

Song Exploder
of Montreal - Wraith Pinned to the Mist and Other Games
Episode 287

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.

Kevin Barnes started of Montreal in 1996 in Athens, Georgia. The Sunlandic Twins came out in 2005; it was their seventh album. And I remember when that album came out, how it felt like they were suddenly everywhere. And the breakout song from that breakout album was "Wraith Pinned to the Mist and Other Games." And so, for this episode, I spoke to Kevin Barnes about how that song came together and what it meant to them then, and what it means to them now.

("Wraith Pinned to the Mist and Other Games" by OF MONTREAL)

(Vocals: "Let's have bizarre celebrations / Let's forget who, forget what, forget where / We'll have bizarre celebrations / I'll play the Satyr in Cypris, you the bride being stripped bare (bare) / Let's pretend we don't exist / Let's pretend we're in Antarctica")

Hrishikesh: Could I get you to just do an introduction, for the beginning of the episode?

Kevin: Yeah. My name is Kevin Barnes, and I am of Montreal.

Hrishikesh: So, in my understanding, you made a few records in more of a band incarnation, but by the time this album came around, you were making stuff more sort of in a solo mode. Is that right?

Kevin: Yeah. I had, like, a pretty solid lineup for a few years. And we had made a couple of records, and the records didn't sell well and people weren't really vibing with them. And people in the band were sort of losing interest...

Hrishikesh: Mm.

Kevin: ...in being in of Montreal and wanting to do their own things. And so, the band sort of dissolved, and then I made Satanic Panic in the Attic by myself, for the most part.

And that record did really well by our standards at that point. It was like a big jump up.

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

Kevin: But then I sort of realized, like, I really liked working by myself. Because when I first started making music, I did it by myself 'cause I didn't have any other people around me. I was living in South Florida with my mom and dad, and there weren't a lot of people that were into the kind of thing that I was into. Actually, there was nobody that was into the kind of stuff that I was into. So, just pretty much did it all myself then. But always kind of assumed that it would be better to have a group of people, because then everyone's kind of more invested and it's less, less on my plate.

Hrishikesh: And less lonely?

Kevin: A little bit less lonely, yeah, for sure. But then there's also problems that come with that. 'Cause then, like, there's egos and there's, like, emotions and, like, people who are like, "Oh, you know, you played that bass part, but I'm the bassist. Why would you play it?" So I kind of like, yeah, reached a point where I was like: I can just do this myself because I want to, and I have all these ideas and have a very specific bassline in mind or a very specific synth part in mind and, and it was also just really fun.

Especially if you're by yourself and you can really zoom in on all the little details and the minutiae and, and really get lost in that world. And it's so fulfilling.

I always think of it like painting, that like, so many people create these incredible works, these paintings. And, it's kind of just assumed that they did it by themselves. And you know, it's not weird at all. It's actually, it would be way weirder to do a collaborative painting.

Hrishikesh: (laughs)

Kevin: So I kind of think about that in a similar way of like, recording a song.

Hrishikesh: Yeah. I was, I was wondering if there was any feeling of "Oh, the albums I did as a band didn't do as well. The album I did solo did better. So that means I should keep working in this way."

Kevin: Yeah, I wonder. I think on some level, maybe it did feel more justified to, to be more of an egomaniac and to be like, "Yeah, it's okay that I, that I'm doing all this by myself because look, guys, it's like working."

Hrishikesh: I think of you as a pretty prolific artist. Uh, Satanic Panic in the Attic came out in 2004, and then Sunlandic Twins came out in 2005. Do you consider yourself prolific?

Kevin: In a weird way, my, my self worth is contingent on that. Like, you know, I kind of

feel like, "Oh, it's embarrassing, I haven't done anything in like six months." You know, like, I need to be constantly re-establishing that I'm an artist in my mind.

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

Kevin: Or else I just feel kind of lost and restless and, like, a loser.

Hrishikesh: I mean, I think I feel the same way, but there's a certain amount of time, some unknown amount of time that I have to wait before the creativity reservoir gets filled back up again. And it usually takes a pretty long time. Do you have a similar experience like that where you have to kind of give it a second or can you just dive right back in?

Kevin: Okay, so if I'm working on a, on a new album, a lot of times I, I'm trying to do it in, like the least self-conscious way possible. Where I'm just creating things and not thinking like, "Oh, I'm making an album." Or like, "What are people going to think about this?" You know, it's just like, just really allow myself to be as free as possible and not imagine an audience, not imagine critics, not imagine any of that side of it.

And really just kind of let the whole thing flow.

Hrishikesh: What was your life like in that time, when you were starting to make this song?

Kevin: Uh, my life was insane in between Satanic Panic and Sunlandic Twins, 'cause I was newly married and my wife was the bass player in the band, and on tour, we discovered she was pregnant and, and like, we weren't really making any money. We didn't have health insurance.

We didn't have any of the things that you think you would need, you know, to like, bring a child onto the earth. (chuckles) So that's kind of, like, the backdrop for me, finishing up Sunlandic Twins. Uh, Nina's pregnant. We were living in a house in Athens with my brother. And even though it was pretty scary, the thought of having a child was still, like, very abstract. Just kind of, like, mysterious, but not overwhelming or anything.

So I was, like, still able to kind of focus on creating the songs and working in my little bedroom studio.

Hrishikesh: Do you think you could pinpoint the first moment of inspiration for "Wraith Pinned to the Mist?"

Kevin: That one I have like a really strong memory.

("Wraith Pinned to the Mist and Other Games" by OF MONTREAL - acoustic demo)

(Vocals: "Let's have bizarre celebrations / Let's forget who, forget when, forget where / We'll have bizarre celebrations / I'll play the Satyr in Cypris, you the bride being stripped bare / Let's pretend we don't exist / Let's pretend we're in Antarctica")

Kevin: It's a pretty small house that my brother and Nina and, and I lived in, and if you weren't in your bedroom, you were basically in a public space.

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

Kevin: (chuckles) You know, the kitchen and the living room were all just sort of one big room. And my brother David would be out there on the table, drawing or whatever. And Nina would be doing whatever she was doing, and I remember coming out of my little bedroom studio space and being like, "Hey, I wrote this song." And I played it for them like, what do you guys think?

And they were like, "Oh, that's cool." (chuckles)

Hrishikesh: (chuckles)

Kevin: It's kind of funny because it is like, not really the kind of thing that you would normally think would happen on an acoustic guitar.

'Cause you know, just playing like single notes and that way, like basically, you know, it's like obviously a bassline.

So, it definitely kind of seems like a shower song that you'd just be like, *hums* and you're like, "Ooh, that's kind of cool."

Hrishikesh: Hmm.

Kevin: And then I had to, like, imagine, like, how I wanted to kind of, like, bring it to life.

("Wraith Pinned to the Mist and Other Games" by OF MONTREAL - synth drums)

I'd just started getting into drum programming and recording on a computer. So I started using this program called Reason.

At that time it was like, pretty, like, stiff and funny sounding, but I thought it was really fun.

I think I was using Reason in a similar way that people were using drum machines in the eighties and stuff. So I started with just the "dum dum, dum..."

And then added some percussion.

"Wraith Pinned to the Mist" was kind of, like, aspirational in a way. Like, I want to make fun, funky, upbeat, buoyant dance music.

I always loved Prince. When I was like, 12, 13, 14, like really early, when I was discovering music. Then I kind of moved away from that in my early twenties, when I was, you know, more obsessed with 60s music, and psychedelic stuff. But it was like around Sunlandic Twins where I started coming back to those influences and realizing like, Prince is really cool. And Duran Duran's really cool. And I kind of wanted to make stuff that's a little bit more like that.

Hrishikesh: Where would you get your drum sounds from?

Kevin: Those are all just, like, stock Reason drum sounds.

Hrishikesh: Mm.

Kevin: Which I always thought was interesting 'cause like, like all those like, early drum machines that people used to use back in the day, like, so many songs were made using that same drum machine. But you don't really feel like, "God, all these songs sound the same." Somehow they still have, like, their own personality. I think that I enjoyed hearing it, like, really more spacious. Hearing just, like, the kick. Like, all the little elements, like, there aren't that many of them.

And each one kind of has a strong personality. Like the shaker or like the hi-hat or the tambourine hit.

Hrishikesh: So you have these electronic drums that you made in Reason, but then, the rest of the elements in the song aren't electronic, right?

Kevin: Yeah, exactly. So I had to use two different programs at the same time.

Hrishikesh: Hmm.

Kevin: I was using all of, like, the drum software from Reason. And then in Cubase, I would record the audio; guitar and vocals and all that stuff, cause you couldn't do that in Reason back then.

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

Kevin: And then the bassline, of course. The "du-du, du-du, du-du, du-du..."

("Wraith Pinned to the Mist and Other Games" by OF MONTREAL - bassline)

When I was recording it, I kind of, like, did, like, a disco bassline for the verse.

I mean, it's funny 'cause, like, when I look at those Cubase projects now, they're so minimal.

And I was just using this PC that Bryan Poole, who played in the band at that time, helped me build.

It was nowhere near, like, as good as the stuff I have now, you know, that I could have, like, actually, like, a hundred tracks. But at that time, I was doing a lot more with less.

And it's kind of like a lesson that I'm trying to like, remember (chuckles).

(Vocals: "Let's have bizarre celebrations / Let's forget who, forget what, forget where / We'll have bizarre celebrations")

The groove was so laid back that it allowed me to kind of experiment a bit more with my voice and try to do something that I hadn't really done that much. Sort of, like, a little bit breathier, a little bit more casual.

I think I was really, probably influenced a lot by Ray Davies and the Kinks.

("Too Much On My Mind" by THE KINKS)

(Vocals: "There's too much on my mind / There's too much on my mind")

You know, mid to late 60s, there's some songs where he has this very sexy, kind of like, mellow style of singing, and I think that I was kind of trying to emulate that a bit.

("Wraith Pinned to the Mist and Other Games" by OF MONTREAL)

(Vocals: "Let's pretend we don't exist / Let's pretend we're in Antarctica / Let's pretend we don't exist / Let's pretend we're in Antarctica (ah-ah-ahh)")

Hrishikesh: Our conversation continues after this.

To me, I always heard the song as a love song. Do you think that's accurate?

Kevin: Yeah. I think that it's a love song. It's sort of like a call to escapism. Like, things can be nasty or stupid, but we can invent our own reality.

Hrishikesh: The line "Let's pretend we don't exist," to me, feels like it has a lot of darkness baked into it. Even though you sing it in such a light and airy way.

Kevin: Yeah. And even, like, "Let's pretend we're in Antarctica." It's like, why would you want to pretend you're in this, like, desolate, frozen tundra? (laughs)

Hrishikesh: Yeah. (laughs)

Kevin: You know, it's like... But I was like a big Edward Gorey fan and so I always like, you know, these sort of like dark children's stories.

So I think having, like, a darker edge to a thing that feels like it shouldn't have the darker edge has kind of appealed to me.

(Vocals: "We'll have bizarre celebrations / We'll play Tristan and Isolde, but make sure I see white sails (sails) / Let's pretend we don't exist")

Hrishikesh: The fact that you're referencing Tristan and Isolde, you know, the most depressing classic love story – where both of them die at the end – in a song, you know, about not getting sucked down by the negative... But in your version, they don't?

Kevin: Yeah, they don't, because you know, we're just play-acting. And anyways, you know, they're not real.

Hrishikesh: (chuckles)

Kevin: That's kind of the funny thing, you know, with art, they're like, "Okay, it was written that way", but it could have been written a different way. Everything could be written in a different way. And everything is like on the table.

You know, Oedipus, you know, what a, like, tragic figure. Like, okay, well then you could write a flip of that where, like, he has sex with his mom, kills his father, and uh, they have a nice life together.

Both: (laugh)

Hrishikesh: Yeah, yeah, that's an alternate version.

Both: (laugh)

Kevin: So, we can pretend that we don't exist. We can pretend we're somewhere that we're not. And we can do it together. I kind of think of it as an homage to magical thinking.

Hrishikesh: Hmm. What does magical thinking mean to you?

Kevin: I guess magical thinking, for me is, you know, there's part of your brain that knows this isn't actually something that you find in the natural world. You find it in your psyche. You find it in your creativity, you find it in your imagination. And so, on some levels, it can be extremely helpful because if you're feeling a lot of trauma or whatever, and you don't want to just, like, drown in your trauma, then you kind of have to recreate a new structure that isn't as destructive to your existence.

But magical thinking is, like, basically turning on the television that's inside your head and, and allowing that to do the work. And I feel like that's, you know, more engaging, more helpful, and probably will help you be more productive if you're trying to do things in the art world.

(Vocals: "I'll play the Satyr in Cypris, you the bride being stripped bare (bare)")

Kevin: I think I was always sort of drawn to Roman and Greek mythology. They were like the masters of magical thinking, in a way that was definitely more interesting to me than, like, Catholicism or any of the other forms of like, contemporary magical thinking. These different characters, these different stories and how they're passed on for like centuries and they still, are still relevant.

Hrishikesh: Could you tell me about the title of the song? Where did the title "Wraith Pinned to the Mist and Other Games" come from?

Kevin: At that time especially, I was like, you should be as creative with the song titles as you are with the lyrics and with every other component of it. And, you know, I could call it like "Bizarre Celebrations," but that's boring.

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

Kevin: You should call it something, like, off the wall. The concept of, like, doing something that's impossible, like pinning a wraith to a thing, like the mist, like not physically possible, but the concept of it is pretty interesting. And if you could do it, in your mind, the thought of that is, yeah, it's kind of just like a, a little brain twister.

Hrishikesh: Do you feel like wanting to make dance music and writing a song where the lyrics felt kind of like light and fun, that those things went together?

Kevin: Yeah I think so. I think that Sunlandic Twins is, almost like a child-like record, in that the adult world hadn't really crept in yet.

Hrishikesh: Is there any chance that, you know, if you were already aware that Nina was pregnant at the time, like, were you thinking about, that this is the chance for you to kind of ignore the impending adult reality of having a child?

Kevin: Having a child, dealing with, like, mental illness, financial stress, and marital stress and all these things that, up to that point, I had been sort of free from.

Hrishikesh: Yeah, yep.

Kevin: Uh, yeah, I think so. I think I was feeling very confident. Newly married, have a very good support system at that point, living with my brother and my wife.

So even though, you know, there's a very big change on the horizon, I think I was like, in a pretty good state of mind. You know, feeling very positive. Like the middle section goes into this kind of, like, preschool Crayola moment with the "Maybe I'll never die, de-de-de" these like happy little elves.

(Vocals: "Maybe I'll never die, I'll just keep growing younger with you / And you'll grow younger too / Now it seems too lovely to be true / But I know the best things always do")

And then it becomes, like, the true celebration when all the extra instruments come in.

That is like "the bizarre celebration." So it's like, yeah! Everyone, pick up an instrument. You know, it's like three bass parts.

("Wraith Pinned to the Mist" by OF MONTREAL - full instrumental)

With Sunlandic Twins, I started getting into like Afrobeat and Fela Kuti and you can definitely hear it with a lot of, like, the multi-tracked basslines.

(layered bass)

I've always been very interested in bass as a melodic instrument and not just as, like, a part of, of a rhythm track. And, as a guitar player, like, I'm definitely not a bassist. I'm more a guitar player that plays bass.

So I think that, yeah, I got really into creating multi-layered bass parts.

And what I think of kind of as, like, pointillism guitar stuff, where it's like,

everything is just kind of like filling in this little space.

Staccato little melodic notes that are, like, creating a full picture. So I started, like, thinking about music visually in that way, and I think that, like, yeah, recording on the computer was sort of helpful too, because you do have the visual. Where you see, like, you know, the transients, waveforms or whatever, and like...

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

Kevin: ...thinking about, like, "Okay, well there's a little space there, maybe I should put a little bass note there."

("Wraith Pinned to the Mist" by OF MONTREAL - reversed guitar strumming)

That's a guitar in reverse.

Initially, I would have been just like strumming it, and then been like, it sounds kind of boring, just like strummed. Let's see what it sounds like if it's reversed.

Hrishikesh: I mean, I feel like I'd rather make everything backwards. You know, like anytime I record a thing, I'm like, just flip it around, because being able to even just add a little element of lack of recognizability to a sound just feels so much better, you know, just, "It's not a literal thing. It's this special, unusual thing."

Kevin: I think that, yeah, probably, like, being such a, like a, a psychedelic pop fan, you know, has always been inspiring for me. And: "How can we make this guitar not sound like a guitar? How can we make my voice not sound like a voice? How can we, you know, make the drums sound like not drums?" Or whatever. That kind of mentality has always been a part of, of the process for me, is like, how can I make this thing sound like something it's not?

That feels exciting. That feels like I'm doing something.

("Wraith Pinned to the Mist" by OF MONTREAL - instrumental groove)

Hrishikesh: You have a lot of tracks of vocals on this. Or at least in terms of the way that I got the tracks sent to me.

Kevin: I think that I've always gravitated towards layering really dense harmonies.

(Vocals: "Let's pretend we don't exist / Let's pretend we're in Antarctica")

So usually uh, I'll have like a harmony idea that'll come,

And then be like, well, I could do a third one. You know, like sometimes.

(Vocals: "Let's pretend we don't exist / Let's pretend we're in Antarctica / Let's pretend we don't exist / Let's pretend we're in Antarctica")

I wanted it to feel like what the lyrics were saying. It's like, okay, we're having our bizarre celebration. It's really happening. And I think that's probably why I had that sort of extended outro. It's like, get lost in the vibe that's happening, with just the music and the groove of the thing.

(Vocals: "Let's pretend we don't exist / Let's pretend we're in Antarctica / Let's pretend we don't exist / Let's pretend we're in Antarctica")

Hrishikesh: How do you feel about this song these days? Like, does it enter your life or your, your thoughts much? What's your relationship like with this song now?

Kevin: I kind of feel weird about the past, and I don't really think about, "Wow, what a cool time."

'Cause I have a lot of downer energy. (laughs) I think, like, I don't really zoom in that often on, like, what was positive about that time.

Hrishikesh: Mmm.

Kevin: But yeah, I mean, to answer your question, I don't really feel that connected. I only really feel connected to the new thing I'm working on, and the thing that I've done in the past doesn't really feel like me. Like, I'll accept that it is me, but, like, it's like a different person made it.

Hrishikesh: Huh.

Kevin: The song has gone so many funny places that I never would have predicted in a million years.

Which is funny because it's like, in a lot of ways, one of the more simplistic songs.

That's the one thing, when I look back on Sunlandic Twins, I'm like, wow, I used so much restraint back then. Like, I kind of allowed things to have more air. And I think the kind of airiness, buoyant quality of the song, I think, is what people vibe with. For some reason it's, like, resonated for people on levels that very few of my songs have.

Definitely, that wasn't my ambition when I was making it. It was very much just

like all the other songs, like, I'm just doing this thing right now and not really thinking that much about it.

Yeah, I felt pretty neutral about it going into it and felt pretty neutral about it when it was done.

It's like, it's fun to make it, but now let's make another thing.

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Wraith Pinned to the Mist and Other Games," by of Montreal, in its entirety.

("Wraith Pinned to the Mist" by OF MONTREAL)

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

This episode was produced by me, with Craig Eley, Kathleen Smith and Mary Dolan, and production assistant Tiger Biskup. The episode artwork is by Carlos Lerma, and I made the show's theme music and logo.

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I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. Thanks for listening.