

Song Exploder
The Long Winters - The Commander Thinks Aloud
Episode 28

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.

(George W. Bush: "My fellow Americans, this day has brought terrible news and great sadness to our country. At nine o'clock this morning, mission control in Houston lost contact with our Space Shuttle Columbia. A short time later, debris was seen falling from the skies above Texas. The Columbia's lost, there are no survivors")

("The Commander Thinks Aloud" by THE LONG WINTERS)

Hrishikesh: That was President George W. Bush addressing the nation on February 1st, 2003. A couple years later, John Roderick, singer and songwriter of The Long Winters, recorded a song about the Space Shuttle Columbia on that day, as it broke apart while reentering the Earth's atmosphere. It's called "The Commander Thinks Aloud." This episode was made from an interview I did with John Roderick in front of a live audience in Seattle about how and why he made this song.

("The Commander Thinks Aloud" by THE LONG WINTERS)

John: I am John Roderick.

(Music fades)

John: I had my pilot's license when I was 17. My dad was a small plane pilot. And that was the way my dad, it was one of the ways that we bonded, was in a small plane, you know, trying to make it over a mountain range. So I had a lot of experience in planes. I always loved to fly. And when the nose comes off the ground, I always feel a charge. I didn't want to be a person that was anxious about flying.

(Keyboard)

John: Well, at that point in 2005, I guess, we were still pretty close to 9/11, and the Space Shuttle disaster followed pretty close only years on that. But also, there were all those smaller disaster crashes; the Alaska airlines crash that happened

off the coast of California, where they lost their vertical stabilizer, the jackscrew one. The pilots were aware there was a problem. Everyone was aware there was a problem. It just flew around, and then flipped upside down, and plummeted into the ocean. And then, there was the one off of Long Island, where maybe the gas tank exploded? And then, there was that Learjet that lost compression, and everybody in it, gone until it ran out of gas. And all of these disasters stuck with me, particularly the ones where there was a sense that the people on board knew that they were lost, but they were still alive. The unfolding dawning realization, like, you know, "We're not getting out of this." And what's your reaction in that situation? Do you scream? You probably don't. Probably everybody is really calm in that situation. And so, I pictured the astronauts on re-entry. They knew there was something wrong with their ship. They were worried about it, but everybody had convinced them it was going to be fine. And they're performing their duties, they're having the peak experience of their lives. And maybe one of the peak human experiences like, "We are coming back to earth, having just like looked down at Earth, and had that feeling how beautiful that, kind of, dumb little stuff is." The beauty of the mundane, right? Like boys and girls in cars, and dogs and birds on lawns. Like seeing it, maybe like no one else would ever see it.

(Vocals: "Boys and girls in cars / Dogs and birds on lawns / From here I can touch the sun")

Hrishikesh: Did you sit down with the idea that you were going to write a song about the Space Shuttle disaster?

John: Yeah, but I didn't know how it was going to work. Every once in a while you get one as a songwriter where you sit down at your instrument, you have an idea, you have a first line, you sing it, and compose the entire song, and in an hour, and then you go, "I don't know where that came from."

(Piano)

John: I resisted piano lessons as a kid. But sometime in high school, I started to sit at the piano voluntarily when no one was home, and try and figure it out. And I got as far as you could go, if you were just practicing for 11 minutes at a time.

(Audience laughter)

John: And I didn't really learn the piano until I was in my 30s. Learn the piano as much as I know it now. In the early 90s in Seattle especially, there was a mentality that you didn't want to overlearn your instrument.

(Audience laughter)

John: Right? Because that was going to affect the authenticity of your feelings. And I embraced that hook, line, and sinker. So the producer of this track was Tucker Martine. Tucker had a, just a stand up parlor piano in his living room, and that was recorded in his living room. Now we would probably just record it one measure and loop it, but at the time I had to sit and play it

(Audience laughter)

John: for five minutes, and then, I would get to the end, and he'd be like, "Hmm,

(Audience laughter)

John: let's hit it again."

(Piano)

(Piano ends)

John: Eric Corson, Long Winters' bass player, and my chief musical partner, he sat down at the microKORG, which is not an instrument he knew, but he worked with it for a little bit and figured it out.

(MicroKORG)

John: There are five or six moments in the song that without Eric's part, it would be so much less of a complete work. His part is very cinematic.

(MicroKORG)

(MicroKORG fades)

John: As the song unfolds, it just starts to go sideways. And every successive verse, stuff is starting to break. Most of The Long Winters songs are about relationships, and they are intentionally difficult to parse because they're meant

to communicate in an emotional language, rather than in a literal language. And so, as I was writing this song, I, as I made my way through the emotional story I was trying to tell, I did arrive at a place where I was like, “I need to give a clue here somewhere.”

(Vocals: “The crew compartment’s breaking up”)

John: I was embarrassed to say “the crew compartment's breaking up,” because I felt like it was too literal. And so, to say “the crew compartments breaking up,” the first time I went through it, I was just like, “Ah,” you know? But it needed it.

(Vocals: “The crew compartment’s breaking up”)

John: And the thing was, you sing it once, the second time everybody gets it, the third time they've heard it now, the fourth time they're like, “Okay, alright.” Fifth, sixth time it starts to get annoying. And then, a new kind of gravity enters the seventh time, you start to feel the emotion.

(Vocals: “The crew compartment’s breaking up / The crew compartment’s breaking up”)

John: And when I perform it live, if I'm not careful, I will start to cry during that part.

(Violin)

John: Those are real violins, and we tried to get a little string quartet to come, and we ran several passes at it. We took that, and played it double speed. And they did their own version of this, kind of, swarm of bees.

(Violin)

(Violin fades)

John: So we didn't have a drummer, and it was like, “Who should we get? Should we call that one guy?” He was like, “Or I could get the best drummer in the country.” Any producer would make that choice if he had Matt Chamberlain’s number. And Tucker did.

(Drums)

John: And he managed to not just introduce swing into it, but make this piano part, which on its own is very square and,

(Piano)

John: and on top of the beat, and he played to it, and introduced swing to it.

(Drums join)

John: Played a little bit behind, and a little bit with this tremendous sort of breath and energy, and watching it all happen was a revelation to me as a musician. I understood how much I had to learn. So what Matt did, he came in, he set up his drums, and he had one microphone that he pulled out of a bag, and set up himself. And we all just were watching him,

(Audience laughter)

John: you know, like you would watch a black panther that came into your kitchen.

(Audience laughter)

John: It's like, "What's it going to do?" And he put the microphone in front of his drums, and he was like, "Okay, you know, record me." And so, he plays for about a minute, and then he's like, "Play that back for me." He listens to the track for a minute, and then he stands up, he walks around, and he moves the microphone

(Music ends)

John: imperceptibly.

(Audience laughter)

John: Sits back down, and says,

(Drums)

John: "Roll it." And he plays all the way through the track. And I was listening to it and going like, "You know, I'm the songwriter and kind of the main guy here."

(Audience laughter)

John: And I was like, "Yeah, it was pretty good. I mean, hmm, I've got, I've got some comments." And we got to the end, and he was like, "OK, roll it again." You know, and didn't wait to hear any comments from the songwriter, which is like, "alright."

(Audience laughter)

John: He played through it again. And I was like, "You know what would be interesting? You know, kind of variation." And he was like, "Give it to me again." He did that five times. And then he's like, "Alright, you know, I'm coming into the control room." And he comes in, he sits down, and he's like, "OK, pan those five tracks, hard left, middle left, center, middle right, hard right in the order that I recorded them." Five mono drum parts. And he had the foresight that there are drum fills that start on one track, and continue through all five tracks. So, you know, you hear about guys, and you're like, "Oh, that guy's amazing," but this was something truly amazing.

(Drums)

(Drums end)

John: As part of his drum kit, I forgot to mention he has a piece of rusty sheet metal

(Audience laughter)

John: just attached to a clamp. And he starts to go up to this sheet metal like,

(Drums)

John: and all of that sheet metal noise that he was creating, the whole end of the tune, where the spaceship is coming apart, he was making that sound on the rusty metal. He had a vision of the song that I didn't even have.

(Drums)

(Drums end)

John: You know, the title of the song wasn't clear until right about this point in the recording. And so, then if the commanders', you know, thinking aloud, why is he telling us this story?

(Vocals: "This is all I wanted to bring home / This is all I wanted to bring home to you")

John: That's his last word, I guess.

Hrishikesh: Do you have a sense of who he was addressing when he says that?

John: I don't publicly out myself as a

(Keyboard)

John: utopian and a people lover,

(Audience laughter)

John: because it's not my brand.

(Audience laughter)

John: But I'm an idealist, and I love humanity. And I imagine us as all on a ship together, and all with a common cause. And space exploration seems like the ultimate expression of human beings doing their best work. So I imagine he's bringing that back to us, all of us. Something that if we could only share that; the simple feeling of just like, "Why the hell did we go up into space?" We go up into space to bring back that little tantalizing, like, vision of the Earth being a borderless place full of birds and boys and girls.

(Keyboard)

(Keyboard ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "The Commander Thinks Aloud," by The Long Winters, in its entirety.

("The Commander Thinks Aloud" by THE LONG WINTERS)

Hrishikesh: You can find all the past and future episodes of Song Exploder at songexploder.net or on iTunes, Stitcher, or wherever you download podcasts.

("The Imitation Game" by ALEXANDRE DESPLAT)

Hrishikesh: Next time on Song Exploder, my guest will be Oscar-nominated composer Alexandre Desplat taking apart his theme from the film *The Imitation Game*. Find this 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. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.

("The Imitation Game" by ALEXANDRE DESPLAT)

(Music fades)

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