

Song Exploder
The New Pornographers - Brill Bruisers
Episode 64

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.

("Brill Bruisers" by THE NEW PORNOGRAPHERS)

Hrishikesh: The New Pornographers are kind of a supergroup, with seven members in the band, including Neko Case and Dan Bejar, who are both acclaimed songwriters with their own successful solo careers. But the band's led by Carl Newman, and in this episode, he breaks down the title song from their sixth album *Brill Bruisers*. Plus you'll hear some thoughts from bassist and co-producer John Collins. My interview with Carl Newman is recorded live at The Greene Space at WNYC.

("Brill Bruisers" by THE NEW PORNOGRAPHERS)

Carl: I'm Carl Newman.

(Music fades)

Carl: There was a guitar part I had an idea for, and it sounds really clumsy, but I remember thinking like, "Oh, this is a cool guitar part."

(Acoustic guitar)

Carl: The chords [laughter] are sort of boneheaded. It's just an A, and then like an A with the G added, and it goes to D. It's like, just couldn't be simpler. It's the hardest thing to do is just come up with something completely just dead simple.

(Acoustic guitar ends)

Carl: When I first started writing songs, I wanted to write something really complex because I thought that was the only way to write something that was interesting. Was to, like, try and come up with chord progressions or structures that nobody else had ever done before. I tried to do that for years. And then, in this band, I just tried to do what I thought was dumbing it down. I'm trying to get dumber, actually.

(Audience laughter)

Carl: I'm really trying to explore, like, how dumb can I get? Musically, lyrically, you know, because I'm trying to make a go of this, and I figure,

(Audience laughter)

Carl: [laughter] I figure like getting really dumb has always worked for me. Because I've always thought we were dumb from the beginning. I was shocked when people started talking about us as a band that had any sort of complexity. I remember playing a few early songs for Neko, and being embarrassed that I was playing her these dumb songs. We take it seriously, but we also, you know, we're trying to have fun with it.

(Acoustic guitar)

Carl: John Collins is our bass player, and does a lot of the production. When we started, John said, "So, what's the feel of this song?" And I just went like, "Kick, kick, crash, kick, kick, crash." And because it didn't have a title, you know, and John has to call it something, it's like, "this is just a song. It doesn't have any words." And so, he called it "Rock You," just because he thought the beat sounded like "We Will Rock You." Like [mimics the beat of "We Will Rock You" by Queen]

("We Will Rock You" by QUEEN)

Carl: And so, I had that in my head, "We Will Rock You" thing. Because of that, I thought, like, this song should be about rock in some way. Like my version of the Rock & Roll dream. The chorus, "The sea was all lighters."

(Vocals: "And the sea was all lighters / It was all lighters")

Carl: You know, a sea of lighters, when you're [laughter] at a concert, and you're looking out,

(Audience laughter)

Carl: and they have their lighters, and it looks like a sea of lighters. Then I started just going off on this tangent about, like, getting lost in a sea of lighters, and being, like, carried away.

(Vocals: "Out on the waves / Over the railing asking the crowd / To send you back / To stage instead of sailing away / Been left behind")

Carl: Never became a rockstar, but I've found myself playing in these absurd places like Coachella or Lollapalooza, where there's like 40,000 people there, and it doesn't even seem real. The whole idea that I became this person in this rock band, how do you reconcile that with feeling like you're the, still this person who's trapped inside his head, and feels sort of shy? And that's what I was thinking when I wrote the song.

(Vocals: "It's how we know now to never go back")

Carl: I was sifting through my voice notes in my phone, and I just had this idea that was just, a sort of, call and response.

(Vocals: "Been left behind / Looking for searchlights leading the charge / The mass appeal")

Carl: To me, that seemed like the thrust of the song. I remember thinking, *it can't be ba ba ba ba ba. It has got to be bo-pah.*

(Audience laughter)

Carl: I don't know why.

(Vocals)

Carl: Actually, Dan and I have had this stupid conversation for so long through the years, talking about people who we admire for their nonsense syllables, like David Byrne for coming up with

("Psycho Killer" by TALKING HEADS)

Carl: [sings fa's]

(Audience laughter)

(Music ends)

Carl: And so, we're always thinking about that. Like what are variations on nonsense syllables that we can use? And the weird thing is it's very precise. I'm not at all overthinking it when come up with it, but when somebody's singing it, I'm going, "No,

(Audience laughter)

Carl: it's 'bo-pah bo, bo-pah, bo.'" Or, and it's like, "No, because you're going, 'bo-pah bo bo-pah pah,' that's wrong."

(Audience laughter)

Carl: And some things I'm pretty lax about like, "Yeah, that guitar is good enough. That bass is good enough." But with vocals, I'm like, "No, you have to do it this way."

(Vocals)

John: I'm John Collins. I am the bass player and recorder of The New Pornographers.

(Electric guitar)

John: There's a middle section that was added at a later date, like months and months later. It's happened like 20 times or more in my life where I'm sitting there with Carl, we're working on a song we spent a hundred hours on already. And then, he's like, "I got a new piece for this section, like for this part after the chorus or whatever." And I'll just be like, "Why do you want to mess up this gem of a tune?"

(Electric guitar fades)

John: Just going, "Okay, here we go, cutting into this great tune when it's really rocking along just fine." And I trust myself to always get that wrong now.

Carl: I felt very happy about that bridge, just because I liked all the rhymes in it. There's that internal rhyme like, "A fire in love with sirens,"

(Electric guitar)

Carl: which I was really happy about.

(Vocals join: "A fire in love with sirens / We go in fighting, decrying / The rising star dying / From its own virus, it's tied in / A firing of the sirens")

(Drums)

Carl: It's sort of what I was talking about before. Like, just feeling like you're a

(Electric guitar joins)

Carl: an imposter, a charlatan, you know? Maybe somebody who's, like, playing rock and roll, and I should have, like, dropped it, and be doing something else. But, hey, this is what I do. So,

(Drums end)

Carl: I'll do it.

(Electric guitar with drums)

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: Now, here's "Brill Bruisers," by The New Pornographers, in its entirety.

("Brill Bruisers" by THE NEW PORNOGRAPHERS)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net for more information on The New Pornographers, including a link to buy this song.

("Work Work" by CLIPPING)

Hrishikesh: Next time on Song Exploder, Clipping, an experimental hip hop trio that includes Daveed Diggs of the Broadway Musical *Hamilton*. You can subscribe to Song Exploder on iTunes, and you can find all the past episodes on the show's website, songexploder.net. Song Exploder is part of Radiotopia from PRX. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.

("Work Work" by CLIPPING)

(Music fades)

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