

Song Exploder
Yo La Tengo - Here You Are
Episode 138

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.

("Here You Are" by YO LA TENGO)

Hrishikesh: Yo La Tengo formed in 1984. The band is made up of Ira Kaplan, Georgia Hubley, and James McNew. In March 2018, they released *There's a Riot Going On*, their 15th album. They made the record themselves - they recorded it entirely in their rehearsal studio with James handling the engineering duties. The album came together slowly, over a few years. In this episode, Georgia, James, and Ira break down how they made the closing track from the record, the song "Here You Are."

("Here You Are" by YO LA TENGO)

Georgia: I'm Georgia.

James: I'm James.

Ira: And I'm Ira.

(Music fades)

Ira: When we started working on what ultimately became "Here You Are," we were recording as a means of writing, as a means of rehearsing, not consciously aware that we were working on our new album. We don't approach anything with a plan. The song just kind of comes out of whatever we're doing and we just follow where it's going.

Georgia: One thing leads into another, into another, into another over a long period of time, and it doesn't move in a straight line at all. This song, in particular.

James: The song had a completely different rhythm.

(Beat)

James: There was a Casio beat

(Beat)

James: and drum kit.

(Drums)

(Beat fades)

James: And the upright bass.

(Bass joins)

(Drums fade)

James: Layered them in together.

(Bass, drums, and beat)

James: But we switched it up. Ira took the Casio, and ran it into a looping delay.

(Beat)

James: It sounds kind of like chirping birds and crickets.

(Beat)

James: And then we went back and recorded more to play it in a completely different mood, in a different rhythm.

(Bass and drums join)

James: We had a little drum circle going.

(Bass, drums, and beat)

Georgia: But we didn't get rid of the original drums.

(Drums)

Georgia: We lowered them in the mix.

James: And layered them in together.

(Bass, drums, and beat)

Georgia: We love the texture of things and the spatial quality of how different instruments take up room in a different way.

(Music ends)

Georgia: One thing that's really special about our space where we record and where we rehearse is, it's just kind of a big mess of a room. You know, we don't clean up the studio because we have to get out or there's not an engineer who puts things away, it's just kind of like a room that you can just go into and go, "Oh look, that guitar's over there," and, you know, it's so open-ended, and we can walk away at the end of the day and come back three weeks later, and it'll still be there. We might even have a loop still going three weeks later.

(Guitar)

Ira: That part is me playing guitar.

James: Like a spacey guitar loop.

Ira: But it's not like an 8-bar loop, James just picks an arbitrarily long time to loop something, so some of the looped parts end at different times. This completely unplanned sound of things falling apart just provides a texture and like either support or pull interestingly against the chord we're playing. And sometimes things that would have sounded like nothing but a mistake, you know, rather than get rid of it, just bring it down to where it's adding mystery.

James: I feel like sacrificing professional fidelity is worth it to get that feeling of excitement.

(Guitar)

Ira: That feedback,

(Guitar)

Ira: I put the guitar super close to the amp and in the course of doing it, thought it sounded kind of cool, the first time I did it, so did it again.

(Guitar)

Georgia: It happens a few times in this song. It might be my favorite part.

(Guitar fades)

Georgia: We kind of had all this mood stuff going, but we were trying to, like, make it more cohesive in a melodic way. And then Ira came up with this acoustic part.

(Guitar)

Georgia: And then there's another part that we added after that, that also helps structure.

James: Just a Jazz bass.

(Bass)

James: I like the juxtaposition of electric bass and acoustic bass.

(Bass)

James: I think it's kind of surreal sound [laughter] to hear both at the same time.

(Bass)

James: Personally, I'm all for it.

(Guitar with bass)

(Music ends)

(Voicemail)

James: That is a voicemail message left on Georgia's cell phone by Danny Ray Thompson from the Sun Ra Arkestra. He likes to check in now and then.

(Voicemail)

James: And that's actually the sound of Georgia holding her phone up to a microphone and having it just play.

(Voicemail)

Ira: James added the phone message to the beginning of the song, and that was where it occurred to me that this would make a really great last song of the record. I really enjoyed hearing him say our names, I thought that would make kind of a nice farewell, you know, wishing everybody a happy new year, sounded kind of like something you would say as you were leaving. So when the words were being written, it was with the thought that this might be the last song on the record. So the first line that I wrote was the first line of the song. "We are out of words." That seemed kind of good to say for your last song.

(Vocals with guitar: "We are out of words")

Ira: We had a sense that this would sound good if we were all singing together.

James: There's 3 individual vocal tracks.

(Vocals with guitar: "We are out of words / We're out of time / Believe the worst")

Ira: But because of dissatisfaction with the way our voices were blending,

James: there's a group vocal track, where we're all singing the same part in unison.

(Vocals with guitar: "Most days, we circumvent / Tune out the world / Except our friends")

Ira: So when we heard the way that track worked with the individual tracks, we were satisfied with it.

(Vocals with guitar: "Tune out the world / Except our friends")

Georgia: Honestly I don't know what James and Ira are singing exactly. I know what it sounds like, but I'm not sure whose voice goes with what sound.

James: That's the goal.

Georgia: That's the goal. Alright [laughter].

(Vocals with guitar: "Road remains clear / Always on the run")

(Guitar)

Ira: This song depends on a certain length.

(Drums join)

Ira: This mood is created that if it were a minute long, it would be different. You know, it's about letting it unfold.

Hrishikesh: The song sounds like it ends at one point,

(Pause)

Hrishikesh: but after a few seconds of silence, it comes back and then continues on.

(Guitar, bass, and drums)

Ira: If I would describe the emotion [laughter] that I felt, it was kind of like, "Oh, it's ending already? I didn't want, I could've listened to this song for another 20 minutes!" Then it comes back, and it's like, "Oh great, I'm so happy it's still here." We're all very fond of something that establishes a mood that you just hope never ends.

(Guitar)

Ira: I think "song" has an elastic definition. The moment we liked it, we knew it was a song. We just didn't know what kind of song it was. And the comfort level that we have from having played together for so long allows us to try things that may not work. As I said, it's not like we're really going for something. And this record could not have existed any other way.

(Guitar)

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Here You Are," by Yo La Tengo, in its entirety.

("Here You Are" by YO LA TENGO)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net to learn more about Yo La Tengo, and for a link to buy or stream this song.

This episode was produced by me, along with Christian Koons, with help from intern Olivia Wood. The illustrations for Song Exploder are by Carlos Lerma.

Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a collective of fiercely independent podcasts. You can learn about all of our shows at radiotopia.fm. Let me know your thoughts on this episode. You can find Song Exploder on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter @SongExploder. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.