

Song Exploder
The 1975 - The Birthday Party
Episode 190

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.

("The Birthday Party" by The 1975)

Hrishikesh: This episode contains explicit language. The 1975 are a band from Manchester, England, made up of Matty Healy, Adam Hann, Ross MacDonald, and George Daniel. They started playing music together in 2002, when they were teenagers. Since then, they've released four albums, won three Brit awards, and gotten two Grammy nominations. Their most recent album, *Notes on a Conditional Form*, came out in May 2020. In this episode, Matty and George break down how they made the song "The Birthday Party."

("The Birthday Party" by The 1975)

Matthew: My name's Matthew Healy.

George: My name's George Daniel. I guess I'm the primary producer and he is the primary songwriter.

(Music fades out)

Matthew: We've been together since we were children, so we just try and support each other. The song started in LA, I spent a lot of my 20s in LA.

George: Normally either I'll start something on my laptop or Matthew will come to me with an idea and want to record it. But this actually for "The Birthday Party," we were all playing in a room together.

Matthew: That was the first time in years that we'd sat down to like work out the arrangement of a song because we don't do that when we're writing songs normally.

George: It was a product of something Matty wanted to try.

(Acoustic guitar)

George: The very first thing I heard was him playing the guitar and sitting on the sofa.

Matthew: I like simplicity of form and conceptual ideas built on top of that. It was an acoustic guitar but I had the idea that I wanted to play a C shape, and have the bassline just move around that.

(Bass joins acoustic guitar)

Matthew: And then I got the guys in the room to see what it felt like.

(Acoustic guitar along with bass fade out)

Matthew: I'm pretty sure I have a recording on my phone of us kind of figuring that out.

(Voice memo of the band jamming to the groove on guitar, bass, and drums)

Matthew: Ross was kind of just playing that repetitive bassline.

George: And I played the drums, I remember it needed to be really light. Like we were using brushes, we just realized that the harder you played that beat, it just got more and more void of emotion. And that kind of became a little bit of a blueprint for the way we were going to approach most of the sounds, it was like to keep them kind of soft.

Matthew: I wanted this record to be quite simple or quite pure in its expression. I knew that the song was just going to be the same thing looping around again and again and again. It didn't feel like a big statement, you know, like a big reaching statement. And it felt like quite humble and it kind of set a pace at the way that I wanted to talk, and then I wrote to that.

(Voice memo ends)

Matthew: The first thing that you come up with is normally the best. The stuff that I want to leave out is probably the stuff that I should put in. So if something comes out and then I want to edit it to preserve my own ego, I try not to do that.

(Acoustic guitar)

Matthew: I was going through a tough time. I was definitely reevaluating myself and my behaviors and stuff like that, and I'd kind of lost a few things. I relapsed for like the first time after coming out of rehab around about that time, and my relationship was kind of slowly coming to an end. And everything felt like it was drawing to an end in a kind of natural way, and I think that like you put it into a song and stuff, and it becomes romantic and exciting but all those things are just like boring and sad in reality if you know what I mean. You know I try and make art out of the boring, sad parts of my life because it's better than them being boring and sad.

(First verse vocals along with acoustic guitar: "Hello / There's a place / I've been going / There's a place I've been going / Now I'm clean / It would seem / Let's go somewhere I'll be seen / As sad as it seems)

Matthew: The song was kind of me at a party, like a house party. It was very conversational, almost like about a series of conversations that I was telling you that I was literally having.

(First verse vocals along with acoustic guitar: "I seen Greg and he was like / "I seen your friends at the birthday party / They were kinda fucked up before it even started / They were")

Matthew: It's like a play about my experiences, a fictionalized version of reality. It's kind of about being my age, which isn't old and it isn't a teenager. And just reflecting on like the nuances of what it's like being that age where some people are still emotionally immature, some people are moving way further into adulthood than you are, like I don't know, I'm just, I'm a bit socially, not socially awkward, just not really up for intimacy with strangers.

(Third verse vocals along with acoustic guitar: "This ain't going well" / I thought I was stuck in Hell / In a boring conversation with a girl called Mel / About her friend in Cincinnati called Matty as well")

George: My favorite part in the song is actually the girls or the fake girls.

(Second verse vocals: "Do you wanna come and get fucked up?")

Matthew: That line, I was going to get girls to sing it. So we made a demo version of it to send to them, which is actually just me, and then we kind of like formanted the vocals. Basically, you can make your voice sound like a girl without kind of

changing the pitch. And then it was funny, and then it was kind of just the best thing.

(Drum beat)

(Second verse vocals along with beat and bass: "And I seen the girls and they were all like / "Do you wanna come and get fucked up?" / Listen, I got myself a missus, says there can't be any kissing / "No, don't be a fridge, you better wise up, kid / It's all Adderall now, it doesn't make you wanna do it")

George: It wasn't until, I think, the end of that L.A. trip where it kind of started coming to life and becoming a way more kind of strange and psychedelic thing.

(Piano arpeggio)

George: Like the way that we used the piano arpeggio. It's from the OP-1, the little teenage engineering synth. And it's a sample of a piano, we just recorded like three octaves, so you just go

(Three octaves of the same note played in succession with George vocalizing, "Boom, boom, boom" [laughter])

George: And then that's all in one sample. And then basically when you play chords, it plays this really clumsy arpeggio that's free time because the way the sampler works is the higher the pitch, the speed of the sample is different.

(Piano arpeggio)

George: So you get this completely changing ever evolving arpeggio that is imperfect. And that became like just one of our favorite things I've made.

(Piano arpeggio along with acoustic guitar)

George: We wanted to have all these layers

(Slide guitar joins)

George: but also keep quite a lot of intimacy.

(Slide guitar)

Matthew: It's full of a lot of like country and western kind of like sounds really, so a lot of like slide guitar.

(Slide guitar)

Matthew: I like country music because I like its authenticity and its aspiration, and it's quite beautiful.

(Slide guitar)

Matthew: This song, like it's not like a country record at all, it just has like a kind of a twang to it.

(Banjo)

George: Yeah that was Matty playing the banjo. The banjo doesn't really sound like any other instrument so it really like cuts through and is poky. And then if you kind of juxtapose the banjo with like bunch of synths or like weirder stuff that's like, it just made it trippy.

(Banjo along with synth)

(Synth)

George: That's a synth called Omnisphere. It was like two sounds blended, one of those thumb kalimbas, and like a music box. Even though we added loads and loads of production, and it became this really weird trippy thing, we were trying to make this song feel like you're in a room with us playing a song.

(Crowd noise)

George: People talking kind of is a cool way to place somebody in a space.

(Crowd noise)

Matthew: It was actually really difficult to finish the song because there was this whole idea that we weren't serving the song without it going somewhere different vocally at the end, and it needed to have like this aspirational chorus. We tried a couple of things and it was just not what the song was. It didn't have a chorus in it, it wasn't moving towards a chorus, like that's not how like art works

sometimes, you know. A chorus is just a repeated section and the song just wasn't about repeating itself narratively. It was about this kind of never-ending stream of consciousness. And you know, sometimes like your instinct is your art. To try and kind of massage it into something more palatable is just, you know, people would smell a rat, you know, if you're trying to give them something that you think that they want. So instead of that, the ending is this like kind of big instrumental finale.

(Brass and horn sections)

George: That is our best friend and saxophone player, John Waugh.

(Brass and horn sections)

George: And he did the brass arrangements for the other brass players. The main thing, like I said, was to record things played softly. But that didn't really apply to the sax because we wanted that to be kind of strangely aggressive.

(Brass and horn sections end)

(Outro vocals along with acoustic guitar and banjo: "I depend / On my friends / To stay clean / As sad as it seems")

Michael: I always finished with that line about the friends, "Depend on my friends to stay clean," that's just a sad line, isn't it? But I said like, "That's not where it's going to end, you know." That was always like the placeholder end, and then we just realized after a while that it, that it was the end.

(Outro vocals along with acoustic guitar and banjo: "I depend / On my friends / To stay clean")

(Beat, electric guitar and slide guitar join: "As sad as it seems / As sad as it seems")

(Full instrumental)

George: But it's like the ending to The Graduate. You know what I mean? It's like there is no ending. Life doesn't work like that.

(Full instrumental with vocals: "As sad as it seems")

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here is “The Birthday Party,” by The 1975, in its entirety.

(“The Birthday Party” by THE 1975)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net to learn more about The 1975. You’ll also find links to buy or stream the song and you can watch the music video for it.

Song Exploder is made by me, Hrishikesh Hirway, with producer Christian Koons, production assistant Olivia Wood, and illustrator Carlos Lerma. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a collective of creative, independent podcasts. You can learn more about our shows at radiotopia.fm. If you’d like to support the podcast, you can get a Song Exploder t-shirt at songexploder.net/shirt. You can also follow the show on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook @SongExploder. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.