

Song Exploder
The Books - Smells Like Content
Episode 22

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.

("Smells Like Content" by THE BOOKS)

Hrishikesh: Before The Books broke up, they released three albums that combined composed music and found sounds. In this episode, Nick Zammuto explains how he crafted the song "Smells Like Content," off of their 2005 album *Lost and Safe*, from unlikely sources, like geometry, chance encounters, and a corrugated PVC pipe.

("Smells Like Content" by THE BOOKS)

(Music fades)

Nick: My name is Nick Zammuto, and I was one half of The Books. The other half is Paul de Jong. I did sort of the writing and compositional side, mostly, although the roles were kind of loosely defined. In the case of this track, I did everything in my little apartment in North Adams, Massachusetts. The way I would work on Books tracks was to put together a body of related sounds without worrying so much about the composition of it until much later. So I had a pile of sounds going, which basically became the sound world of this track. I remember I used to get records out from the public library when I was a kid. And whenever the record would end, I would just wait for that sound because I loved it so much, that kind of little thump as it crossed over where the spiral turns into a circle.

(Vinyl sound)

Nick: Yeah, that circle at the center of a record is a loop. And so, it was a major epiphany when I realized it. Oh, that's a blank canvas right there.

(Bass with beat)

Nick: I scratch records. I mean actually physically scratching records with, like, razorblades, and pens, and pencils, and foam tags, and things like that. And usually not across the music part, but across the locked groove at the center of the record. You know, if the music part is this long spiral, it carries the needle inwards when that spiral finally ends, it ends in a circle. So if you use a protractor, you can measure out any time signature you want, right into that groove. And, you know, you have 360 degrees in a circle, so if you take 60 degrees, you know, that will give you six beats, which is, you know, can be a six, eight, or a three, four, or whatever.

(Music ends)

Nick: It's simple geometry. I mean, that's all rhythm is.

(Bass with beat)

Nick: But there's a chaos to it as well, which I really love because when you're [laughter] actually cutting into vinyl, you have no real control over what you're doing. You can just sort of like, "Well, I wonder what this is going to do."

(Bass with beat)

Nick: You know, it never feels like what a drummer would play, but it does create these really, kind of, imperfect, organic rhythms, because you can't be that accurate with it. So it creates all this unexpected noise and weirdness. And so, if you take that sound, and then process it in some way, it really comes to life. In this case, I took one of those corrugated pipes that you can get at a hardware store. I think it was 10 feet in length. I had to use a corrugated one because my room actually wasn't long enough to fit an entire 10 foot [laughter] PVC pipe in, at that point. And then, on one side, I put a mixer and a speaker, and on the other side, I put a microphone, and played that loop through the pipe. And, at the same time, was, kind of, playing with the EQ on the record click sounds, to kind of give a little bit of a different quality to what was coming through the other side, kind of bring out different harmonics in the pipe that way. And that became the basis for the rhythm part of the track.

(Bass with beat)

(Music fades)

Nick: So, in the summer of 2004, my wife was about to get this job in Brooklyn Heights, and was, you know, looking for a place to live nearby. While she was looking for that apartment, I just, kind of, tagged along for moral support. Basically, the lyrics of that song are what happened, sort of, mentally over those two or three days that we were apartment hunting. And, at night, we would go out to her parents' place, and they had a television, and television was something that I hadn't seen in several years at that point. So I'm like, "Well, let's see what's on." So I got into this thing where I would sit down in front of the television, after this long day of apartment hunting, and wait for a line of a song to come. And then, as soon as I got one, I would change the channel to another channel, and then wait for the next line of the song. Yeah, "When finally we opened the box, we couldn't find any rules." That came from television. I was watching, I don't know if it was PBS or some other kids station, but they had this sort of educational animation trying to teach kids how to use inductive reasoning [laughter]. And so, in this episode, they find this board game. And they're looking around for the rules of the board game, but they can't find it. And so, they have to sort of look at the board game to try to figure out the rules, which I thought was just a great metaphor. And so, that made it into the song.

(Vocals: "When finally we opened the box / We couldn't find any rules")

Nick: And then, I was doing the same thing, kind of walking around the city as well. I would collect all these little bits of information that I would see around. And another big one was we went to the Brooklyn public library, and on the facade of the library is the last line in the song.

(Vocals: "And therein lies the garnered wisdom / That has never died")

Nick: It's straight off the Brooklyn public library. And so, that's really where the lyrics came from, knitting together a very disparate bits of information that came into my head over those three days. Yeah, I'm amazed at how kind of free language is when you really start to listen. You know, I think people labor over lyrics a lot, but really they're kind of all around us all the time. You know, it wasn't me writing the song from a personal perspective. It was sort of, I don't know, this may sound cheesy, but it was sort of the universe writing the song [laughter].

(Vocals: "And the hail's heralding the size of nickels")

Nick: You know, there was nobody else to sing the songs that I had in my head. So it had to be me. If I could find somebody else to sing the songs, that probably

would have been better [laughter]. They would probably have a better voice. Yeah, no, I got a lot of flack. I mean, I remember the interviews I did after *Lost and Safe* came out. They're like, "No one wants to hear you sing. Like will you just fucking shut up?" And I'm like, "Well, no I won't. But thanks for the advice [laughter]."

(Bass guitar)

Nick: Ah, yeah, the bass guitar. Oh man [laughter]. All of my guitars are tuned in really weird ways. I just don't like standard tuning. I hate it because everything you play on, it sounds like it's been played before, because it probably has [laughter]. And so, as soon as I get a string instrument, I just mess up the tuning, and then, you know, then it's mine.

(Music ends)

Nick: So my bass guitar, at that time, I had this really nice, old Ibanez, 5-string tuned to B, F sharp, B, F sharp, B [laughter]. So it's basically stacked power chords. I wanted to do something with bass tapping on this song. It took me a while, but I actually figured out how to play that chord progression, in a way that I could sort of tap a second chord on top of the chord underneath.

(Bass guitar)

(Music fades)

Nick: So my brother Mark, he has this way of thinking that every idea he has, is like the best idea that's ever been had. So he started carrying around this MiniDisc recorder with him, wherever he went, and he did this for quite a while. Whenever he had a thought, he thought was worth recording, he would just flip on the MiniDisc. And, at some point, he knew I was into that kind of stuff. And he said, "Well, Nick, I have all these MiniDiscs. If you want to go through them, and look for samples, that's fine with me." I'm like, "Are you kidding me?" And so [laughter], so I started going through them, and it was just like one jam after another, it was just amazing, railing off these nouns that he found interesting.

(MiniDisc recording: "Ballots, repetition, composition, mirrors")

Nick: But when he hit on the end part,

(MiniDisc recording: "Expectation leads to disappointment. If you don't expect something big, huge, and exciting, usually, I don't know, it's just not as, yeah")

Nick: it was just so perfect in so many ways. I'm like, "Well, that's the end of the track [laughter]." Hearing my brother at the end makes me smile every single time.

(Crows)

Nick: For whatever reason, I don't know why, but crows kept ending up in our recordings. You know, crows are pretty common where we are, and they're always really loud. So oftentimes in Books tracks, we had this crow sound. I used to read *Goldbug* when I was a kid, which was sort of a precursor to *Where's Waldo*, where every page has this little goldbug, and you can spend hours looking for this bug. And so, I always like to put a crow sound somewhere in a Books track. And so, when I heard that squawk on my brother's recording, I was like, "Oh, well, that's definitely in."

(MiniDisc recording: "Ballance, repetition")

(Bass guitar)

Nick: Really how I got into music was this really backwards way. I studied chemistry in college, and I really thought I was going to be a research chemist, until I got Hodgkin's disease when I was a junior, which is, you know, sort of a mild form of lymph cancer, but still enough that I had to drop out of school to get it taken care of. That kind of brush with mortality, once I had it, when I came back to school, everything looked really different to me. And I'm like, "Well, I don't want to spend the rest of my life under fluorescent lights, or working for a corporation or an institution, it's just, that would seem like a waste." And so, I kind of moved over to the visual arts, at that point. It was something I always had going on the sides, but it was never my main thing until that moment. I'm like, "No, I'm going to pursue this." And then, I got into sculpture, and then, I started to incorporate sound elements into the sculpture. And, you know, you can't take a picture of a sound sculpture, it doesn't make any sense. So I had to buy something I could record the sounds with. So I got a really nice stereo microphone and a DAT recorder, and that totally changed my life. You know, I made this recording around North Adams where I was living, where I just took this stereo microphone, this DAT recorder, and I walked around town for about an hour, and it was during a street fair, so there's a lot going on. And I brought that recording back to my house, and laid down in bed. I was living alone at the time, and it

was just extremely quiet there in the apartment. And just put on my headphones, and listened to that recording. And it was like I could remember every single inch of that walk, just by the sound of it. And that just blew me away that sound could conjure so much detail. And I really started to think of sound as sort of a sculptural medium at that point. The texture of sound on its own has this emotional quality. And that was really a turning point for me, definitely was the inspiration to start The Books.

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Smells Like Content," by The Books, in its entirety.

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Hrishikesh: You can find all of the past episodes of the podcast, and subscribe to future episodes at itunes.com/songexploder. You can also find Song Exploder on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. If you go to songexploder.net, you can also find six unreleased tracks by Baths who was a guest on this show previously. On Song Exploder, artists are essentially telling success stories, how a song was realized, but Will from Baths has unveiled these never before heard recordings that he calls his failed demos, which never coalesced into finished songs. It's a bit of insight into the other side of the creative process. Listen to the tracks, and read his thoughts on what went wrong with them at songexploder.net/demos. Those demos were all first released on my newsletter, which comes out every Friday. Sign up at tinyletter.com/songexploder. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia from PRX. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.