

**Song Exploder**  
**The Postal Service - The District Sleeps Alone Tonight**  
**Episode 266**

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. I'm Hrishikesh Hirway.

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

Somewhere around the end of 2012, I started daydreaming about Song Exploder as a vague idea: A show where you could hear the inner workings of a song, and the ideas that went into making all the different parts. I finally decided to try and make some kind of pilot episode in the spring of 2013. I'd never interviewed somebody before, but I asked my friend Jimmy Tamborello if he would be up for letting me try this concept with him. We'd known each other for years at that point; we'd gone on tour together, and I've been a huge fan of his music for a long time. He makes music under the name Dntel, and he's one half of the band The Postal Service, along with Ben Gibbard. They were just getting ready to go on tour to celebrate the 10th anniversary of their album *Give Up*, and so Jimmy had already been working with the different stems of their songs to get ready for playing them live. So one day, I went to his home studio in LA, and we sat together in front of his computer, and he played me different parts of my favorite Postal Service song, "The District Sleeps Alone Tonight." And I tried to explain what my idea was, and what I wanted to get out of the interview.

Hrishikesh: *Like, let's listen to the song and then you point out things that you hear, to me.*

Jimmy: *Oh okay, yeah. That makes sense.*  
*("The District Sleeps Alone Tonight" by THE POSTAL SERVICE - bass parts)*

Hrishikesh: *Like this. I've never heard this stuff.*

Jimmy: *Yeah, that's just all the bass parts together.*

Hrishikesh: *That would be awesome to do that.*

Jimmy: *Yeah. Yeah. I could play those.*

Hrishikesh: *Yeah.*

Jimmy: *Play the synth parts.*

Hrishikesh: *Yeah, the beat, the synths...*

While we were talking, I just got more and more excited about this idea. And then eventually I put it all together, and that became the first episode of this podcast. And that first episode came out 10 years ago this month, in January 2014. And so, I thought, to celebrate... What if we do what bands do on their anniversaries, and put out an expanded, deluxe version of our very first release?

*Jimmy: Wh-, uh-... my name's J - (laughs) I'm gonna look at you while I say... [laughs]*

*Hrishikesh: Yeah! Yeah, yeah, totally. What's going on? What's happening?*

*Jimmy: My name is Jimmy - [both laugh] And then I'll say...*

*Hrishikesh: Say, "Today we're listening to...." or something.  
I've been trying to figure out a way to do it entirely where I, my voice isn't there at all.*

*Jimmy: You have a good radio voice, though. You could just come out on...*

*Hrishikesh: Just a really anonymous at the beginning. Just being like, you know, "this is blah blah blah; today, blah blah blah..." and then...*

*Jimmy: Yeah. Yeah.*

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

*Hrishikesh: The Postal Service formed in 2001. Their debut album came out in 2003, and it was a game changer. Their combination of electronic music and indie rock not only sold over a million copies, their songs were everywhere on TV and in film, and influenced a generation of artists. Last year, they played sold-out concerts across the US, in celebration of the 20th anniversary of the album, and there are more shows to come in 2024. A few weeks ago, I spoke to Ben Gibbard, and I combined that with my original interview from 2013 with Jimmy Tamborello. And here, together, the two of them tell the story of how they made their song "The District Sleeps Alone Tonight."*

*(music up)*

*(Vocals: "(Where I am) / You seem so out of context / In this gaudy apartment complex / (Where I am) / A stranger with your door key / Explaining that I'm just visiting / (Where I am) / And I am finally seeing / Why I was the one worth leaving")*

*(music fades)*

*Jimmy: My name's Jimmy Tamborello, from The Postal Service.*

*Ben: My name is Ben Gibbard. I play in Death Cab for Cutie, and I moonlight in The Postal Service.*

*Jimmy: And this was kind of like an electronic side project we did together.*

*Ben: Jimmy and I first met in the spring of 2000. Death Cab was playing at Spaceland in Los Angeles. And there was a band on the bill called Arca, and Jimmy was playing bass.*

*Allegedly we met that first night, but very briefly. And, uh, you know, Jimmy is a fairly soft-spoken individual.*

But about a year later, I was going down to Los Angeles to visit my friend Pedro Benito.

And he had said, oh, uh, my roommate Jimmy Tamborello, he was in that band that you guys played with last year, and I was like, okay, don't remember it.

But uh, [chuckles] he was like, yeah, he has this electronic music project called Dntel, and he's having guest vocalists on his record; would you mind if I put you guys in contact and he send you a song to work on?

And I was like, sure, yeah, why not? I mean, at that age, maybe 24, 25, where you just kind of say yes to everything without questioning it. And uh, he sent me the music that became "(This Is) The Dream of Evan and Chan."

*("(This is) The Dream of Evan and Chan" by DNTEL)*

This kind of really cool, glitchy kind of piece.

*(music cont'd)*

I wrote atop that. Sent him back, I think, a cassette. And we made a plan to record it when I was down in Los Angeles. So, Jimmy and I spent an afternoon in his bedroom working on the song.

*(Vocals: "It was familiar to me / The smoke too thick to breathe / The tile floors glistened / I slowly stirred my drink ...")*

And over the course of the weekend of just hanging out and becoming kind of friendly, I asked him if he might wanna do some more stuff like this, 'cause it was so fun, and so easy.

And he, in his very kind of subdued way, kind of smiled a bit and was like, yeah, that could be good.

So we kind of concocted this plan to do a project together. And I believe the name The Postal Service was thrown about, maybe even that weekend, based on how we'd made the first song. Both of us had dial-up connections in 2001. It wasn't, it wasn't like it is now.

So, yeah, it'll be called The Postal Service 'cause we have to mail things, you know, back and forth.

*(music fades)*

One of the many things that attracted me to Jimmy's music was that it felt experimental, and it felt new and interesting, but it also felt as if it kind of had a soul to it. Like there was a human behind it.

Jimmy: So, when Ben and I decided to make this record, my first job was just to make a couple instrumentals to send to him, to get the ball rolling.

Ben: And then I would write to that. Kind of like a conversation, where he's starting it, and I'm hopefully finishing it.

Jimmy: My computer at the time, I think it was a Quadra, or something like... [chuckles]. It was an old Mac. It still wasn't really powerful enough to record audio into it. So I'd mostly use it as, like, a sequencer.

All the music that I was making back then, in the early 2000s, I was using mostly one sampler/synthesizer called the K-2000 from Kurzweil. So all the sounds would be coming out of the K-2000, but controlled by the computer.

*("The District Sleeps Alone Tonight" by THE POSTAL SERVICE - drum beat)*

I think, in this song, the drum programming definitely is indebted to Bjork *Homogenic*.

When I was making this song, I was kind of imagining it as a song for Bjork.

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

The K-2000 is pretty flexible as a synthesizer. It comes with a lot of preset bass and pad and all sorts of synthesizer sounds that you can edit.

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

Any sound I used, I would try to change it from the preset, just so it would be more original.

And then also, I was able to sample outside sound sources, and use those in the same machine.

*("The District Sleeps Alone Tonight" by THE POSTAL SERVICE - add strings)*

So, almost everything on the Postal Service album came out of that machine.

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

So I sent an instrumental version of the song to Ben.

*(instrumental fades down)*

Ben: So this was the first thing that Jimmy sent to me. And I remember I lived in this attic apartment on Mercer Street in Seattle. And this mail shows up, you know, it's an envelope. It's kind of scraggly writing. Jimmy's handwriting. Open it up. Just a CD. No note, no letter. No, "Hey, I was thinking this could be about..." Just a CD that said, like, "PS One" or something, on it.

I put it in like a CD Walkman, and I just walked around my neighborhood, Capitol Hill in Seattle. It was just like a rainy Seattle night, as they tend to be in December. And just listened to it over and over again.

*("The District Sleeps Alone Tonight" by THE POSTAL SERVICE - organ comes in)*

There was just something about those organ chords that start the song. It was just a very kind of melancholic mood, immediately.

And so, it was fairly easy to enter that space where I was reacting to someone else's ideas, rather than the idea beginning with me. Because half the work was

already done. What he sent me didn't require any editing. It allowed my mind to kind of go places lyrically, thoughts kind of floated across the front of my brain. And I remember listening to it and thinking, oh, I, I, I know exactly what I'm gonna do with this.

*("The District Sleeps Alone Tonight" by THE POSTAL SERVICE - verse 1, vocals and organ)*

*(Vocals: "Smearred black ink / Your palms are sweaty / And I'm barely listening / To last demands / I'm staring at the asphalt wondering / What's buried underneath")*

*(music out)*

So the story's taking place in front of the Black Cat, in DC, which is a kind of legendary club.

I had been on tour with Death Cab, and I was seeing a woman who was basically my first adult girlfriend. We had moved to Seattle together; we had gotten an apartment. She was a teacher. She had, like, a real job. Um, and I was trying to do music and working temp jobs and stuff. And, you know, as often are the case with these relationships when we are young, it didn't work out.

And she had moved to Washington DC, she was teaching there. So, you know, we had had this kind of day, driving around, her introducing me to, like, her new life. You know, having her show me her school, and, and where she lived... And it was a new experience for me; the idea that a relationship can end, and somebody can move across the country, and start a totally different life.

It was really over, you know? Like, this person had started anew, 3,000 miles away.

So, we were trying to find a space to kind of talk and catch up. But the backstage at the Black Cat was not really a conducive place to talk. And there was also a line of people going into the show [chuckles].

So I remember we were sitting kind of on the stoop in front of the club, and, you know, she had, like, written down a number of things she wanted to talk about on her hand, because she was nervous that she would forget.

*("The District Sleeps Alone Tonight" by THE POSTAL SERVICE - organ fades in)*

Specifically things that she perceived that I had done wrong. So that was a pretty indelible image to me from that experience.

*(Vocals: "Smearred black ink...")*

It was almost like the eulogy for the relationship.

I was torn between trying to listen, while also being very acutely aware of my role and who I was as a member of this band, because we were in front of however-many-hundred people who were trying to go into the club to literally see me play music.

So it was a very awkward place to have this conversation... And it was also an awkward conversation.

I'm being kind of read a particular type of riot act in the first verse.

But then the chorus is almost a dig on this person. Like, this doesn't seem right that you're here.

*(Vocals: "You seem so out of context / In this gaudy apartment complex")*

She lived in this very kind of bland apartment complex in Arlington, I think. Like one of those places that bureaucrats would live. There's a slight indictment in there as well of like, is this who you are now? Are you no longer cool? Which, I think, is the kind of thought that a 25-year-old has.

*(music out)*

I don't remember how quickly I turned it around and sent it back to Jimmy, but it was within a week. It wasn't that long. I was so excited to work on it.

I did vocals. It might have been in this mic I'm talking into right now. This is an Audio-Technica 4033. And I think this, this might be the actual mic.

And that was it. Then I just burned a mix and sent it back to Jimmy, you know, awaited his response a couple days.

I think he just said, "Sounds good," exclamation point.

And then, "Any notes?" "No." That was kind of how it was. There weren't a lot of conversations about things to change, or adjustments to make.

Jimmy: Maybe just 'cause we still didn't know each other that well. It was probably weird to ask too much.

Ben: A lot of it had to do with just Jimmy's personality. He obviously cares deeply about the music that he is making, as I do. But we were kind of doing this for a laugh.

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

Jimmy: Ben added this guitar, I think when he was recording the demo.

Ben: There was this break in the middle, and then all of a sudden it was like, [imitates drums] "do snap, do that." And I just wanted to put something small in there, to kind of just mark it as a bridge. Kind of like a Death Cab-style guitar thing.

*("The District Sleeps Alone Tonight" by THE POSTAL SERVICE - guitar riff)*

Jimmy: This kind of chime-y part really added a lot to the second section of the song.

*("The District Sleeps Alone Tonight" by THE POSTAL SERVICE - bridge into next chorus)*

*(Vocals: "(Where I am) / You seem so out of context / In this gaudy apartment complex / (Where I am) / A stranger with your door key / Explaining that I'm just visiting / (Where I am)")*

Ben, 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.

Hrishikesh: What made you decide that you didn't want it to just be Ben? What was the thought process behind that?

Jimmy: I think 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 Ben's vocals.

Ben: I had had this vision of having a female vocalist at least doing backups. It just felt as if, like, that was a tone that I think would bring a lot to how I sang, because I have such a small, kind of reedy voice. So this seemed like, because Jimmy and I were basically making the rules up as we went along, we could invite whomever we wanted to come be a part of it.

Jimmy: Ben's band, Death Cab for Cutie, was on Barsuk Records at the time, and one of their labelmates was Rilo Kiley.

Ben: So I asked Jenny Lewis to sing on the record. I did not know Jenny Lewis. We were not friends. But her band, Rilo Kiley, had just put a record out on Barsuk, *Takeoffs and Landings*, and I liked that record.

Jimmy: So, he got in touch with her, and asked if she'd be up for doing these background vocals.

Ben: And she was like, "Yeah, sure."

*("The District Sleeps Alone Tonight" by THE POSTAL SERVICE - outtakes of Jenny vocals*

*(Vocals: "(Where I am) / (groan noise) (laughs) / (speaking) One more time")*

Yeah I mean, this is just a testament to how people roll when they're young. You don't ask a lot of questions. You're just like, Yeah, do you wanna hang out with these two weird dudes you've never met before and make a record? Yeah. Sounds great.

So she picked me up at Burbank Airport, in the Rilo Kiley tour van.

Jimmy: 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 hung out very much.

Ben: "Hi, nice to meet you." We got Mexican food and then went to go make *Give Up*. That's how it went.

Almost immediately, I had this thought of like, oof, okay, well we're gonna go right into the studio and start making this album. And we have never sung together before. So, I don't really know if our voices are gonna work together. But, from the jump, she just got it.

*("The District Sleeps Alone Tonight" by THE POSTAL SERVICE - vocal harmonies)*

*(Vocals: "Where I am")*

You know, Jimmy's behind his computer; Jenny's in front of a mic; I'm on a set of headphones.

You know, I remember Jenny just having this grin on her face, like, "Hey, this is, this is, we're doing this, this is weird, this is new," you know? And she would sing one of these things. She'd kinda look over at me and just kind of like, and I'd be like, yeah, sounds great!

*("The District Sleeps Alone Tonight" by THE POSTAL SERVICE - vocals isolated)*

*(Vocals: "I am a visitor here / I am not permanent")*

And then Jimmy would just kind of, like, nod a bit and like, we'd move on to the next one.

I think my favorite part in the song is the "DC sleeps alone tonight" harmony.

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

*("DC sleeps alone tonight")*

Jimmy: By the time we got Ben and Jenny's vocals together, we were pretty close to finishing the record. It was mostly just some refining and, 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, it might've been just an accident with a delay pedal, but I looped a little bit of Jenny's vocals

*("The District Sleeps Alone Tonight" by THE POSTAL SERVICE - vocal loop isolated)*

and made it into texture in the song.

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

*("The District Sleeps Alone Tonight" by THE POSTAL SERVICE - vocal loop isolated, into full song)*

*(Vocals: "(Where I am) / You seem so out of context / In this gaudy apartment complex / (Where I am) / A stranger with your door key / Explaining that I'm just visiting / (Where I am) / And I am finally seeing / Why I was the one worth leaving")*

Ben: It felt as if that moment, now, with the benefit of hindsight, is like the introduction of, like, Hey guys, we can have these indie rock guitars and we can put them on these beats. It's fine. We're not breaking any rules here. Like, no one's gonna get arrested.

And it would be very easy to sit here, 20-plus years later, and retrofit our origin story and pretend as if we knew we were making some landmark album at the time.

And it's like, no, we were just two dudes who were, who'd just met, didn't know each other very well, and thought this would be a good idea.

Hrishikesh: Coming up, you'll hear how all of these ideas and elements came together in the final song.

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And now, here's "The District Sleeps Alone Tonight" by The Postal Service, in its entirety.

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

To learn more, visit [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net). You'll find links to buy or stream "The District Sleeps Alone Tonight," and you can watch the music video. And check out [postalservicemusic.net](http://postalservicemusic.net) for The Postal Service's upcoming tour dates.

If you liked this episode, I also did an episode with Ben Gibbard about a Death Cab for Cutie song, back in 2015. You'll find that, and all the other episodes of the show, at [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net).

The original version of this episode was produced and edited by me. This expanded version was produced by Craig Eley, Theo Balcomb, Kathleen Smith, Mary Dolan, and myself. The episode artwork is by Carlos Lerma, and I made the show's theme music and logo. I've thanked him before many times, but my deep thanks to Jimmy Tamborello for agreeing to let me try the idea for this podcast out with him. And special thanks to Ben Gibbard and Jordan Kurland, as well.

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I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. Thanks for listening.

—

*Jimmy: There's this part that was, uh, like a... edit of Jenny's vocals that we used.*

*Hrishikesh: That's awesome. I had no idea that that was in there. I've listened to that song so many times.*

*Jimmy: Yeah, you can hear the, like, that Jenny part, really far in the background.*

*Hrishikesh: ...Oh my god!*