

**Song Exploder**  
**The National - Sea of Love**  
**Episode 25**

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.

*("Sea of Love" by THE NATIONAL)*

Hrishikesh: The National formed in 1999. They've released six albums, and have been nominated for a Grammy. Their music has been everywhere from *Game of Thrones*, to Bob's Burgers, to Barack Obama's presidential campaign. In 2013, they released their sixth album, *Trouble Will Find Me*, which debuted at #3 on the Billboard charts. The band is made up of singer Matt Berninger, along with two sets of brothers: guitarists Bryce and Aaron Dessner, who are twins, and Bryan and Scott Devendorf, who play drums and bass, respectively. In this episode, Matt Berninger and Aaron Dessner break down "Sea of Love," a song that they co-wrote. You'll hear how it went from Aaron's original guitar demo to a densely layered recording with contributions from their bandmates and others.

*("Sea of Love" by THE NATIONAL)*

*(Music fades)*

Aaron: My name's Aaron Dessner, and I play guitar and piano and other instruments, and write a lot of the music.

Matt: And I'm Matt, and I don't write any of the music. I write the lyrics, and the vocal melodies, and that kind of stuff.

Aaron: This song just started with a demo that was kind of like a rough, loud guitar. It kind of sounds like Nirvana playing Crazy Horse or something.

*(Guitar)*

Aaron: I'm sketching a song, humming along to it, but mainly with Matt in mind, and then, I kind of leave it open-ended so that he has room to carve.

Matt: Aaron and his brother Bryce will send me, in the process of making a record, 50 or 60 little bits of ideas. And some of them are developed, and they have lots of

different parts, some of them are just really simple and rudimentary. And I just work on the ones that I connect with in some way. And I would just sing along to it, and try all kinds of different approaches in music with melody. I just look for melody when I'm singing nonsense. The words start to come after I figured out a melody mostly. And if it's a good melody, words will just land on it, and stick there.

*(Vocals: "Oh, you say you love me, Joe / How am I supposed to know?")*

Matt: It wasn't like I had a story about a character named Joe, and all this kind of stuff that I wanted to tell, it was mumbling melodies without any discernible words, probably for awhile, until something stuck to it.

*(Vocals: "Hey Joe, sorry I hurt you, but / They say love is a virtue, don't they?")*

Matt: Lyric wise, I was listening to other things, and I was listening to Hendrix. "Hey Joe, sorry I hurt you," was like, I was, I had been listening to, "Hey, Joe."

*("Hey Joe" by JIMI HENDRIX)*

*(Music fades)*

Matt: That's kind of a quote, I guess. And I think, at the time, the idea was to, well, that's just for placement. I will figure out what that lyric is later, because I'm not just going to say, "Hey, Joe," but then that just stuck. I think there probably was a time when I was like, "OK, I have got to put a woman's name in there." And I just quickly discarded that temptation to just change it to a woman's name, because I'm a man. It didn't matter at all. And I just never could let go of, "Hey Joe," so

*(Vocals: "Oh, Joe, you fell so fast")*

Matt: I'm not trying to make any sort of statement about human sexuality. It's just, there's a song about, a romantic song about a man who's bitten into the apple a little bit. It's a big murky mess of all the feelings that happen between human beings, one romance, and hopes, and all those kinds of things. They run away with our hearts a little bit. So whenever I sing it, I am thinking about a guy.

*(Vocals: "I see people on the floor / They slide into the sea")*

Matt: And then, the song just started to become this loose idea of how people often will fall in love, and jump into a situation. The “Joe” is definitely the one who's like, jumping in with both feet. There's a room full of people that are all sliding into the sea of love.

*(Vocals: “I see you rushing down / What did Harvard teach you?”)*

Matt: “What did Harvard teach you?” It's just like, you seem like, to be such a smart person, then why are you doing such a foolhardy thing?

*(Guitar)*

Matt: Of the 60 sketches, this one popped out to me just because it had this immediate aggressive, and had a different, sort of, color than a lot of our songs. And I was excited by it. I think, at the phase in the writing of the record, we had a lot of songs that were manicured or something, and I don't mean that in a bad way, but we felt that the record needed something a little uglier.

*(Guitar fades)*

Matt: I think I just wanted it to be almost Neanderthal. And it's, when it comes out of the gate, that's why I was just like, “Pound 8th notes,” you know, “on the snare.”

*(Drums)*

Aaron: Matt, kind of, likes to eardrum, and has good ideas. But Bryan, being a great drummer and opinionated drummer, often doesn't embrace those ideas. But this time he kind of like did. So that snare Brian was excited by. And he also likes simplicity, if it ever really works, and, in this case, it did.

Matt: It was a rare case that I had a drum idea that Brian liked.

*(Drums end)*

Aaron: It kind of came to life with the drum part, and that's, I think, when he realized that Bryan is going to run with something, then we all, kind of, focus in a little bit, and find the song. Because it's not, we often have situations where we'll write a song, and the kind of band element doesn't click.

Matt: Whenever I have a musical idea that those guys like, I think everyone's surprised [laughter].

Aaron: Well, that's not true, because you actually, he's massive visual artist, and is good about describing musical ideas in non musical terms,

Matt: [laughter]

Aaron: sometimes, and that will lead to interesting places, and

Matt: And I have a lot of opinions on the music, but yeah, I don't have any musical vocabulary.

*(Guitar)*

Aaron: Bryce and I went to Berlin because we do a lot of recording, you know, whether it's in my studio or in a fancy, professional studio. And then we undo it or like redo it somewhere that's not at all a studio, I think, because we are missing some kind of like, charm or element of unpredictability, or just the feeling of needing to make it less claustrophobic, or something. Because I like records that have been recorded in different places. So we, I know for a fact that we re-recorded all the guitars on this song in Berlin in this hotel. The owners of that hotel are big fans of The National, and really close friends of ours, and they've been really supportive, they created a studio for us in there, in the hotel. It was like a cement box, kind of, the rooms in an old, pretty worn building, and the walls were unfinished walls, and it was a cement floor, and the sound was bouncing around in there a lot, but it just sounded cool.

*(Guitar ends)*

Aaron: There's a whole weave of things in there that create the moving parts, and kind of like deceptive complexity to a simple chord progression. I mean, my brother plays guitar, and we did these, kind of, twin strikes.

*(Guitar)*

Aaron: There's a strike of each chord on the downbeat, and then, one on the offbeat, and they kind of answer each other. And that's definitely an old trick of ours, because we play off each other a lot like that.

*(Guitar ends)*

Aaron: On "Sea of Love," you hear the contribution of Richard Reed Parry from Arcade Fire, who did this, sort of, elaborate vocal harmonies in the chorus.

*(Vocals: "Hey Joe, sorry I hurt you, but / They say love is a virtue, don't they?")*

*(Vocals)*

Aaron: We've always been an open, collaborative group of people, and like my brother and I, being twins, grew up playing music, always together, never alone. And it's quite natural to collaborate with other people, and embrace someone else's idea. And, also, one thing may be the key to unlocking a riddle, or just giving something an extra lift, or making something work. And I guess the band could solve all of those questions on its own, but I think it's actually makes it more interesting to have these different musical perspectives. So clearly with Richie, because he does come from this choral background, his father was a choir director, and he does think in terms of these multipart vocal harmonies, and kind of like elaborate arrangements, and it's easy for him to render things. With "Sea of Love," the chorus did not come easily. And so, Richie, he sang, he was really inspired by "Sea of Love," and the music, and was enjoying it, and he had ideas. So we just kind of like set up a bunch of mics, and literally half an hour later, there's that vocal arrangement. It's literally that quick with him, but it definitely has a big effect on the song.

*(Vocals)*

*(Harmonica)*

Aaron: I promised my wife that I would put harmonica on at least one song [laughter]. She obsessively listens to the demos that I write, because we listen to them sometimes after I write them, just like in the car, in the house, or they're just on, or she hears me making them. And so, sometimes, so like, she'll have creative ideas, and she's not, she's a nurse, so it's not like she's coming from a musical standpoint either. But I kind of thought that was interesting as I think it was the first time that she had suggested something. And so I kind of thought it would be worth a try. It actually just plays like this supportive role to announce the chorus, and it kind of fit. But weirdly Matt didn't know it was there, until like [laughter] much later when the album was done, because he, why don't you explain, Matt? Your ears were a little bit destroyed.

Matt: When this was being recorded, and mixed, and put together, I had to fly home to Cincinnati because my grandmother died, and I had a terrible cold in the air, the plane, my eardrum ruptured. And so, I got back to the studio without being able to hear anything on one side of my head. And I think you guys panned it on, over to that side on purpose, so that I'd miss it. We'd try to trick each other, and so, I think you guys were worried that if I knew there was a harmonica, I would look for it, and try to get it out of there for some reason. And you might be right. I don't know, I don't have anything specifically personal against the harmonica, but that is something I would do. You know, for no good reason, just take offense at a harmonica.

*(Harmonica)*

*(Harmonica ends)*

Matt: The more we write together, and the more we

*(Strings and guitar)*

Matt: do this together, we start to lose a lot of insecurities about things. We used to think like, "Does it seem like it's The National?" It's like, before we even knew what The National was, we were always trying to like sort of, "Oh, that just doesn't seem like us." Thankfully, we stopped trying to define, you know, what is us, because none of us could agree anyway. And that's let us do things that, maybe, if one person was in charge, we wouldn't do a lot of the things that we've done, and so, yeah, now we know just to chase it all, and you never know where it's going to connect.

*(Strings and guitar)*

*(Music ends)*

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Sea of Love," by The National, in its entirety.

*("Sea of Love" by THE NATIONAL)*

Hrishikesh: Visit [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net) for more information on The National, including a link to buy this song.

So I had originally planned on doing this podcast as an experiment for a year, to see how it went and see what happened. And that year ends with this episode. I

want to thank you for listening, and I want to thank all the musicians who have taken a chance on letting me into their process, and giving me the latitude to edit and present their songs from the inside out. It's been fascinating for me personally, and

*("The Battlefield" by GHOSTFACE KILLAH)*

Hrishikesh: I'm excited to keep going with it, and see what next year brings. So, coming up next time on Song Exploder, the making of "The Battlefield" by Ghostface Killah. Hit me up on Twitter @SongExploder, or on the Song Exploder Facebook page. Don't miss an episode, subscribe to the show on iTunes, SoundCloud, Stitcher, or wherever you download podcasts.

*("The Battlefield" by GHOSTFACE KILLAH)*

*(Music fades)*