

Song Exploder
The Flaming Lips - Do You Realize??
Episode 272

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 Flaming Lips formed in Oklahoma City in 1983. Over the last four decades, they've put out 16 albums. In 1999, they put out their album *The Soft Bulletin*, and that brought them a new level of success. And then, in 2002, they followed it up with *Yoshimi Battles the Pink Robots*. Pitchfork named it one of the top 5 albums of the year, Stereogum called it one of the best albums of the decade, and they won a Grammy. The biggest song from the album was "Do You Realize??" So, for this episode, I talked to Wayne Coyne and Steven Drozd about how that song was first imagined. You'll hear the very first demo Wayne recorded for the song, and the demo that he and Steven put together later, on their way to making the final version with producer Dave Fridmann.

("Do You Realize??" by THE FLAMING LIPS)

(Vocals: "Do you realize / That everyone you know someday will die?")

Wayne: My name is Wayne Coyne and I'm the singer for the Flaming Lips.

Steven: My name is Steven Drozd and I'm a multi-instrumentalist and songwriter for the Flaming Lips.

Wayne: We had put out this record, *The Soft Bulletin*, in 1999. And the success of *The Soft Bulletin*, I think in our state of mind at the time, it bought us a couple more years of making freaky records.

Steven: I think there was an active feeling that we didn't wanna repeat *The Soft Bulletin*, so maybe let's use less acoustic instruments and more electronic elements.

Wayne: So *Yoshimi Battles the Pink Robots* is not us making a commercial record. It felt like another experiment.

Steven: Yeah.

Wayne: And there was already a couple of songs where we used this lyric "realize" in the songs. This word "realize," it resonated with the way I communicate, or something.

Steven: Yeah, we had done a BBC session, a song called "We Can't Predict the Future," that had that [sings] "ree-a-lize" at the end of it. And that's really the first time that

really–

Wayne: Yeah.

Steven: –took hold like that.

Wayne: Yeah.

(“We Can’t Predict The Future” by THE FLAMING LIPS)

(Vocals: “How long will it take / Before I can realize / Realize”)

And Steven and I, I both thought, ah, we didn't nail that one. Let's keep, let's see if we can find the song that that word is gonna work with.

Steven: So, spring of 2001. Wayne's living in Oklahoma City, where he lives now. I was living down in Norman.

And Wayne just showed up at my house one day and said, Hey, I gotta play this thing for you to see what you think about it.

Wayne: At the time, I was using a four-track cassette recorder.

Steven: Old school.

Wayne: No effects or anything. Just me, a microphone. And it's all plugged in, ready to go. You know, if you sit down, within five seconds you can be recording. That's the way I like to do everything. 'cause if you get an idea, you wanna be able to just go right to it.

(“Do You Realize??” by THE FLAMING LIPS - first demo, Wayne only)

(“...do you realize...”)

But these demos, you know, they're excruciating to hear. Cuz it's just a guy fumbling in all areas. You know, I don't know what I'm gonna sing. I don't even know what key it is. And I don't really even know the chords.

(“Do You Realize??” by THE FLAMING LIPS - second demo with Steven)

(Vocals: “Take two / Do you realize / You have the most beautiful face / Do you realize...”)

I think I'm improvising the lyrics. This beginning, a romantic line... Romantic's such a dumb word, but it's true for songs, you know, where, "you have the most beautiful face." And I don't really even do songs like that, you know. And I think, in my embarrassment that I would start a song with that line, I quickly go, "And do you realize we're floating in space," to kind of make up for it.

("Do You Realize??" by THE FLAMING LIPS - first demo, Wayne only)

(Vocals: "We're floating out in space / Space / Do you realize")*

That would be me. I'd say, no, I'm not, I'm not a cornball!

Steven: [laughs]

Wayne: I'm, I'm being, I'm cosmic, you know, or whatever. I think that probably set me free, and then I could just hope to get like a rhyme.

("Do You Realize??" by THE FLAMING LIPS - first demo, Wayne only)

(Vocals: "Do you realize / Happiness makes you cry / Do you realize / Everyone that you know someday will die")

I think most people would hear that and say, you call that a demo? I mean, it, it, it sounds like a guy just

Steven: [laughs]

Wayne: barely getting through it. I don't sing in time, I don't sing in tune. I don't play in time.

Steven: [laughs]

Wayne: All these things that good musicians do without thinking about it, I just can't really do it. Because if you have to know all these things, it just takes all the fun out of it.

Steven: It already sounded like something to me, for sure. Something we could work on. It could be great.

Wayne: And I know that once Steven hears it, he can help me with some of the tuning, and the melody, and where the chords could go.

("Do You Realize??" by THE FLAMING LIPS - second demo with Steven)

(Vocals: "Two, three, four / Da-na-na / Na-na-na-na")

Steven: You know, Wayne had what he had, but we knew that we needed another part. So I'm just trying to come up with something that breaks away from the main part of the song.

(Vocals: "Here's the new part")

For a long time I was kind of obsessed with key changes.

(Vocals: "Do you realize / Ah-ah-ah...")

I think it's interesting that in pop music, especially, that you do this thing called a key change and people just accept it, and—

Wayne: Yeah.

Steven: —like, we should do a key change just because it would be a fun thing to do, you know? So it's got this, I think, a little bit awkward key change maybe.

I do think it's interesting that, on the demo, I go through the key change twice, you know? And on the record, it's just once.

That was probably Dave Fridmann, like,

Wayne: Yeah.

Steven: "That's too long." "Chop that in half." "Let's go." So.

Wayne: Dave Fridmann our producer, he's not gonna give you any slack. I mean, back then it was like...

Steven: "Too long." "This is too slow." "This is boring."

Wayne: You know, we, we first become aware of Dave Fridmann through our friend Jonathan Donahue, who's in a band with Dave Fridmann called Mercury Rev.

Then we ended up back in Dave Fridmann's studio, and he's gonna record the Flaming Lips for his senior project. And we're all living together, all doing this stuff day after day after day after day. And we loved each other. I mean, we all really loved creating music together, and mixing together.

And I think as soon as we would've got done with that, we would've been thinking, "Let's do this as much as we can." So I've known him since 1988. Long, long time now. Yeah.

("Do You Realize???" by THE FLAMING LIPS - acoustic guitar strumming)

Steven: As far as the acoustic guitar track goes, I think we were trying to make it as intense as possible, so.

Wayne: We know we're gonna compress it. We know it's gonna be as bright as possible.

It's gonna be slightly distorted, but it's not really gonna sound distorted. It's just gonna sound like it's very much in your face.

("Do You Realize???" by THE FLAMING LIPS - acoustic guitar strumming)

Steven: I know I strummed it like all down strokes, [imitates guitar] "dun-dun-dun-dun-dun." So instead of "ding-di-da" it's all "da-da-da-da-da."

Wayne: And it's got a lot of high notes, you know, everything is [imitates guitar] "up, up, up, up, up."

That's driving the song.

Steven: A lot of times we would just put down a bunch of tracks.

("Do You Realize???" by THE FLAMING LIPS - add drums to guitar)

What I did was recorded different parts individually. So I recorded the kick drum.

Then I put the toms down, which is just two toms by themselves.

Then I put a shaker down.

And then Wayne put down the electronic loop thing.

("Do You Realize???" by THE FLAMING LIPS - add electronic loop)

And then we just put it all together and kind of make a... one thing out of it.

("Do You Realize???" by THE FLAMING LIPS - add all drums, then drum fill)

The drum fill is actually from a song called "Slow Motion" from 1999 by us.

That's actually just taken from that session and thrown into "Do You Realize???" [imitates drums] "Ta-ka-ta-ka-ka, drrrrrrr-pshhhh!"

("Slow Motion" by THE FLAMING LIPS)

This was Wayne's idea, to use that actual drum fill from that song. We didn't wanna set up a drum kit session, which would take really a long time, back then. So like, let's just grab the thing that already exists.

Wayne: That we'd already spent—

Steven: Yeah.

Wayne: —50 hours getting that sound.

Steven: The thinking was, let's do this quickly and see if we like it.

Wayne: And for us, it was even cooler that it was out of one of our old songs.

("Do You Realize???" by THE FLAMING LIPS - drum fill into bass)

Steven: That part was played on the uh, Fender music master bass. Wayne was thinking, can you play a bassline that propels along like Adam Clayton from U2? And that was the assignment. So that's what I did [laughs].

Wayne: Part of our songs would be classic rock, you know, where they have a drummer and a bass player, and then other parts are like, a couple things thrown together and we don't really want you to hear a bass player.

Steven: Yeah. Let's sound less like just a rock and roll band from Oklahoma City and sound more like just something you can't really put your finger on.

(Vocals: "And instead of saying all of your goodbyes / Let them know you realize that life goes fast / It's hard to make the good things last / You realize the sun doesn't go down / It's just an illusion caused by the world spinning round")

Wayne: You know, "Realize that life goes fast. It's hard to make the good things last." I mean, that's cheap. But it sings great.

And, "The sun doesn't go down. It's just an illusion caused by the world spinning around."

That's something I would say anyway. It wouldn't have occurred to me that that's that lyrical.

("Do You Realize???" by THE FLAMING LIPS)

(Vocals: "Do you realize")

("Do You Realize???" by THE FLAMING LIPS - weird synth sounds)

Yeah. Those little [imitates synth] you know.

Steven: [imitates synths]

("Do You Realize???" by THE FLAMING LIPS - weird synth sounds)

Wayne: I mean, we would just already have an agenda. It's like, all right, we need at least seven of those in this song

Steven: [Laughs] Seven squibbs. Yeah.

Wayne: And we'd try to find different ones, and I,

Steven: [Laughs]

Wayne: I don't even know if they're, are they in key or anything? I mean.

Steven: Uh, some are. Some aren't.

("Do You Realize??" by THE FLAMING LIPS - weird synth sounds)

Wayne: When you hear them outta the context of the song, it just sounds like, what is happening here?!

Steven: Kinda goofy, yeah. [Laughs]

Wayne: Yeah.

("Do You Realize??" by THE FLAMING LIPS - chimes)

Steven: The Flaming Lips have never been afraid of chimes. That's just a color, a palette. Just a sound we would go to.

Wayne: I mean, we like epic. You know, we like to be like, we're going all the way.

Steven: Right, right.

Wayne: It's as bombastic as you can get away with.

("Do You Realize??" by THE FLAMING LIPS - chimes)

You know, we're on the way to it being the biggest production ever, every time.

Steven: [Laughs] Right.

("Do You Realize??" by THE FLAMING LIPS - chimes into strings)

Wayne: The big string sections... What I liked about it is like, it starts and it's already intense. It's up and it's full blast.

Steven: Yeah.

Wayne: You know? That uplift, that energy and those bells and all that together, you're just like, I'm in.

("Do You Realize??" by THE FLAMING LIPS - backing vocals)

(Vocals: "Do you realize? / Ah-ah-ah")

Steven: That's me, singing 12, 16 tracks of vocals, I guess? Just all mixed together.

Wayne: I would just say, well, we need like, the Wizard of Oz choir. And that means it's a big choir. It's men and women.

Steven: Lots of voices.

Wayne: And then there's voices that are slowed down and sped up.

You know, we want it to seem like 20 people. And some of 'em are giants. Some of 'em are two inches tall and they're all singing together. It's like a Dr. Seuss choir, or something.

Steven: It'd be like 12 voices, probably double tracked also. And then tape manipulation for some, so they're lower and tape manipulation for some so they're, [imitates high pitches] "weh neh neh" higher. So you get a full, big, full spectrum of sound there, you know.

(Vocals: "Ah-ah-ah")

Wayne: It's just a evocative sound. And it does sound a little bit, like, it's ridiculous. Which is, it's what you want.

Steven and I will say this all the time: the worst thing that we can say to each other is "eh, it just sounds like music."

Steven: [Chuckles]

("Do You Realize???" by THE FLAMING LIPS - end of song)

("Do you realize / That you have the most beautiful face? / Do you realize?")

Wayne: When the song came out, we probably didn't want to be known for being the people that do the song "Do You Realize???"

Steven: [Laughs]

Wayne: We probably were like, nah, we're, we're not like that. I mean, I think there's a sense of it feeling like there's something heavy about it.

You know, at the time, to have people say, I played that at, you know, my mother's funeral or I, we played that at our, our wedding. It was the first song we danced to, you know, our reference for those types of songs would've been like, I hate those kind of songs. I don't want to be played at people's weddings. And it was weird that it would have so much meaning. The way that we made it is just sounds and stuff.

("Do You Realize??" by THE FLAMING LIPS - mellotron)

Even though we always treated it like it's one of our great songs. But we didn't really embrace it like, "This is who we are." But in time. Little by little, we could see why it is cool to have these types of songs. But I mean, we've played it every night since 2002, you know? For the longest time we played it, the very last song we would play. And it would just, you see people crying, you see people hugging, you see people struggling. You know, I mean, I struggle watching it, you know? And um, yeah, it's heavy, you know? But, when we did it, it wasn't heavy. It was fun.

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 "Do You Realize??" by The Flaming Lips, in its entirety.

("Do You Realize??" by THE FLAMING LIPS)

To learn more, visit songexploder.net. You'll find links to buy or stream "Do You Realize??" and you can watch the music video.

This episode 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. Special thanks to Myles Adams for recording Wayne and Steven's side of the interview.

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I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. Thanks for listening.