

Song Exploder
Andra Day - Forever Mine
Episode 81

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. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway.

("Forever Mine" by ANDRA DAY)

Hrishikesh: Singer/songwriter Andra Day put out her first record in August 2015. Since then, she's been invited by the Obamas to perform at the White House on multiple occasions, and her record was nominated for a Grammy for Best R&B Album. In this episode, Andra breaks down her song "Forever Mine" along with the track's producer, Rob Kleiner.

("Forever Mine" by ANDRA DAY)

(Music fades)

Andra: I am Andra Day, and I co-wrote "Forever Mine."

Rob: I'm Rob Kleiner. I co-wrote and produced the song with Andra. Even before I had learned that I might be able to co-write with Andra, there was kind of this cool buzz going on. She had just signed to Warner, and she was doing some showcases, and I was like, "Woah, I hope I get to work with her!"

Andra: [laughter]

Rob: And then, you know, lucky enough it happened. And yeah, they put us together for a reason. It sounded like a great musical fit. A lot of the work I had done before that was like soul inspired and a little bit hip hop.

Andra: Yeah. It was sort of the mix of, the one thing I wanted was the mix of the old and the new. So it was kind of like, "Alright, cool. Let's do this." I told Rob I'm like, "I love The Flamingos, and I love the song "I Only Have Eyes For You.""

("I Only Have Eyes For You" by THE FLAMINGOS)

Andra: And so, that was really sort of the prototype for this song. And so, I was like, “I want “I Only Have Eyes For You,” but I want it current. I want it with a little bit of like, you know, like hip hop.

(Music fades)

Rob: If you break down The Flamingos track, it's this 50s doo-wop thing, which has a lot of similarities to a lot of 50 doo-wop songs, especially that triplet piano. And that's a cool thing that you don't really hear a lot in modern music. So I was like, well, I got to do something like that.

(Piano)

Rob: The piano happens to be a MIDI piano. One thing you get good at, being a bedroom producer, is making

Andra: [laughter]

Rob: MIDI stuff sound real. And, especially when you're going for like a cool vintage sound like that.

Andra: Yeah.

Rob: I'm not a very good piano player, but the triplets are so easy because they just kind of hang on C, and they modulate a little bit. So I was able to, with my very limited piano skills, keep the triplet going. And then, I wrote the bassline with my left hand, which later, is played on the bass, not on the piano.

(Bass)

Rob: That bassline is like a upright bass sample. And then, like me playing an actual bass on top of that. So it's kind of both fake and real.

(Piano joins)

(Piano and bass end)

(Drums)

Andra: It's sort of like 90s sort of garage, Wu-Tang, hip hop sounding drums.

Rob: You know, a lot of those 50s style drum beats are kind of like hip hop-esque. They're not all that different. The thing that makes this, I guess, modern to my ears is especially these drums. They have this kind of sampled, chewed up

Andra: Yeah.

Rob: quality in their tone. It loops in this four bar fashion with these weird imperfections, and air cutting in and out between the hits and stuff like that. That's what really gives it, I guess, this modern feel to my ear.

Andra: Yeah. Mmhm.

(Drums)

Rob: I think I had

(Guitar)

Rob: almost the entire track done by the time Andra came, you know, at noon the next day.

Andra: Yeah. And then, he played it for me, and I was like, "Oh my gosh, it's everything I imagined and wanted it to be." It was awesome.

(Piano, guitar, bass, and drums)

(Music ends)

Rob: And I had the title "Forever Mine."

Andra: Yeah. He came and he said, "I have this [sung] "be forever mine."" I was like, "Bomb. I'm with it [laughter]."

(Vocals: "Be forever mine")

Rob: Lyrically and melodically, Andra came up with pretty much the rest of it.

Andra: I'll write tons of lyrics and lyrics and lyrics and lyrics. The challenging part for me is actually to narrow down, what's the concept and what's the line? You know

what I mean? So it was actually really helpful. "Be forever mine," you know, something really simple, and let's just figure it out from there.

(Vocals: "My heart has been a chessboard / Making moves and losing out")

Andra: You know, when I heard the title "Be Forever Mine" I asked the question, *what does that mean to me?* And then, it's, you know, something I never want to let go of. Like the one thing, if I lose everything, what's the one thing that I want to hang on to? And it was my relationship with God.

(Vocals: "Cause now I'm lost up in the clouds")

Andra: In my mind, it was a love song to God, where I went from trying to find love in all these unhealthy places, and then finally discovering this love that made me feel whole. And so, that's kind of the place that it came from, that sort of healing relationship, you know what I mean?

(Vocals)

Rob: I'm super lucky to get to write with, like, some of the best vocalists on the planet. With Andra, it's, the vocal production is hitting record and sitting back like that,

Andra: [laughter]

Rob: That's about all there is to it. And if you notice in the hooks of the song, there's no copy and paste. She sings each hook totally different on each one, which is really cool to me also, because like how many pop songs aren't just copied and pasted.

(Vocals: "I just want you to be / Be forever mine / I just want you to be / To be forever mine / I just want you to be / Be forever mine")

Andra: I think I liked the aspect of that because, you know, back in the day, it was like on tape. It was sort of like, you better get the take [laughter],

Rob: Yeah.

Andra: you know what I mean? You better get it right. And you do. But I think for me, if there's little changes in music as the song progresses, if it builds, like that's

exciting to me as a listener, you know what I mean? So I think that's kind of where that came from as well.

Rob: You know, we were working on the verses for a while. And I think the last thing you wrote was the bridge. You know, when a songwriter and producer in a session, a really normal thing to do is you have like a melodic idea, but you don't have the lyrics yet. The lyrics can take quite a bit of time. So you'll sing a mumble just to get the melody idea down.

Andra: Yeah.

Rob: And I remember her mumbling the bridge.

(Vocals)

Rob: And I remember hearing that, and I mean basically like my mind exploded.

Andra: [laughter]

Rob: And like even now that's like the greatest part of the song to me, the bridge.

Andra: That's my favorite.

(Vocals: "The way that you move, never seen it before / Looking for my head, can't find it no more / You ransom my heart and I get the reward / Winning the crown like a Trojan horse / I come back, back, back every time / You got me shook like the Mobb when they rhyme / Come out of nowhere come blessing my life / I just want you to be forever mine, oh oh")

Andra: In this part, I want the rap feel, but I can't rap. Like if I try to rap the tone of my voice is just so like, "Girl, come on, this is not Sesame Street." So I was like, I got to sing this, whatever, you know? And so sort of like, "OK, I have to write this in a way that it feels like rapping, you know what I'm saying?" Because I love hip hop. And so, I was like, "Okay, let me put references in there." The lyrics are "I come back, back, back every time. You got me shook, like the Mobb when they rhyme." That's the Mobb Deep reference, because I love that song "Shook Ones" by Mobb Deep. So I was like, "How do I put this in here?"

("Shook Ones (Part II)" by MOBB DEEP)

(Music fades)

Andra: Shout out to Mobb Deep [laughter].

(Vocals with claps: "I come back, back, back every time / You got me shook like the Mobb when they rhyme / Come out of nowhere come blessing my life / I just want you to be forever mine")

(Guitar joins: "oh, oh")

Andra: It's hip-hop, and it's doo-wop.

(Claps)

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Forever Mine," by Andra Day, in its entirety.

("Forever Mine" by ANDRA DAY)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net to learn more about Andra Day and her music, including a link to buy the song "Forever Mine," and to watch the music video. You can find all the past and future episodes of Song Exploder at songexploder.net or wherever you download podcasts. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a curated network of extraordinary, story-driven shows. Learn more at radiotopia.fm. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.