

Song Exploder
The Postal Service - The District Sleeps Alone Tonight
Episode 1

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 District Sleeps Alone Tonight" by THE POSTAL SERVICE)

Hrishikesh: The Postal Service was formed by Jimmy Tamborello and Ben Gibbard in 2002. They lived in different cities and would mail recordings back and forth between Seattle and Los Angeles. They only made one record, *Give Up* but it sold over a million copies. It's considered a landmark album for the way it combined indie-rock and electronic elements. In this episode Jimmy Tamborello breaks down The Postal Service song "The District Sleeps Alone Tonight."

("The District Sleeps Alone Tonight" by THE POSTAL SERVICE)

Jimmy: Hi my name's Jimmy Tamborello from The Postal Service. Postal Service was a project that I did back in 2002, 2003 with my friend Ben Gibbard who is also the singer for Death Cab for Cutie. And this was kind of like an electronic side project we did together.

("The District Sleeps Alone Tonight" by The Postal Service)

Jimmy: All the music that I was making back then, in the early 2000s, I was using mostly one sampler slash synthesizer called the K2000 from Kurzweil. Almost everything on The Postal Service album came out of that, that machine. It comes with a lot of preset bass, and pad, and bell sounds, and all sorts of synthesizer sounds that you can edit. Any sound I used I would try to change it from the preset just so it'd be more original. So this is most of the synthesizer sounds that I used on "*The District Sleeps Alone Tonight*."

(Synthesizer sounds)

Jimmy: My computer at the time, I think it was a Mac, like a Quadra or something. Maybe? It was an old Mac. It still wasn't really powerful enough to record audio into it, so I mostly used it as a sequencer; it would control the K2000 with MIDI. So I would sequence and, kind of, program the drum patterns in the computer.

(Drums)

Jimmy: Since this is one of the first songs that we worked on, I still had this idea that this album was going to be more experimental than it ended up being. I think in this song, the drum programming definitely is indebted to Björk, the album, *Homogenic*.

(“Earth Intruders” by BJÖRK)

Jimmy: Even though, I guess, it was a couple years before that, I must have still been stuck on that style of programming. So I think when I was making this song, I was kind of imagining it as a song for Björk. German label, Morr Music, was another big influence on this song. I think I was trying to copy Lali Puna.

(“Low Down” by Lali Puna)

Jimmy: And especially the second half of the song, when the, kind of, four on the floor beat kicks in. So it's like, the first half of the song is Björk, and the second half of the song is Lali Puna. So if I solo just the drums, this is what it sounds like.

(Drums)

(Drums fade)

Jimmy: In addition to me and Ben, we also had Jen Wood and Jenny Lewis do some, some additional vocals on the record. So I sent Ben the instrumental track for the song, and he came up with, like, a demo. He did the main vocal, as well as a bunch of harmonies and, kind of, background vocals. But it was all his own voice. Once we got further into the recording process, we decided there should be some other voices besides just all Ben. Maybe it was nice to not have it be a one-man band, type of sound. Maybe it would be too lonely or something if it was all of Ben's vocals. I think it really helped that there were some other people in there. So here's some of Jenny's background vocals solo'd out.

(Jenny Lewis vocals: “I am a visitor here / I am not permanent / Where I am / Keeping me dry is)

Jimmy: When we recorded them, Ben came down to, kind of, oversee and help with the recording. Which was nice 'cause it was also a time where we could all get to know each other, 'cause we really, none of us had really hung out very much. In some of the songs I felt like maybe, there needed to be a little bit more variety in the sound so I would add parts. And in this song, it might have been just an accident with a delay pedal, but I looped a little bit of Jenny's vocals and made it into texture in the song. That was one of the last things that we put into that, into “District.” I can play that part by itself.

(Jenny vocal loop: “Hello”)

Jimmy: This vocal loop comes in after the second verse when it's kind of going into the more dancey outro part.

(Jenny vocal loop: "Hello" fades)

("The District Sleeps Alone Tonight" outro)

Jimmy: We put out one record on Sub Pop, and that came out in 2003. And now we're at the 10-year anniversary, and we're going to do it, like a, Deluxe Reissue, and we're also going on tour this summer.

("The District Sleeps Alone Tonight" outro fades)

Hrishikesh: And now, here is "The District Sleeps Alone Tonight," by The Postal Service, in its entirety.

("The District Sleeps Alone Tonight" by THE POSTAL SERVICE)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net for more information on The Postal Service. You'll find links to their record give up and the video for "*The District Sleeps Alone Tonight*." Jimmy mentioned some influences: Björk's album *Homogenic*, the band Lali Puna, and the record label Morr Music. I've included links to all of those as well. You can subscribe to Song Exploder on iTunes or wherever you download podcasts. You can also find Song Exploder on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia from PRX. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.