Song Exploder
Mastodon - Your Ghost Again
Episode 324

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.

This episode contains explicit language.

The band Mastodon formed in 2000 in Atlanta, Georgia. They've won a Grammy and been nominated for 5 more, and 3 of their albums have debuted at #1 on Billboard's Hard Rock charts. For most of their history, they were a four piece, made up of Brann Dailor, Troy Sanders, Bill Kelliher, and Brent Hinds. But in March 2025, Brent Hinds left the band. And 5 months later, he died in a motorcycle accident. For this episode, I spoke to Brann, Troy, and Bill about the making of the song "Your Ghost Again," which came together in the wake of Brent's death, and the death of Brann's mother. Along with the new members of the band, Nick Johnston and João Nogueira, they released their 9th album, *Marrow Deep*, in August 2026. I went to their studio in Atlanta, and I talked to them about everything that they went through and everything that went into the song "Your Ghost Again."

("Your Ghost Again" by MASTODON)

(Vocals: "I saw your ghost again / Followed by crushing feelings of regret")

Brann: Hi, my name's Brann Dailor. I play the drums and do some singing.

Bill: My name is Bill Kelliher, and I play the guitar.

Troy: My name is Troy Sanders, I play bass guitar and also do vocals. And along with our lead guitar player Nick Johnston and keyboardist João Nogueira, we are Mastodon.

Hrishikesh: When did you all first start playing together?

Bill: Brann and I knew each other from, uh, we grew up in Rochester, New York. Played in a few bands together since '94-ish.

Brann: '94. Yeah. Bill and I were playing in a band in Massachusetts called Today is the Day. That band had been already established and had been going for a long time, and Bill and I really desperately sort of wanted to start our own thing, and he really wanted to live with his longtime girlfriend.

And so he's like, "Dude, let's move down to Atlanta. Let's get a band going."

Bill: I promised Brann I was like, "Dude, there's no drummers down here. There's no one playing the kind of music that we're doing."

Troy: And at the same time in Atlanta, I was in a band from 1994 to 2000 with Brent Hinds playing local shows around Atlanta and Southeast. So we each had like six, seven years together before we all collectively met in January of 2000.

Bill: Brent found out I was in Today Is the Day, and we became quick friends, and I was like, "I'm gonna bring our drummer down and, you know, we should start something."

And so when we came down in 2000, he was one of the guys that tried out. And... didn't go well the first time. (laughs)

Brann: But the next early afternoon, he came over to our apartment, and he just sat down with this, uh, acoustic guitar and started ripping. And I was like, "Wow, that's the guy I heard about," you know? Troy came down, and that's when I met Troy. He came in and introduced himself and said, "Hey. What's up? I got a van. I play the bass." And we're like, "All right, let's go."

Bill: (laughs)

Brann: And, uh, just a few days later, we had a practice, and we were kinda showing these guys a couple songs that we had written. And they had, like, a whole demo that became Mastodon songs.

Troy: So I was booking shows for us before we had complete songs or even a band name on the brand new, uh, interwebs in the 2000s.

Brann: Yeah. We also had a standalone singer when we first started. He ended up leaving the band, like, right before our first actual tour. And Brent and Troy just were like, "We'll just yell stuff." So that's... All the singers in Mastodon are reluctant singers.

Everything happened really fast, and so it was really exciting, and we were off to the races. And we've had the same mentality ever since: We just work a lot, and like to hang out with each other and laugh and play rock shows and travel, and that's what we do.

Hrishikesh: I'd love to jump forward in time to the period just before you started working on this album. What was going on with the band at that point?

Brann: So, in 2024 we had started writing, but things were, like, a little fragmented. You know, at this point in our lives, Mastodon's our job. You know, I get up at like 9:00 AM and I'm ready to rock. Like, I'm excited to get after it.

Bill's always riffing. I'm always riffing. So getting together over there in the morning, cup of coffee, Bill's basement, fire up the riff machine, and figure out what we like.

And that's kinda how it was in the early days, too, you know. I'll work on the Bill songs. And I'll work on my songs with Bill. And then I would work on Brent's stuff with him. That sort of stopped happening with him. He stopped coming around as much, and like, just wasn't as active with us, you know. So, we were trying to let Brent hear what we were working on, you know, sort of.

But it just didn't really, I don't think, pique his interest that much, you know. He was going through a lot, like, in his personal life. And he just was, kinda staying up late and,

Bill: He was spreading himself pretty thin, you know.

Brann: Yeah. It's just the last thing he wanted to do is come down and practice or… it was like work to him, and he didn't wanna do that, you know? So, it's hard sometimes, you know, especially when you've been in this band for this long, and, you know, kinda gotta force yourself to go down and do the work.

Bill: It's not a weekender type of career. It's either you're all in or you're just not in.

Brann: I think a lot of what was keeping Brent coming down when he did come down, is that everybody was best friends in this band, so like we loved each other very much. And so, there was no shortage of, of laughs and, you know, it's like one of the deepest human relationships that you can have is what we had with Brent.

Hrishikesh: Do you remember how "Your Ghost Again" first started?

Bill: We hadn't been together in a while, and I, I was just down in my basement studio, just riffing out. And uh, I like to have at least two or three ideas. And if I think it sounds cool, then I'll send it over to these guys, and if they're like, "Yeah, that sounds killer," then I'll kinda focus on that, and I'll start layering, uh, more guitars and harmonies.

Brann: He'll send it to me like the night before. Be like, "Hey, check this out. You wanna come over and play drums on this tomorrow morning?" I'll be like, yeah."

Bill: And that's kinda where it all starts.

(demo - riffs and drums)

Troy: This one was labeled “Song Number One.” In the 32 loose demos that you started putting together.

Bill: We like to overwrite for songs, because it's better to have too many riffs than, than not enough.

And this song became so convoluted with riffs, 'cause we're just like, "I don't know. Does this sound good?" And every day Brann would come over and we would try something new, and then he would be like, "Hey, I thought about this all night last night. I, I, I got another idea." And I'm like, "Okay. Let's, let's put, throw it in there. Throw it in the soup." (chuckles)

(cont demo - riffs and drums)

Brann and I had come out of the chorus and we're like, "Man, this is a real big, catchy, spacious chorus. We need something that's kinda tight and busy for a bridge section.

And he's like, "Come up with something." And this riff just kinda came out.

(demo - complicated riff and drums)

Bill: And I recorded it, and I was like don’t ask me to play that again, cuz I have no idea how I did that.

Brann: 2024 was the 20th anniversary of our album *Leviathan*, and we did a whole tour of the States. And then we went to Australia after that. Kinda sidetracked us. So we sort of shelved the demos for the new album.

And then, there was medical stuff with my mom, you know. She'd been in and out of the hospital and she had rheumatoid arthritis which, she was 19 when she was diagnosed, but she had a multitude of syndromes. She had a really bad, traumatic brain injury. And so, once she finally passed, I was just kind of angry at just how everything played out in her life. She went through so much. And like way more than any one person should have to endure. You know, so I'm-- was unpacking all that.

And we just didn't know what was going on with Brent. We just, on stage he just was miserable, and everybody could tell, fans could tell. We had to make a change, and so we wanted to have this band meeting and… didn't go great.

Troy: Not being able to hear words from your friends and your bandmates and your brothers of 25 years, pleading you for the right avenues for help and ultimately happiness, and we can't even approach you with this in a daytime sober conversation. That breaks our hearts, too. Because when I was in the middle of trying to plead my personal case with him, he stood up and walked out of the room and that's the last time I ever saw Brent.

We had, uh, flown to Anchorage, Alaska to play the Alaskan State Fair. We land at the airport and go to baggage claim, waiting at the carousel, and we receive a phone call.

Bill: Hysterical person on the other end just telling us all. I was like, "Wait, okay. Are you fucking serious?" This is the guy that has made it out of every car crash and fight and bike accident unscathed. So it was pretty shocking, you know, and, uh,

Brann: Yeah, we were shocked.

Bill: And still processing and it's really hard 'cause everything is still so familiar, you know. Like just this building in general, just being in this band with him for so long, and always just expecting him to be walking in the door. Late.

Brann: And if we had folded up shop, then no one would've blamed us for it.

Troy: But I feel like it was like, all right, things were very, very dark. We need to buckle down and start writing. We've been digging on this music a bit now over the past year, half year or so. It's... let's dig deeper.

Hrishikesh: More with Mastodon after this.

Brann: Given what we had gone through, the best thing for us was to get in the studio and try to work it out.

Troy: Brent passed in late August, and we started the record in this very room. First week of September.

(drums + guitar lick)

Kurt Ballou was the engineer of the record and co-produced it. Patrik Berger, from Sweden, was the producer of the record.

Brann: When we first started looking for producers, we were made aware that Patrik was maybe wanting to work with us, and then we looked at his pedigree and we were like “I don’t understand why.” (laughs) ‘Cause he did a lot of pop stuff, you know?

Hrishikesh: Stuff like Taylor Swift, and Charli XCX, and Carly Rae Jepsen.

Brann: But then Patrik came down to the studio here and instant good chemistry. Some of these, like, Swedish dudes, they're super into metal, but they end up in the pop world, which is cool, you know. That jived with us, and we liked him as a person, and so... It was a, a really cool team that w- we felt like was assembled, like everybody's input would produce something really interesting and cool.

Hrishikesh: Is it weird for you guys to let people who are outside of the band have creative input?

Troy: Yes. However, that's the beauty of trusting an outside member to come in and give their honest thoughts and opinions on how to create more dynamic within your songs that you've already been working on.

Brann: Yeah, when we started pre-production, Patrik was like “That, what’s that thing, on the demo version in the middle?”

(demo excerpt - complicated riff)

We’re like, “Nothing. That’s just, that’s just trying to get to the end, to the last chorus.” He’s like, “No, that needs to be, like, the main part of the song. Start the song like that.”

Bill: So we’re all like, “Okay, let’s try it.”

(“Your Ghost Again” by MASTODON - opening riff)

Brann: It was exciting. I thought it was like a shot of adrenaline, really, into the song.

Hrishikesh: And then for Kurt Ballou, as the co-producer, what was his role?

Brann: To engineer, getting the sounds.

Bill: When I close my eyes to one of Kurt's records, I feel like I'm at the show and I'm seeing the band play perfectly. He really captures that fine line between overproduced and live and organic.

Brann: The mission statement at the beginning was like, we want the heavy moments to be the heaviest we've ever, ever been. You know, and we think that Kurt is the

guy that can get us there. But we also desire the dynamics and the vocal production that we think that Patrik can bring, like recognizing hooks. And those two worlds together, with all the things that we bring to the table, we thought that we would come to the best conclusion with this album.

(bass)

Bill: I mean, we have every kind of amp you could imagine in this studio. So, we've got them all plugged into a, a master channel switcher. So we can go, okay, this Marshall head from 1978 with this Friedman cabinet combo, press a button and you can instantly hear it.

(cont. bass)

Bill: For Troy's bass, we used that Orange 412, but we put some heavy-duty bass speakers.

Troy: We put bass speakers in a guitar cabinet, and for the first time ever, I ran through a guitar head. To get that real gnarly, real hairy bass tone.

Hrishikesh: So everything that we've listened to and talked about so far has just been instrumental. Are you thinking about lyrical ideas at the same time while you're working on the music?

Troy: Yeah, so I, I keep a, just a written journal everywhere I go in my backpack. And anytime a word or a line or a phrase or a whole poem comes to mind, I'll put it down, just like Bill would with his riffs, you know, and I'm sure Brann does. He's got a gazillion voice notes.

So, I had an idea for all parts. But I had penned my lyrics in two different time settings. The two front verses, was during, uh, the spring of 2025 when the band was in this turmoil and tension, and we were navigating this breakup, and that's what ultimately became the first line lyrically of the song.

(Troy's vocals: "Throes of despair,")

"Throes of despair,"

(cont. vocals: "Approach if you dare,")

"Approach if you dare," it kind of stemmed from the last time I ever saw Brent. It was trying to have a, a productive band meeting to really get to the bottom of these issues of what's causing what felt like our band's demise.

And, uh, it was hard to approach someone when they just kind of were very callous to the words we were trying to say from our heart, you know?

And then the last line of verse one is, "We let go of all these wasted years," meaning, like, I think Bill and Brann and myself tried more than with any other relationship in our life to bring, you know, some clarity and some help towards Brent and we just have to let go of all this trying because we really, really, really tried.

(cont. vocals: "And we throw love at this / we let go of all these wasted years")

I feel Brann and I are quite selfless when it comes to, whoever kind of gravitates towards a part. Like I have an idea for this verse here, and Brann's like, "Cool, put that down, let's hear what it sounds like." Vice versa. Brann says, "I have an idea for the chorus, I wanna give it a shot." "Well, go knock it out."

(Brann's vocals: "With your fists clenched tight / You can feel your blood begin to boil / When the world went black / And to them you seemed invisible")

Brann: My lyrical contributions to "Your Ghost Again" were born out of being in these familiar places, being in this studio, sitting there and seeing Brent to my right for 25 years.

I just started seeing him out of the corner of my eye, like just expecting him to be there, and your mind plays tricks on you. You know, and you're kinda like, oh, shit, I thought he was in the room or, I thought I heard his chains on his, on his belt or whatever.

Same with my mom. I would see her, you know, out of the corner of my eye. At first you get excited that they're there, "Oh!" And then you get, kinda get the little jolt, and then you remember that they're gone. You're not gonna see them again. So that was sort of the impetus for the chorus.

(Brann's chorus vocals: "I saw your ghost again / Visions of a future / Non-existent")

Hrishikesh: When you're each recording your individual parts, do the rest of you come to the studio? Do you listen to each other while you're recording?

Troy: Most of the time it's all here.

Brann: Yeah, most of the time.

Troy: You know, kind of see what's going on. The friendship, the camaraderie, and also to, uh,

Bill: We all chime in a little bit.

Troy: Yeah, chime in, give some constructive criticism when necessary. And cutting vocals, you know, last minute like we tend to do, it's a very naked spot. And if someone is through that glass, whether it's Bill or Brann or whoever, with a thumbs up, then, "Ok cool. I feel comfortable that I'm onto something here."

Brann: I'm embarrassed by my initial, like, vocal ideas, you know. And you know, where, when you're, like, totally unsure. And you're like, "I think I have an idea." Because I write a lot of my lyrics in my car. I'll be out there with the stereo cranked, singing along, be like "Ok, I think I got it." And I come in here, and for some reason, everything's changed. And I'm like, these guys will give you the grace of like, let him get his idea down. And then, finally, when you say, "Ok, now I think that that's the thing," then everybody says, "yeah," or "try this," or "try that."

Hrishikesh: There are times in the song when you're singing together and layering your vocals, and I was wondering, what was the process for figuring that out?

Brann: I initially came in with the, the super high thing that's like,

(Brann's doubled vocals: "With your fists clenched tight / you can feel your blood begin to boil")

Hrishikesh: Cause that's two octaves of you, right?

Brann: Yeah.

Hrishikesh: You're singing a high octave above.

Brann: Yeah.

Troy: And then Patrik suggested, would I mind coming in and doing the low underneath Brann's back half verses.

(Troy's low vocals: "When the world went black / And to them you seemed invisible")

(Brann and Troy together: "Close your eyes")

Bill: When Brann came up with the chorus part, that started to, for me, change the dynamic of where the song was kinda going. And I remember sitting in the room. We had already recorded it, and I was just playing around with the song, and I was like, just João and I, and I said: "What if we did this in this part?" And I started playing:

(guitar riff)

Troy: That's the beauty of teamwork, is that it could be a riff idea initially of Bill's, and then Nick and João got a hold of it.

(same riff on keys)

Our keyboard synth player, João Nogueira. And our lead guitar player Nick Johnston.

(add guitar and drums)

Troy: And then one of the bridge parts kind of needed some vocals and I was a bit more reflective and a little more positive. The lyrics were, "All my gifts from you, take it back where you must go."

(Troy's vocals: "All my gifts from you / take them back where you must go")

That was thinking about how great it was to have known Brent and shared thousands of stages around the world. Because when I met Brent in 1994, for many years he turned me on to so much music and art and a lot of beauty that I had never been exposed to. And I always want to remember that the good far outweighed the bad.

(Brann's vocals: "All I ever wanted you to say to me / Is that you felt safe and sound")

Brann: And I think especially, "all I ever wanted to hear from you was that you're okay," was, like, him and my mom at the same time. That's what I wanted from both of them. That's all I wanted them to be, was happy and healthy and feeling good, and they, they both just weren't. And it was frustrating to watch them go through it and not be able to do anything to help, 'cause that's all I wanted to do. I wanna pick 'em up and make 'em feel better.

Troy: I think this is the first record in our whole discography where Brann and I didn't talk at all about the lyrics. I think it was very clear after our breakup with Brent, Brann's mother's death, and then Brent's death. It was clear as day there was no other way we're gonna write about anything on Earth than this.

Brann: Unfortunately. You know, we don't want this record to be about what it's about. It's the last thing any of us want.

Bill: It's a bit of closure, you know, when, when you hear it. It's not one of those songs, like, "Oh, I don't wanna hear that anymore, it brings back terrible memories," or anything. But it's like just us standing up on our podium and

making it a real thing and making it tangible and just telling people like, "Hey, we're not forgetting about this guy or this situation, and here we are singing about it."

Brann: Yeah. No, I guess it still makes me a little sad to listen to. It's, (clears throat) kinda transports you back to that time. And then that won't last forever, which is good, (chuckles) I think. But it might, you know, grief kinda sneaks up on you sometimes. They're just these big old, (chuckles) these big old bags of grief that you kinda get to lug around for the rest of your life, but it gets easier. And I'm lucky enough to have had these loving, beautiful relationships to mourn.

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Your Ghost Again," by Mastodon, in its entirety.

("Your Ghost Again" by MASTODON)

Visit songexploder.net/mastodon, for links and more info about stuff that was discussed in this episode. You'll also find links to buy or stream "Your Ghost Again," and you can watch the music video.

This episode was produced by me, Craig Eley, Mary Dolan, Kathleen Smith, and 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.

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