

Song Exploder
Iron & Wine - Flightless Bird, American Mouth
Episode 243

Hrishikesh: This episode contains explicit language.

In 2002, Sam Beam's first album as Iron & Wine was released on Sub Pop Records. He'd given them a bunch of demos, and rather than have him re-record these songs, they released the demos themselves. Since then, he's put out five more full-length albums and been nominated for multiple Grammys.

For this episode, Sam looked back at the making of his song "Flightless Bird, American Mouth," from his 2007 album *The Shepherd's Dog*. A year after that album came out, the song was used prominently in a scene in the movie *Twilight*, and it's been one of the most popular Iron & Wine songs ever since. I talked to Sam at Blue Rock Artist Ranch and Studio in Wimberley, Texas, in front of a small audience. Coming up, you'll hear the original demo he recorded, and how that transformed into the final version of the song.

("Flightless Bird, American Mouth" by IRON & WINE)

(Vocals: "Have I found you? Flightless bird / Grounded, bleeding / Or lost you?")

Sam: I'm Sam Beam and I have a musical project called Iron & Wine.

My family was growing and I was traveling the world more, traveling the country and the world, and seeing more of the universe. We had been living in Florida for a while, and we were getting ready to move to Texas.

That was also in a time right after 9/11, um, it was still pretty fresh.

And the way that made us all feel differently about the world, or... Just the way the world was changing in that time.

And I was also a young man, coming to terms with histories that I had learned, and I was reacting to this difference between the, the myth and the reality.

("Flightless Bird, American Mouth" by IRON & WINE)

demo

(Vocals: "I was a quick wet boy / Diving for candy coins / All of your street light eyes / Wide on my plastic toys")

That demo was recorded in 2004, and it sounds like those early Iron & Wine records, cuz I used the same process.

demo chorus

(Vocals: "Have I found you? Flightless bird / Jealous, weeping / Or lost you? American mouth / Big pill looming")

I got the sense pretty early that it was like a "rite of passage" kind of story. It's me talking to America and describing our relationship.

I used to multitrack the drums one head at a time, and so my kids and my wife at the time, they'd always complain about, you know, hearing this "boom, boom-boom." You know, Or "ping, ping, ping," you know what that's like (*chuckles*) in the back room.

At that point I was definitely learning about "demo-itis" as well. 'Cause if you develop a demo *too* well, and you try to chase the thing, it's impossible.

I was building my own studio. So I brought in Brian Deck, who had recorded the record before that, *Our Endless Numbered Days*. We did that in Chicago. That was my first experience in the studio and it was frustrating and illuminating, and everything.

And so, I got the bug, bought a bunch of gear, and he came to Texas and helped me set it up, and we got to work

I also had a bunch of kids and I had to take 'em to school or change a diaper, or whatever. It was, it was a mess. But it was also, you know, it was part of the adventure, setting up this mad factory at your house and trying to, you know, make a life out of it.

And so, Brian would make a loop. Like some interesting loop. And I would play a guitar –

("Flightless Bird, American Mouth" by IRON & WINE")

guitar

And then go back and we would record everything else, track by track.

("Flightless Bird, American Mouth" by IRON & WINE")

(Vocals: "I was a quick wet boy / Diving too deep for coins")

I changed one of the lyrics from that demo that you played, because I decided "diving too deep for coins" was better than "my candy coins"

I liked the idea of reflecting on yourself as someone diving too deep for things that you were after. And the other stuff was me just reminiscing about my neighborhood as a kid, you know, running around under the streetlights.

("Flightless Bird, American Mouth" by IRON & WINE")

(Vocals: "Then when the cops closed the fair / I cut my long baby hair / Stole me a dog-eared map / And called for you everywhere")

I was also really into Alan Ginsberg at the time, and some of the other Beat poets.

Just their way of describing America; a lot of incongruous images thrown up against each other.

I think the beginning of it, the imagery is innocent, and then it gets more complex and more frustrated as the thing goes on.

Have I found you, Flightless Bird, the innocent part of America?
Or have I lost you, the American mouth, with a big pill stuck going down?

("Flightless Bird, American Mouth" by IRON & WINE")

(Vocals: "Have I found you? Flightless bird / Jealous, weeping / Or lost you? American mouth / Big pill looming")

And then once I got to the idea of, like, America being a mouth, the rest kind of felt like, that things are going wrong.

("Flightless Bird, American Mouth" by IRON & WINE")

drums

This is Brian Deck.

Brian's a drummer. It was one of the reasons I wanted to work with him, 'cause I wish I could go back in time and be part of the rhythm section, but I'm not that good... But that's where my heart is. And so I wanted a producer who, who loved that as much as me.

What's interesting, you can hear this room, it's not like, a treated room at all. It was just this round room. It was a terrible idea to record drums in there.
(chuckles)

("Flightless Bird, American Mouth" by IRON & WINE")

piano

That's Rob Burger, playing the piano.

I love bringing other musicians in. I mean the demos are, you know, just me, and, you know, I can flesh it out a bunch, but the fun comes when you bring other people in and they expand what you're doing in a way that you would never imagine.

Rob, the piano player, is also an incredible accordion player.

("Flightless Bird, American Mouth" by IRON & WINE")

chorus 1 w/ piano and accordion

Mostly I just wanted new voices, new sounds that I hadn't used before, and I had plenty to choose from *chuckles* because the early records were so sparse.

("Flightless Bird, American Mouth" by IRON & WINE")

EBow

That's an acoustic electric guitar with a tool called the EBow. It basically makes the string vibrate the way a, you know, a violin bow would, and so it gives this long sustain.

My grandma used to play piano in church. And I remember as a tiny kid, like she would sing the harmonies, you know, standing beside me, and I'd like, listen to her... and the music in your ear just kind of starts to expand, like, Ooh, that's fun.

Listening to her woke up something in my brain, or tickled it in a way that just made it really happy.

At the time, I just really liked stacking harmonies.

("Flightless Bird, American Mouth" by IRON & WINE")

(Vocals: "Pissing on magazine photos / Those fishing lures / Thrown in the cold and clean / Blood of Christ mountain stream")

“Pissing on magazine photos, those fishing lures thrown in the cold and clean blood of Christ Mountain Stream.”

I had done a bunch of hiking in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains in New Mexico, and so I was just kind of, like, using the words.

It's a roundabout, long-winded, fancy way to say: There are things, sacred things that aren't, I don't think are, being treated as sacred.

You know, there's something – something vulnerable is being exploited. Like, I think advertising is bullshit, that kind of thing. I mean, obviously it serves a purpose, but like, if you get lost in those things, you miss out on some of this beautiful cold, clean, blood of Christ water, you know? It was just sort of this American feeling.

(“Flightless Bird, American Mouth” by IRON & WINE)

piano

The high piano stuff is Rob.

We had a really weird filter thing called the Sherman.

And anytime we had a spot where we didn't know where to go, it was like: Sherman. *(chuckles)* See what happens.

It was my studio, so for better or for worse, I could work on it whenever I wanted to. I was able to approach it the way that I would a painting. You work on something, walk away, clear your head, look at a lot of other paintings, or work on other stuff and come back and address it in a totally different mindset and usually have a new idea of how to approach it.

Like in the second section of the song, where you're just sort of building more and more girth, you know, just making it thicker, the drones and all the different clangs and tambourines...

(“Flightless Bird, American Mouth” by IRON & WINE)

It kind of starts quiet, then it gets joyous and a little haywyrish, and it's fun.

music builds

You know, I wrote this song, and, oddly enough, it's been the most well-known from this movie that it was in, *Twilight*.

You know, it came out around the time they were filming this movie, and, as far as I've been told the story, a reputable source told me that Kristen Stewart was listening to it, in her headphones, while they were blocking this dance scene. And she was watching, going, "Oh, this kind of fits, you know, you guys wanna put this on some speakers?"

And they listened to it so many times, it just stuck in their brain, and it became the irreplaceable song for them.

But yeah, it changed my life.

("Flightless Bird, American Mouth" by IRON & WINE)

You know, we were doing better than I had ever imagined. I don't know what I'm doing. I don't know how to read music or I don't know what I'm playing. I just enjoy making songs. I never imagined that I'd be, this would be my career.

And so I had already felt like the luckiest person on the planet. And then when it got on the soundtrack, and the audience just sort of blossomed and bloomed in this way that I had never imagined, it was a huge part of the building of my career.

You never know, man. Never know where they're gonna land. *(chuckles)*

("Flightless Bird, American Mouth" by IRON & WINE)

(Vocals: "Have I found you? Flightless bird / Grounded, bleeding / Or lost you?")

I feel like what happens in the song is a statement: This is what it was like when I was young, and this is what I'm frustrated about now.

Growing up and getting older, and starting to understand how things work, and just feeling unsettled.

I don't feel like this narrator ever reached some kind of resolution. I think it's just more like, things are different now and I don't think they're great.

I don't know who I am. Am I, the, the flightless bird in the American mouth, you know, who feels like somewhere in between those, those things.

Any kind time someone's griping about the state of their country is because they're frustrated and don't feel like they can change it except by saying it.

And I love America. I mean, it's fine to like, love America and criticize it at the same time. That's what we do. But we usually criticize the things we love the most.

Hrishikesh: For those of you who can vote in American elections, for all the ways you might be frustrated about the way things are changing, election day is November 8, Please vote.

And now, here's "Flightless Bird, American Mouth," by Iron & Wine, in its entirety,

("Flightless Bird, American Mouth" by IRON & WINE")

Hrishikesh: For more, visit songexploder.net. You can find links to buy or stream "Flightless Bird, American Mouth."

Song Exploder, and the show's theme music, were created by me. I produced this episode with Craig Eley, with artwork by Carlos Lerma, music clearance by Kathleen Smith, and production assistance from Mary Dolan.

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I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. Thanks for listening.