

Song Exploder
Air - Playground Love (feat. Gordon Tracks)
Episode 305

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 band Air is a duo from Versailles, France. Their first EP came out in 1995, followed by their critically acclaimed debut album, *Moon Safari*, which was an international hit. Then they made the music for the film *The Virgin Suicides*, which was written and directed by Oscar-winner Sofia Coppola, based on the novel by Jeffrey Eugenides. The movie came out in 1999, and it was Sofia Coppola's first film. An album version of Air's score came out in 2000, and it was nominated for a Brit award. Pitchfork put it at number four on their list of the best film scores of all time. In addition to the instrumental music that appears in the movie, Air also wrote a song for the end credits, called "Playground Love." That song featured Sofia Coppola's future husband, Thomas Mars, from the French band Phoenix, on vocals. Phoenix was still a very new band, and he and Sofia hadn't even met yet. Thomas appears on the song under the name Gordon Tracks.

("Playground Love" (feat. Gordon Tracks) by AIR)

(Vocals: "Love is all / All my soul / You're my playground love")

So for this episode, I spoke to all of them: Nicolas and JB from Air; Sofia Coppola, Thomas Mars, as well as Brian Reitzell, the music supervisor on the film. The story of the song "Playground Love" begins over 25 years ago, with Sofia Coppola starting her work on *The Virgin Suicides*.

Sofia: I'm Sofia Coppola.

Hrishikesh: How did you first hear Air's music?

Sofia: I remember I was in London, and I was writing the script for *Virgin Suicides*, so it was probably '97 or '98. And I was in Rough Trade record shop, just looking around at albums and I saw Air's, I guess a CD? And I remember just asking the guy like, "Oh, is this good? Do you like it?" And they recommended it. So I bought it, and I took it home. And I was listening to it while I was working on my script and, yeah, I just got really into the atmosphere of it.

And because the story is set in the seventies, but it's actually 20 years in the future, looking back at that time, I liked the idea of not having music from the period for the score. That it's a memory, and then to have contemporary music

that's related to the seventies. And it had that quality.

Brian: It was both current and '70s retro.

My name is Brian Reitzell, I was the music supervisor for *The Virgin Suicides*.

This was before the release of *Moon Safari*. When *Moon Safari* did come out, a few months later, it just sealed the deal, you know.

Hrishikesh: How did you all actually meet?

Brian: I met the Air guys in LA, when they were, uh, here doing a music video.

Nicolas: It's a very LA, classic story. Like, we met him at a party at the Chateau Marmont. That's so unoriginal. (chuckles)

I am Nicolas, from the band Air.

JB: I am JB Dunckel, also from Air.

And so, we met him in a party, and then we decided to play with him,

Nicolas: Yeah.

JB: Some drums.

Nicolas: Because Brian Reitzell is also a drummer. He was in this band called Redd Kross.

Brian: They were putting together a band with all US musicians to do a tour for *Moon Safari*, so the timing was just perfect.

Hrishikesh: Had you two ever had any experience scoring film before?

JB: No.

Nicolas: No. That's why it was cool, because we never did soundtracks; she never did movies. (laughs) So we say, okay, let's go for the ride and see what happens.

The style of the movie is very beautiful and it's kind of uh, ethereal, in a way. But we started by reading the book and um, the book is much more dark. So, very fast, the idea was to do very dark music. Especially because we were coming after *Moon Safari*, which was a very light, uh, kind of easy listening album, and we wanted to show the dark side of us. And also, it was a good way to avoid the

second album syndrome. Because you can have a lot of pressure, but if you decide that the second album is a soundtrack, it's a totally different context.

JB: We had this concept that every part had to be understandable and listenable on its own. So it was not exactly like, uh, a real soundtrack. It was more like a sort of soundtrack-y pop album around the movie. And we had like some uh, VHS uh, tapes. Like, some sequences of the movie. And we would improvise.

(piano)

Hrishikesh: How did the two of you write together? Are you in the same room when you're writing?

Nicolas: Yeah. We were even on the same, uh, piano. (chuckles)

Hrishikesh: You sit at the piano together?

Nicolas: Yeah. It's a four hands recording. I played the melody and JB played the chords.

(piano duet)

JB: We had like an eight track recorder with no memory. And so, when something was wrong, we had to rerecord again and to replay it. So we would, like, replay constantly what we were doing. And it was a perfect way to learn the song.

(piano fades out)

But this theme, this melodies, these chords, we recorded them many times, like in many versions. We did like a vibraphone version.

(vibraphone version)

We did an organ version. We, we did a Rhodes version.

Nicolas: Brian Reitzell flew to Paris, he did the drums.

(drums, bass, and pads)

Brian: There were variations of the main theme threaded throughout the score.

JB: We kept the basic idea of it. In a way, the other versions were rehearsals.

Thomas Bangalter from Daft Punk, he said something in an interview that I really understand: He said that he's always like putting everything in the trash. And this

is a beautiful way to make music, just to delete and to destroy constantly what you do.

(instrumental cuts out)

And at the end, there will be like something surviving and it's gonna be good.

("Highschool Lover" by AIR)

Nicolas: They took this theme, "Highschool Lover." It's all over the movie. And so they called us and they asked, yeah, we need to do a song for the credits.

Brian: Rather than license a song, we thought it would be cooler and more classic to have our original song for the film.

(instrumental ends)

Hrishikesh: What's the significance for you of the end credit song in a film?

Sofia: I always feel like that's so important. 'Cause it's kinda like your big finish. It's the end. It's the feeling that you, the audience, leaves with, and, um, it's sort of a punctuation. So I always feel like it's really important.

Brian: I think having an original end credit song is just a classic way to tie everything together; to have the music crystallize into one, complete piece.

I suggested a song arrangement with a vocal of the main theme. But I think it was hard for them at first. They had already delivered the score. I was back in LA. They thought they were done, you know. Plus, we wanted vocals.

Nicolas: At the time, we didn't sing on our albums.

JB: But I think we tried to describe this uh, magic moment of having like, uh, two young people uh, falling in love. First of all, you do um, some "yogurts". You know, you, (laughs) we call it "yogurts". It means that you, you, try to sing something, but it doesn't make any sense and the sounds are falling naturally and they transform into words.

So like, "anytime or anywhere," this kind of thing, it has to sound good when you sing it through the vocoder.

(Vocoder vocals: "Anytime you want / Anywhere you want / Anytime, anywhere / Everything you'd say")

Nicolas: We were in Versailles and the, the only singer we knew in Versailles was Thomas.

Thomas: So my name is Thomas Mars. Somehow, for this specific project, I was, I picked Gordon Tracks as an artist name. And I'm a member of the band Phoenix. We have a long history with Air, because we were their backing band.

They were going to tour in the UK first. The label thought: we just signed Phoenix, they don't have experience, I'm sure they'd love to get some live experience and play with you guys. I was also playing drums in my band, on the record. And so we thought, well, we'll be their backing band, and I'll play drums.

And uh, when we were rehearsing, they just finished *Moon Safari*. They were working on *Virgin Suicides*. So it was really exciting for us, 'cause it was like going into, like, the headquarters of, like, a band about to explode internationally.

Nicolas: And so we called him, and said, "Man, we have to do a song for this movie. Can you sing it? And can you write lyrics? And, by the way, can you do the drums as well?" (laughs) And he said, "Yeah, I'll do it."

Thomas: They had written one line. They had written "anytime, anywhere."

("Highschool Lover" by AIR - instrumental in F#)

JB: "Highschool Lover" is in uh, F sharp. And uh, we changed it into C for uh, Thomas.

("Playground Lover" by AIR - instrumental in C)

Hrishikesh: Because of his vocal range?

Nicolas: Yeah.

JB: Yeah. For him to sing properly on it.

Hrishikesh: Where did you start with the lyrics?

Thomas: I specifically saw the scene of Trip Fontaine on the football field. There's also a uh, famous shot of him getting into the high school in slow motion and all the girls are turning, like, his hair is blowing.

Hrishikesh: (chuckles)

Thomas: And the music was so inspiring that the words came really quickly.

(Vocals: "I'm a high school lover / And you're my favorite flavor")

Hrishikesh: Did they give you any direction as to how they wanted you to sing the song?

Thomas: So they are very loose on certain things and they are very, extremely precise on others. They're very loose on the lyrics. Like everything that was my creativity somehow, they really trusted me on this. But the rhythm of the song, they wanted it to be exactly on the grid.

Hrishikesh: Hmm.

Thomas: It was almost like, if I was out of tune, it didn't matter. But if I was, like, slightly behind, that was a huge problem for them. I remember them being very precise in that sense.

(Vocals: "Love is all / All my soul / You're my playground love")

Hrishikesh: There's something really specific, and kind of creepy, in a great way; you're almost whispering, when you sing.

Thomas: I remember growing up listening a lot to INXS. On *Kick*, they have a recording technique that's pretty incredible 'cause it makes it sound really close. This is before ASMR, and uh, it was the ultimate ear candy growing up. And I remember that was a reference for myself. I was like, I want it to sound like this.

At the time, I didn't understand that you need the right amount of space between the mic and the voice. I was like, let me get as close as possible (chuckles). So I was always, when I would set it up, it was always, I would push it so that it was so close.

(Vocals: "Yet my hands are shaking / I feel my body remains")

Hrishikesh: I have to ask you more about the Gordon Tracks part. Why did you decide to record it under a pseudonym?

Thomas: Well, Phoenix hadn't released anything yet. And I didn't want everybody to talk about the Air project when we were doing our Phoenix promo. Uh, I wanted it to be only about Phoenix and I didn't wanna stand out from the band. And then I always loved, like pseudonym. In the band, Mars is not my real last name. It's just fun to have something that was even more exotic.

Hrishikesh: The story of "Playground Love" continues after this.

Hrishikesh: What was your first reaction to Thomas' vocals?

JB: Me, when I heard him singing, I remember that I liked, very much, the lyrics because they were really, really super simple.

Hrishikesh: Why did you like that they were simple?

JB: Because they were really understandable. And, you know, I think that I'm not good in English, but I feel when it's... fits into the song well. And it was the case, you know, it was being delivered really clearly and properly. And so, I liked it very much.

(Vocals: "I'm on fire / On the playground, love")

(drums)

Thomas: I love the lazy drumming. Uh, it's the Ringo uh, fascination of just the most basic, simple drumming. Back then, a snare drum, if you would hear a snare drum that you like, you knew you were gonna like the record. You couldn't judge an album by its cover, but you could judge a song by its snare drum sound.

Hrishikesh: (laughs)

Thomas: They understood that. It all came down to taste.

Nicolas: That's what I like about drummers. I like when they have a cool attitude and like Ringo Starr, when you look at him playing, he's got a cool gesture.

And Thomas, when he play drums, he's so stylish. The way he holds his sticks and the way he holds his arms. You can't fail in making a bad drum take when you have this kind of attitude, you know?

I always say, it needs to sound like a record. Like, you can bring me any good musician. I know if it doesn't sound like a record. It can be as good as you want, but that's what JB says about Bob Dylan. Bob Dylan sounds like a record. You can bring some better singer than him, but they don't sound like a record.

Thomas: And so we wanted it as muted as possible and as like, crunchy, like, uh, has depth at the same time.

(drums)

Nicolas: Yeah, that's the seventies way, you know. Everything sounds dry. The acoustic guitar there's no reverb.

(acoustic guitar)

Hrishikesh: Who's playing the acoustic guitar on this track?

Nicolas: I played it.

JB: The chords are changing to fit the melody. And that's why, when it's repeating for the second time, the chord has to change into a diminished seventh.

(guitar out)

Nicolas: It's a very annoying chord to play on guitar.

JB: But that makes like the original color of the song, is because of the presence of this diminished seventh.

(Vocals with guitar, bass, and drums: "I'm a high school lover / And you're my favorite flavor")

Basically this song, the feeling of it is something that is flying. Because it stays on the same bass.

(bass and drums)

So it's like not moving. It's like flying.

The beauty of it is there is, like, a sort of hesitation. Like the chords don't know where to go.

Nicolas: But each time he stopped singing, the song was kind of fading down a little bit.

So the three of us, we talked and he say, "Yeah, I got a friend. He lives nearby, he plays saxophone, I can call him." So it will fill the gap between the, the vocals. And he called him and we, we saw this young kid, very young, like maybe 18. We told him we really like the Lou Reed song. What's the name?

JB: "Walk on the Wild Side."

Nicolas: Yeah, "Walk on the Wild Side." And, "Can you sound like that a little bit?" And he did it in one take.

(saxophone)

JB: In the morning, I came earlier and I had to do some vocals and I did like, three notes following the chords.

(backing vocals)

(chuckles) I'm singing quite out of tune. But for some reason, when you add some reverb and when you put it on the back, that's okay. It makes a sort of like, uh, feminine waves of sounds behind. And it makes a good, how do you say, cream of sound behind. Because you don't really hear them, but they are there and you feel the presence of it all over the song.

(Vocals: "Anytime, anywhere / You're my playground love")

Brian: It was exactly what Sofia and I had hoped would happen. You know, there's some really amazing seventies pop songs in the film, and it held up next to them.

JB: I don't know if it helped her edit and cut the movie, but I think that on the last two weeks she gave to the movie something much more glamor and something much more romantic. I think that she has cut the moments where it was kind of dark and negative. And she turned it into a love story, in a way. And the song helped.

Nicolas: The movie was presented in Sundance. And the record company had the idea to do a showcase to promote the soundtrack.

Sofia: They played at Sundance for our premiere, and Thomas played with them. That's when we first met.

Nicolas: And so since then, as in the fairytales, you know, they got married and had a lot of children. (laughs)

Hrishikesh: (laughs)

Sofia: I love that song, and I love when Thomas plays it, especially when he plays it in concert now, or live. I feel like that's my song.

Thomas: It's such a fun story for us. One of my daughters was playing it yesterday. And so I came in the kitchen and I heard her play the song. I thought, like, that's so special that she likes the song that brought her parents together.

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Playground Love" by Air featuring Gordon Tracks, in its entirety.

("Playground Love" (feat. Gordon Tracks) by AIR)

Visit songexploder.net/air for more. There's a new 25th anniversary analog mix version of The Virgin Suicides album, called The Virgin Suicides Redux, that came out this year. There's a link to buy it on the Song Exploder site. You can also watch the music video for the song "Playground Love," which was directed by Sofia Coppola and her brother, Roman Coppola.

Also, if you liked this episode, and you want to hear more from some of these folks specifically, there's an episode I did with Phoenix from 2017, episode 112, and an episode I did with Brian Reitzell from way back in 2014, episode 15. You can find those and all the other episodes of the podcast at songexploder.net/episodes.

This wraps up the 12th year of Song Exploder, which feels hard to believe, even as I say it. I'll be back in January and I hope you have a wonderful holiday.

In the meantime, this episode was produced by me, Craig Eley, Mary Dolan, 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 write a newsletter, where I talk about the making of some of these episodes, and about music and film and TV, and generally about the creative process. You can find a link to the newsletter on the Song Exploder website. You can also get a Song Exploder shirt – which makes a great gift, by the way – at songexploder.net/shirt.

I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. Thanks for listening.