass sounds that those guys were wrangling. I remember sort of like doing that kind of weird dancing thing, where you're just grooving with it, but you kind of just sink your body so low because it's just like that kind of visceral, guttural provocation.

(Processed vocals: “Decades to decide I will never be satisfied / With how I have been living”)

Thao: “How the decades to decide,” you know, that's how that's chopped up. That was Merrill's idea. She, after we recorded it, she said, “Just, you know, indulge me for a second.” And I loved it, and it felt exciting, but it didn't feel dishonest. The way that's chopped up, I think, is really appropriate because it's, you know, what I'm lamenting is these decades of behavior, this very cyclical, circular behavior that I'm disgusted with, and I have disdain for. There's sadness in those lyrics that are in the verses. You know, the, “You don't look for me, but I will look for you.”

(Vocals: "You don't look for me / But I will look for you / Without a wish to see / Anybody new / You don't look for me / How I will look for you / Without a wish to see / Anybody new")

Thao: When I wrote this song, the first lyric I wrote, it's at the beginning and end of the song, is, "I must find and capture an astonished man."

(Vocals: "I must find and capture an astonished man / Hold him 'til he knows he is forgiven")

Thao: Which is, in part, inspired by Marilynne Robinson's writing, is one who would be astonished with the amount of forgiveness that could be afforded him. That kind of astonishment that, in the end, people would still come looking for him and want, you know, a part of him. And, you know, and

(Synth pad)

Thao: he's convinced that he's undeserving of such.

("Gilead" by MARILYNNE ROBINSON: I said, "We all love you, you know?" And he laughed and said, "You're all saints." He stopped in the door and lifted his hat, and then, he was gone. God bless him.")

Thao: No matter how his family loves him or tries to, they can never keep him, you know, for whatever his ideas about himself are; his ideas of what he deserves or what he's worth. I don't know if that's my dad's deal, but it certainly offered this different perspective and this humanity that I guess I had denied him.

(Guitar)

Thao: There's melancholy in this song and there's some sadness and grief, but there's an optimism in this, kind of, newfound forgiveness, or this idea, you know, at least in this song that I wanted to exist differently, and I wanted to be better. And I wanted that to be embodied in the chorus, to have them be rousing.

(Vocals join: "I wake / So worried, worried / Yet I won't / Hurry, hurry / I still sleep / As only the careless can")

Thao: The greatest service of this record was to grieve,

(Strings)

Thao: to acknowledge the kind of pain I've felt for, I guess [laughter], I guess my whole life, and to just admit it, and to like, to go in there and talk about it, and write about it and sing about it, and have it on record.

(Guitar joins)

Thao: Making this record forced me to do that, and I'm so grateful to it.

(Guitar with strings)

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: Now, here's "Astonished Man," by Thao & The Get Down Stay Down, in its entirety.

("Astonished Man" by THAO & THE GET DOWN STAY DOWN)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net for links to buy this song, and for more info on Thao & The Get Down Stay Down. There's also a link to buy the novel *Gilead* by Marilynne Robinson. The lines that you heard from that book were read by Phoebe Judge, host of the amazing podcast, *Criminal*. Checkout *Criminal* at thisiscriminal.com.

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