

Song Exploder
Sam Fender - People Watching
Episode 298

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.

Sam Fender is a singer and songwriter from the town of North Shields in England. He won the Brit Award for Best Rock/Alternative Act, twice. His most recent album is called People Watching, and just like his first two albums, it went to #1 on the UK album charts. To help produce the album, Sam enlisted Adam Granduciel, the singer and frontman of the Grammy-winning band The War on Drugs. For this episode, I talked to Sam, and his bandmate Joe Atkinson, about the title track from People Watching, and the long journey that it took to get made, from Sam's kitchen, to the Hollywood Hills, to Abbey Road.

("People Watching" by SAM FENDER)

(Vocals: "I people-watch on the way back home / Everybody on the treadmill, runnin' / Under the billboards, out of the heat / Somebody's darling's on the street tonight / Oh, I can't stop runnin' / I see the whole town fall / I people-watch on the way back home / I people-watch on the way back home")

Hrishikesh: Could I just ask you each to introduce yourselves?

Sam: Yeah. I'm Sam Fender.

Joe: I'm Joe Atkinson. I play keyboards for Sam and help him in the studio with the production and stuff like that.

Sam: Yes. And we've known each other for ages.

Joe: Yeah.

Hrishikesh: When did you first meet?

Sam: Probably 14?

Joe: Yeah.

Sam: We used to be in rival bands.

Joe: (laughs)

Hrishikesh: When you were 14 years old?

Sam: Yeah. If there was ever like a, a local band competition, it would always be like us two pitted against each other. 'Cause where we lived, North Shields, it's like... I love it, it's the best town in the world, but it's not connected to the music industry or anything. You know, it's a fishing town.

Hrishikesh: Back in those days, was your relationship mainly about playing music together or did you hang out otherwise as well?

Sam: I think with us it's like, we all grew up together, you know?

Joe: Yeah.

Sam: And like, we are family, really. Like Joe's just like a brother to me.

Hrishikesh: So what was happening in your life around the time when the first ideas for "People Watching" started coming to you?

Sam: I was back home, and somebody who was very, very close to me, she's called Annie Orwin. She was an actor. And she was like my surrogate mother. She got sick and she was sick for quite a long time.

Hrishikesh: And how did you first meet Annie?

Sam: So when I was a kid, my grandmother was like, "he's hyper, and we should put him in something that'll, y'know, that he can express himself in and do some", so she put me in this local community center acting class, when I was like 13. And that was like, my grandma would pay for that. And I think it was only like a fiver. And some kids actually didn't even pay. Like, she was like a community hero, Annie.

And, uh, I had quite a low self-esteem when I first met her. I was getting bullied in school and I didn't really have a lot of confidence. And she gave us pretty much, I think all of the confidence that I have.

Hrishikesh: Hmm.

Sam: So I did like loads of little bits of acting and stuff when I was a kid. Like, just sort of, community theater stuff, but it made us be able to go on stage and do what we do, you know. And you know, there was loads of plans. Like we had a plan, like when I was a kid, there was, we were planning to move down to London and she was like, you know, we can try out your music and your acting down there.

She was always really supportive. And she was the first person I think in my life, too, that ever made me believe that this was like a viable thing to do as a career. You know, she was always like, "You're a star, kid." So she meant a lot to us, you know?

She became, like, one of my best friends. And even once the acting stuff stopped, I was like, still, you know, really good friends with her in my twenties and I used to go around to hers and, she had periods where she was a lot better and, and periods where, like, her cancer was under control and, you know. We used to just drink a bottle of wine and bitch, to be honest, (laughs) like most of the time.

She used to always go, "You never mentioned me, in any of these awards." It's like, "You get an award and you don't mention my name at all." And I used to be like, "Well, I'm sorry." (laughs) Like, she's like, "I should be the first person you think of whenever you get an award for something."

And I was like, "Oh, Jesus. I've, I'm like, I'm sorry." You know?

Hrishikesh: Was she joking or was, was she-

Sam: No, (laughs) she was serious. Well, she was joking, but she was, there was definitely an element of her... She was like, no, you see, she was serious about it.

And then, not last year, but the year beforehand, I basically got a call off my other good friend Joe, who was also like, one of her protégés. And he was like, you know, I think, I think this is gonna happen.

It was really bizarre, 'cause I went to see her and the whole plan was, I was gonna get her out of the care home. And she was seemed in fine spirits. And then I think some doctor came in and basically was really negative. And she just started deteriorating really quickly. So she said, you know, she didn't wanna be alone. So I was like, well, we'll, I'll stay. And so did Joe and, and so did her wonderful nieces.

We just slept on the chair next to her, you know, for like five days, in and out, to try and do shifts. And we'd go home for a couple of hours to try and get some sleep. And it was a really, really, like, grueling, but, like beautiful thing. Like it was a, I was, it was an honor to be able to be there with her at the very end, you know?

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

Sam: You know, she died in my arms, you know, like I, I, I held her hand. And ehm.

Whoa. I just, you know what it is? I haven't actually spoke about it. Like, yeah. Um, and it was like, but it was, it was beautiful, in the end.

(GarageBand demo - piano chords)

So I had this piano chord progression. And I've got this little piano, which I got from, like, a school. And we just put a load of pin tacks into the keys, which make it sound, like, metallic. The hammers are obviously metal hitting metal so,

Joe: Really percussive sound.

Sam: Really percussive, really bright.

Joe: Yeah.

Sam: Kinda like a, an old honky tonk piano. And I've got that in my kitchen. And I was like, what's this song about? It's definitely about something. And then Annie died, and I was like going through all of that. And then it was like, ah, it's, it's Annie's song.

(add bass)

I was doing a demo on my phone, on my Garageband. And I don't use a microphone or anything. I just, I don't have it plugged into any gear. (chuckles) 'Cause I'm like, I'm like an idiot when it comes to tech.

So I'll just go like, (imitates drums)

(drum loop)

And I'll, if I can loop it, like a bajillion bars.

I'll record a piano for two bars and then just (imitates piano). Copy and paste that along.

(add piano)

And then I'll find a bass.

(add bass)

What I tend to do is find a loop so that I can listen to it and then eventually the lyrics come, and the melody forms around it.

(demo fades out)

When I walked back from the care home back to my house, I was people-watching. You know, like that was my, my sort of escapism was just watching people pass by and seeing what was going on in their lives. And I was obviously thinking a lot about life and death at the time and how such a big character, like, was about to leave this plane of existence.

And how kind of, you know, everything just keeps moving. The world keeps turning and everybody's still living their lives and going through their struggles and, you know, and I think at the time I was also thinking about Britain being, you know, the cost of living crisis was a lot in the news at the time. And, you know, there was an element of guilt that I had because we're doing well and, and a lot of people that we know back home are, you know, struggling to even feed their kids. And so, you know, it was, all of that was kind of swimming in the, in the atmos.

(GarageBand demo)

(Vocals: "I people-watch on the way back home / I think it gives me a glimmer of hope / Gives me a break from feelin' alone / Gives me a moment out of the ego / I used to feel so invincible / I used to feel there was a world worth dreamin' of / Back in the Gasworks, screamin' the song / Just the beauty of youth would quell my aching heart / Oh, I feel so dark rememberin' / Oh, my heart, I feel so dark")

Hrishikesh: Joe, do you remember the first time you heard this iPhone demo?

Joe: Yeah, we went into the studio, Sleeper Sounds, and Sam was playing it to us and we were just like, wow. Me and Dean, and Dru was there as well. And we were like, wow, this is awesome.

Hrishikesh: Sam, when you played the demo for them, did the sort of grief and the feelings that you were feeling about Annie's passing, did they still feel fresh at the time?

Sam: Yeah, it was mega fresh. 'Cause it was only in November, you know. Aside from Annie as well, like there'd been a lot of death.

Joe: Yeah.

Sam: In all of our lives.

Joe: Yeah.

Sam: So, I think the band connected to it because we'd all kind of lost people and

friends, and it was, I think that's the only way we know how to sort of deal with these things and process these things. As an artist, like, that's how you deal with these things.

Hrishikesh: Joe, did you know how much Annie meant,

Joe: To Sam? Yeah, but unfortunately, I'd never met Annie in my life. But Sam would always fondly talk about her, and, even when we were kids, I remember him being like, I'm going to do my acting thing. I'm gonna see Annie and stuff. And,

Sam: Yeah, you did.

Joe: So obviously it, you know, it, it did strike a chord because I knew how close they were.

Hrishikesh: And why Sleeper Sounds? Why were you working there?

Sam: It's a decent space to just, to write things, and get things moving.

Joe: Yeah.

Sam: You know, you're just sat there, doing it. And it, it just comes together really quickly.

And I like to work fast. Because I feel like a lot of the time, with a song, you've gotta strike while the iron's hot, because if you don't, you lose that energy and that, the excitement for the song.

There's nothing better than when you're like, it's like you're chasing a song. I feel like you're always chasing them down. You're like, let's get to the next bit, right. Okay, let's record this acoustic, let's put some synths in.

Then you came up with a melody, and it was just the little (imitates wurlitzer melody)...

Joe: Yeah.

(Wurlitzer melody)

Sam: On the Wurli.

(drums)

Hrishikesh: Who's playing drums here?

Sam: That's Dru.

Joe: That's our Dru.

Sam: That's Dru. Yeah.

Hrishikesh: Could I ask you about the tempo of this song? Because, given what the song's about, I could imagine an inclination towards, you know, writing something more like a ballad, or just something much slower, as a tribute to grief. I mean, like, that feels maybe like a natural place to go.

Sam: Yeah.

Hrishikesh: What was it about this kind of tempo that felt right to you about what you were writing about?

Sam: Well, I wanted it to be like, that feeling of liberation when you're kind of getting over grief, or like coming to the more accepting phase of grief. I think because I was so desperately wanting to get there myself, I wanted the music to get us there as well, like, I suppose, you know.

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

Sam: Sounds wanky saying that, you know what I mean? But-

Hrishikesh: It doesn't at all.

Joe: Nah, not at all. Yeah.

Sam: Annie was such a larger-than-life person, and I wanted something to be more celebratory and have that kind of euphoria. 'Cause she put so much euphoria into the world and, you know, into my world, especially, you know, as a young lad. And like, I wanted that to be reflected in the music.

But, I never got the chorus.

(Sleeper Sounds demo)

(Vocals: "The biggest crime in this town has always been the debt / Streets on my memories I can't forget / When tragedy came calling, it made me who I am")

Hrishikesh: So this chorus, the original chorus, this just wasn't good enough for you?

Sam: Yeah. I was like, oh, I've gotta get it right. I cannot make a, like, it can't be crap. Do you know what I mean? It's about Annie. So it kind of just sat like half a song for like a few months.

Joe: Yeah, a little while. Yeah.

Sam: For quite a few months. Normally the songs come together so quick. And this one was such a bastard. We needed somebody else to kinda help get it across the line. I mean, we could've done it ourselves, really, but it was like, we're at this point in our career where, like, we're really lucky that we could, like, pretty much call on anybody and the label would back it. So it was like, I wanna work with one of my heroes. Do you know what I mean? I was like, why not? We have a, a saying in Newcastle, where we're from, it's ah, "shy bairns get nowt." And that means like, shy kids get nothing.

So I just asked the label. I was like, can I ask Adam Granduciel from War on Drugs? And they're like, yeah, of course. We'll get his number. And then I just called him up and spoke to him about this idea. I sent him some songs.

And he was like, he fell in love with them, and he called back straightaway. And then we were just on the phone for like an hour and a half talking about Tom Petty. (chuckles)

So it went from that to LA with Adam.

Hrishikesh: My conversation with Sam Fender and Joe Atkinson continues after this.

Sam: So, Adam Granduciel jumped in. And then we went out to LA and started working with him, and it was, it was magic, you know?

Joe: Yeah.

Sam: I was sat in the house that we're staying in. We're like staying up in the hills. It was amazing. Like, a bunch of Geordie boys in Hollywood, what the hell has happened?

Joe: Yeah.

Sam: This is ridiculous. Like, in the beautiful sunshine. And I just sat with the guitar. 'Cause I was like, I've gotta get this song sussed out.

I remember just sitting up on there, looking over the hills, and looking across the city and all of that. And I was just sat thinking about Annie and thinking about, 'cause she was an actor and she was like such a big movie buff, you know. Obviously being in Hollywood where like every bloody movie's ever been made, you know what I mean.

So I sat there thinking about her and just thinking, God, she would've loved this. She would've loved being here with me.

And we're driving down Hollywood Boulevard and there was just so many homeless people on the street. And then it made us think of home, because the homelessness is getting really bad back home.

So it was, like, bizarre. 'Cause then like the first half of that song was all talking about walking back from the care home, and watching people back there. And then it was like suddenly I was like out in LA and I was doing the exact same thing, you know?

(acoustic guitar)

And then these lines just came out of us.

(Vocals: "I people-watch on the way back home / Everybody on the treadmill, runnin' / Under the billboards, out of the heat / Somebody's darling's on the street tonight")

You know, "Somebody's darling's on the street tonight." That was inspired, 'cause Billy Connolly was, he did this TV show, he found this grave in Scotland, and it said "Somebody's Sweetheart." And the village had found this random person, they had no idea who this person was, and somebody says well, it's somebody's sweetheart. And they buried the person as "Somebody's Sweetheart."

Which I think was so beautiful. It's like, no matter who you are, or where you go in the world, like, you're loved by somebody. And that's what I thought when I saw all these people on the streets, like, I was like, that's somebody's darling, that's somebody's kid, you know. I remembered that as I was writing the song.

(Vocals: "Oh, I can't stop runnin' / I see the whole town fall / I people-watch on the way back home / I people-watch on the way back home")

It took so long to get it right and then that was like this overwhelming, like, joy and relief.

Joe: It was, wasn't it?

Sam: That we got this chorus that was *good*. Such a great feeling.

Joe: Totally. Because we'd had that song,

Sam: For ages.

Joe: Ages at this point, and we're kind of like, we knew there was something so special within it. And after that, we just, straight to the studio.

(drums)

Sam: Got Dru's drums down. Oh, he's so on it, man.

Joe: Yeah, dude.

Hrishikesh: I mean, he's so on it that I actually wondered if these were samples when I got the stems.

Joe: Nah, no, that's Dru's playing. Adam was kind of like, "Hey, Dru can you just do like a straight just (imitates drum beat)?" And he just rocked that.

We overdubbed some toms (imitates drum beat),

(add toms)

And then we started building from there.

(add Wurlitzer melody, fade out drums)

Hrishikesh: Did your ideas about that little riff change when you got to this stage of the song?

Sam: Yeah. We wanted it to be a Wurli, but then I remember like, it doesn't quite poke out, as much as we expected it to poke out.

Joe: Yeah.

Sam: So, I'll double it and I'll do like a kind of Mark Knopfler / Dire Straits style picking pattern version of it.

(add guitar picking melody)

Hrishikesh: I love the tiny bend. Which you obviously can't do on the wurlitzer. And so they're, makes them more distinct as well.

Joe: Exactly.

Sam: It sounds more like a band when there's like slightly different things happening.

(instrumental fades out)

But we felt there was something missing in the high end. And I wanted something that was gonna come out and sort of mirror the melody. So we had to figure out what it was gonna be. And I remember Adam thinking about that synth sound and he was like, "Yeah, it's like Dire Straits."

Joe: Yeah. He's like, "Hey, try this OB-8."

Sam: "The OB-8. We'll get an OB-8."

(add OB-8 synth)

Joe: Yeah. Literally we pressed like one sound and Sam was like, oh my God, this is the sound.

Sam: This is the sound.

Joe: Get it on now.

(Vocals: "Everybody on the treadmill, runnin' / Under the billboards, out of the heat / Somebody's darling's on the street tonight")

Sam: It just adds, it's a lush, like part of the palette I think. I keep saying "palette" because Adam, we stole some of his terminology.

Joe: Yeah.

Sam: 'Cause he's, he always kinda looks at, at it like he's painting.

Joe: Yeah, love that.

Sam: He's like "Yeah, let's go paint."

(acoustic guitar)

We wanted to do acoustics. And Adam was like, "I wanna get a bit more, like, rhythm."

And he was like, I think we should just do it together. So we set up a binaural head mic. Have you seen them before?

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

Sam: So, I love them. I mean, spooky, aren't they. Like, it's literally just like a human head on a stick.

Joe: (laughs)

Hrishikesh: And the ears are the microphones.

Joe: Yeah.

Sam: And the ears are the microphones. It's nuts.

So, like, we used that quite a lot to try and get a bit of that sort of, like, "in the room" feel. Adam sat on one side of it and I sat on the other side and we both did the whole song. Just one take, just jamming it out.

(acoustic guitars duet)

Hrishikesh: Did it change the way that you played to have him playing it with you there?

Sam: Well it was just like, for me that was like one of the, it was really special.

Hrishikesh: What made it so special?

Sam: Because he's like my hero, isn't he? Do you know what I mean? It was like, I was sat and I was thinking like, I was like 10 years ago, I was in hospital. I was like, living with my mother, and me and my mum were both unemployed. Didn't have any money. Black mold all over my bedroom wall. And when I was in hospital, the Lost in the Dream album, Adam's album.

I'd become obsessed with it, and that's all I listened to during that whole time that I was recovering. And it really meant a lot to me, that record. I used to listen to this album and dream about doing this as a job and being able to pay my bills. And now I'm in LA, sat with the guy who made that album, playing an acoustic track with him. We're both doing it at the same time.

It was like literally one of my biggest heroes. It was, you couldn't write it.

(guitars fade out)

Hrishikesh: Can you tell me about the horns that come in later?

Sam: Oh, man.

Joe: The Rip Tones.

Sam: The Rips.

Joe: So, The Rip Tones were basically a combination of our brass players,

Sam: Yeah.

Joe: Which is Mark Webb and Johnny Bluehat, and then The War on Drugs. Adam invited his mate John Natchez, and they came as a trio. And we started calling them The Rip Tones.

Sam: (laughs)

(horns)

Joe: John Natchez is on bari, Mark Webb trumpet, Johnny Bluehat on tenor sax.

Sam: Tenor sax, yeah.

Joe: The solo actually in the tune, which comes in the outro, that was done on Johnny's first day to LA. Walked into Adam's studio.

Sam: Jet lagged.

Joe: Jet lagged. He walked in and just ripped that in one.

(saxophone solo)

Sam: Insane. It's the highest note I think I've ever heard him hit on a tenor sax.

Joe: Yeah.

Sam: It was ridiculous.

Hrishikesh: How was it recording your final vocals for the song?

Sam: So, I get quite fearful in, in the studio, in booths, like just singing. And I only really feel comfortable doing my vocals at home. Because I just feel a lot less stressed, you don't have that like, oh my God, it's, we're against the clock.

So I've always kind of done my vocals either like in the flat or like, or in our place.

Joe: Yeah.

Sam: Back home.

(Vocals: "Oh, I stayed all night till you left this life, but that's just love / I people-watch on the way back home / Everybody on the treadmill, runnin'")

Hrishikesh: Who's singing backing vocals there?

Sam: That's Brooke. The newest member of our band.

(Brooke's vocals: "Under the billboards, out of the heat / Somebody's darling's on the street tonight")

So me and Brooke have been friends since we were like 17.

And the first time I ever heard her sing, she was doing a cover of "Dancing in the Dark" by Bruce Springsteen. And my jaw was on the floor. I was like, that's how you sing. I actually started trying to emulate her vibrato as we grew up together, which made me a better singer. Like I kind of learned how to sing through Brooke, really.

Hrishikesh: Hmm. How do you think it affected the song to have her voice in there on those choruses as well?

Sam: It's like singing with a family member or something, you know what I mean? It's like, we have that, ah, is it telepathy?

Joe: Yeah.

Sam: I can sing anything and she'll just find a harmony immediately, you know.

(Sam and Brooke vocals: "Oh, I can't stop runnin' / I see the whole town fall / I people-watch on the way back home / I people-watch on the way back home")

And then the middle eight didn't come until,

Joe: It was a bit later, wasn't it.

Sam: After that.

Joe: Yeah.

Sam: I didn't have the lyrics for it and I was like, but I knew I wanted to round it off and make it about Annie and, and just kind of like a final gesture of love to Annie.

(bass and vocals: "Above the rain-soaked Garden of Remembrance / Kittiwakes etched your initials in the sky")

I was like, I can hear strings in this section. So, what I normally do is, I'll sing the parts, and then I'll send it to Rosie Danvers. She's a string arranger. She, she does, she's done everybody. Like, she's the best.

(strings)

Hrishikesh: This was in Abbey Road?

Sam: Yeah.

Joe: Yeah. Studio Two.

Hrishikesh: How big of an orchestra is playing that?

Sam: It was 30.

Hrishikesh: Wow.

Sam: And it was going through the same compressors used by The Beatles.

(strings and vocals: "Oh, I fear for this crippled island and the turmoil of the times / And I'll hold you in my heart till the day I die / Oh / I people-watch on the way back home / Everybody on the treadmill, runnin' / Under the billboards, out of the heat / Somebody's darling's on the street tonight / Oh, I can't stop runnin' / I see the whole town fall / I people-watch on the way back home / I people-watch on the way back home")

The first half of that song is like, I'm down in the doldrums. I wasn't in a good way at the time. I was definitely drinking too much. It was just, it was loss, you know what I mean? Grief hits you in so many different ways. And I think I was, like, kind of focusing more on the loss as opposed to focusing on the, on the beauty. The beautiful impact she had on me, in my life.

I think that's where the song flips. Being grateful. That's the end result of grief, a lot of the time, is just being so grateful and, it's that really painful love that you, you'll always carry with you. No matter how long I live for, you know, I'm, I'm always gonna remember Annie.

Hrishikesh: Do you feel like you have responded to Annie's request about uh, you shouting her out in your speeches?

Sam: (chuckles) Yeah. Well that's, that was, that was the thinking, I think, you know. Wherever she is now, she'll be, like, kicking her heels. She'll be like, "Why didn't you do it when I was there?" (laughs) You know what I mean? Um, but yeah. I think she would've liked it. I think she would've liked the tune. I don't know what I believe in, but I hope she can hear it, wherever she is, you know.

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "People Watching" by Sam Fender, in its entirety.

("People Watching" by SAM FENDER)

Visit songexploder.net to learn more. You'll find links to buy or stream "People Watching," and you can watch the music video. You might also enjoy the episode with The War on Drugs, featuring Adam Granduciel, who co-produced this song. There's a link to that in the show notes, too.

This episode was produced by me, Mary Dolan, Craig Eley, and Kathleen Smith, with production assistance from 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.