

00:01

I've been in love with music my whole life, both as a musician and as a listener. But as a listener, sometimes songs feel a little like houses to me, houses that you can only see from the street. You can stop and admire them from the outside. You can say, "Wow, look, the architecture is amazing. You might be able to get a little peek inside through one of the windows, but it's this thing of beauty that you have to appreciate from a distance because it's not yours.

00:31

And as a musician, when you put a song out into the world, it can sometimes feel like you're trapped in the backyard of this house that you built. There might be people looking at it, but you never get the chance to show them anything inside. Inside a song, there are all these parts that get imagined and written and recorded that are so full of thought and beauty, but only the people who've made the song ever get to hear those pieces on their own. All those pieces get smushed together in the final version that comes out.

01:03

Whenever I put out a song, I was always a little sad that no one else was going to get to hear the things that I had heard when I was making it.

01:11

Let me show you what I mean. Here's a clip from a song of mine.

01:14

(Guitar plays a soft accompaniment)

01:18

(Cello plays a flowing melody)

01:38

OK. What's your experience when you listen to that? You might like it, maybe, or you might hate it, or you might say, "I don't know, dude, it's 20 seconds of a song, what do you want from me?" Which is fair. What I hear is impossible to expect anyone else to hear. It's not just the cello

part and the guitar part and the drum beat. It's also all the things that I lived through in order for that music to exist.

02:04

So in 2014, I started a show to try and solve this distance between the creator and the audience. I interviewed musicians about one of their songs and then combined that with the different layers of music that make up that song. I thought this way an artist could bring a listener in and give them a guided tour of this house they made. They could point to the foundation and say, "This is how the song got started." And then as more and more layers get built on top, eventually the full song gets revealed. The show is called "Song Exploder." It's a pod --

02:39

(Applause)

02:43

"Song Exploder" is a podcast, and it's also a TV show that I adapted for Netflix. And over the years, I've gotten to talk to some of the biggest musicians in the world about their work. People like Fleetwood Mac and U2, Lin-Manuel Miranda, Alicia Keys, Billie Eilish, The Roots and Yo-Yo Ma, and over 200 others.

03:04

At first, I was really looking at those isolated pieces of music to do the work of revealing the inside of their respective houses. But as I was having conversations with them about their songs, something happened. I realized that there were rooms to be discovered in the conversations themselves, doors that could be opened. And I started to wonder: Could I try listening to people the way that I was trying to listen to music? Because when someone tells you something, just like with a song, there can be all these layers within it. There can be all this context that you're missing as the person out on the street, outside of the house.

03:48

So to get inside, I had to listen for those moments, those clues where there was more to be discovered, where there was something below the surface of what was first presented to me. So I borrowed from my music-listening brain, and now when I'm in a conversation, this is what I try to do. Be open to new ideas. Stop multitasking. Let the other person know that you're engaged, and do it without taking your focus away from them and turning it onto you.

04:19

Because of making "Song Exploder," I now listen to a much wider range of music than I used to. When I was younger, I used to actually pride myself on my music snobbery. But nowadays, it just feels like I'm potentially cutting myself off from hearing some great ideas. And I think that's a prerequisite when it comes to listening to people, too. You have to go into it open-minded and curious and ready to learn something new.

04:47

Also, the instinct to multitask is so hard to turn off, but it's so important that you do it. You know, when you're listening to music these days, most of the time it's something that we do passively. It's in the background. It's the soundtrack to something else that we're doing. And I hate to say it, but between our phones and our smartwatches and just our own wandering thoughts, it's easy to get distracted, and we tend to listen to other people that way, too. But you can't really get immersed if that's the case. Imagine trying to listen to a song while singing a different song in your head. You can't do it or you can't do it well. And you can't fully appreciate what someone else is saying if you're thinking about something else.

05:31

I'm also a big believer in the power of nonverbal communication. Like, just the simple act of a nod is a way to let the other person know that you're engaged and also invites them to keep going and say more. That kind of intentional, engaged silence makes space for them.

05:52

Sometimes, though, you do have to actually ask for more. You have to draw them out. But if you can ask for what's below the surface of what they just said, you might unlock some door for them and invite them to go through it with you. That also means turning off the instinct to talk about yourself. I used to think that this was actually the best way to show that I was really listening. Someone would tell me something and I'd say, "That reminds me of this thing that happened to me," and then I would tell a whole story of my own. But it's kind of like listening to half a song and then saying, "Oh, you know, this part reminds me of this other song," and then turning that first song off and going and putting on some other song, which is also something I've done.

06:37

(Laughter)

06:39

But you can't get deeper if you lose the moment like that. So it's a challenge to your impatience and to your selfishness to be engaged without making it about you.

06:53

OK, and so now to ignore the advice about talking about yourself. I would like to talk about myself and tell you a little bit about me and that song that I played you a part of to hopefully illustrate what I'm talking about.

07:09

Years ago, when I was making my first recordings, I would play my songs over and over and over again in my bedroom. My music career wasn't really something I could talk about with my parents. They were hardworking immigrants whose dream for me had been to become a doctor or a lawyer. But every now and then, I would hear my mom humming one of my songs just to herself in the kitchen. And that felt like some kind of unspoken approval. And over the years, whenever I would hear my mom humming one of my songs, it made me so happy.

07:45

Last fall, my mom passed away. And a few weeks after her funeral, I had a dream where I got to see her and talk to her and visit with her for a little bit. And I woke up filled with longing and sadness but also gratitude for this moment and this dream. And I ended up writing a song about it.

08:11

(Guitar plays a soft accompaniment)

08:13

(Sings) But it's so good to see you.

08:19

It's so good to see you, see you again.

08:28

In the bridge, I stopped singing for a little bit and I just hummed a melody.

08:34

(Humming)

08:39

I was thinking about my mom, and I wanted to try and represent her in the music in some way.

08:47

One of the people who I talked to about the song while I was making it was Yo-Yo Ma. I told him, this is what the song is about and this is what the music is supposed to do in this part. And I asked him, "Do you think that the cello could represent my mom's voice?" And he listened to everything that I said. And then he played those notes.

09:08

(Cello plays a flowing melody)

09:15

OK. Here's everything together again.

09:17

(Guitar plays a soft accompaniment)

09:20

(Cello plays a flowing melody)

09:41

So now, what's your experience when you listen to that from inside the house? Every conversation has the potential to open up and reveal all the layers and layers within it, all those

rooms within rooms. And personally, I hope that I can keep looking for those ways in so I can experience the depth and the richness of someone else's ideas every chance I get to hear them.

10:06

For now, thanks for listening to mine. Thank you.

10:10

(Applause)

10:23

(Plays a soft tune)

10:34

(Sings) You called out my name

10:39

“Bring me some water, my love”

10:45

And it all felt the same

10:50

As any other night of my life

11:00

We lived at home back then

11:04

It still feels like home in my sleep

11:11

I woke to dark again

11:16

For a moment

11:19

It was you and me

11:25

You're a piece of a dream now

11:30

Just a little too far

11:36

I can still hear your voice through

11:42

The door left ajar

11:46

But can't see where you are

11:52

By the murmuring TV

11:57

You'd fall asleep to in bed

12:04

You sat and looked at me

12:08

I said I miss you

12:12

You said, "I know"

12:18

The pictures that I've framed

12:23

Don't tell the stories in between

12:29

The moments that contain

12:34

Who you were really to me

12:40

You're a piece of a dream now

12:46

Just a little too far

12:51

I can still hear your voice through

12:57

The door left ajar

13:02

I guess that's how it is now --

13:08

The only place you'll appear

13:13

We'll have to meet in some shadow

13:20

Between there and here

13:24

Between there and here

13:30

But it's so good to see you

13:36

It's so good to see you See you again

13:45

(Hums a soft melody)

14:03

You're a piece of a dream now

14:09

Just a little too far



14:14

I can still hear your voice through

14:20

The door left ajar

14:25

I guess that's how it is now --

14:30

The only place you'll appear

14:36

We'll have to meet in some shadow

14:42

Between there and here

14:46

Between there and here

14:55

Thank you.

14:56

(Applause)