

Song Exploder
Arlo Parks - Black Dog
Episode 210

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.

Hrishikesh: Before this episode starts, I want to let you know that the song being discussed is about someone who is alive and well today, but was going through a period of depression and anxiety. Both the song and the interview allude to suicide, so please be careful before listening. If you're thinking about suicide, or if you have a friend who is, or if you just need someone to talk to right now, you can get support by calling the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255) or by texting HOME to 741-741, which is the Crisis Text Line. If you're outside of the U.S., check out the list of international hotlines at [suicide.org](https://www.suicide.org). I'll link to all of this on the Song Exploder website and in the episode show notes.

("Black Dog" by Arlo Parks)

Hrishikesh: Arlo Parks is a singer and songwriter from London. In January 2021, she released her debut album, *Collapsed in Sunbeams*. It hit number three on the UK charts, and she won this year's BRIT award for Breakthrough Artist. Last year, NME called her song "Black Dog" the year's "most devastating song." In this episode, she breaks down "Black Dog," which she made with producer Gianluca Buccellati.

Arlo: But I call him Luca.

Hrishikesh: Here's Arlo Parks on Song Exploder.

Arlo: My name is Arlo Parks.

(Music fades)

Arlo: I started working on this song when I was still at school. I was 18 at the time, and I remember coming to this apartment that my manager actually had in central London, and working on the song with Luca. At the time, I had been listening to *Carrie and Lowell* by Sufjan Stevens.

("Should Have Known Better" by SUFJAN STEVENS)

Arlo: I had been writing all these little demos on guitar, and I wanted to create something that had this minimal guitar based feel. And I arrived at the apartment and Luca just started working on this very minimal guitar loop with those repeated chords.

(Guitar)

Arlo: I was like, oh this is exactly what I wanted and I didn't even have to tell you. The way that I like to work is starting from whether it's a synth or a piano or a guitar, it has to be sparse. There can't be too much going on around it, otherwise I lose the thread. And I immediately felt transported, it seemed like there was this real sense of melancholy, this real sense of nostalgia and because it was so sparse and so minimal, it felt like it provided the perfect backdrop for going into lyrics that were quite complicated and dark. I was going through a lot at the time. And just all kind of spilled out of me in that moment.

(Guitar ends)

Arlo: The song surrounds my best friend. You know, we'd been friends since we were 14, we met in Spanish class. And she was really struggling with deep depression and anxiety. And seeing her struggling was really kind of, putting this sense of heaviness in my heart, and I didn't know how to help her. And I wanted this song to kind of speak about what she was living, but through my eyes. I have found this poem that I had written kind of about her situation and that formed the foundation, I guess, of the song.

Hrishikesh: Would you be open to reading the poem?

Arlo: Yeah, of course.

“You promised, you'd be there in the morning. And I only half believed you, because last time you said that you almost weren't. I should have forgotten that by now, but I remember, there has always been a part of you, some little agony. Smooth, hot, and painful. Something that I could not touch. I hear the smile in your voice today though. A loose string of dark red silk, so soft, faint and rare. Where did it come from? For months, it seemed the curtains were always closed. It seemed like you were always angry at me and tired of yourself. It seemed like you wouldn't survive this. Ignoring the jewel of hope behind my

right eye. Rolling over onto your side to crush a tear with the side of your wrist, like a tiny blue flower. We were all so scared.”

I think I had written that poem maybe a week before. For the past month, I think, you know, things had been really bad and I'd been writing about it a lot, but I guess I had this fear surrounding putting it in a song, it was something that felt very private and very painful. But at the time I was thinking about Alice, and it just felt like the right moment because I felt like I was, I was really in it, and I wanted to be honest and I wanted to speak about what I was living, and for some reason that day there was some kind of alchemy and I was like, “Okay, I'm gonna try and sing about this.”

(Guitar)

Arlo: I heard the chords and I was kind of singing the melodies in my head, and that line, “I'd lick the grief right off your lips” popped into my head.

(Vocals: “I'd lick the grief right off your lips”)

Arlo: It's that idea of, I would take that pain onto myself if it would free you in some way, if it would make you feel better. And immediately I was thinking to myself, okay I'm gonna create a verse that feels very dense. You know, I'm gonna fill it with imagery, and I want it to feel almost overwhelming, I want to kind of pack it with as much rich content as I can. And then I was trying all these different things and then I thought to myself, actually no, maybe it needs space.

(Vocals: “Sometimes it seems like you won't survive this / And honestly it's terrifying”)

Arlo: So I was pacing around the room, just kind of writing in my head and humming to myself as Luca kind of laid down the drums

(Drums)

Arlo: and the bass.

(Bass)

Arlo: It was almost like building a body, you know, the bass gave it feet and the drums gave it bones. And then the synth, I mean, it sounds very wishy-washy,

but it almost felt like the soul, it almost felt like that thing that you can't quite grasp.

(Synth, bass, and drums)

Arlo: And as the elements were added, I found it very exciting because something that I had probably initially envisaged as just guitar and voice, gathered this real body to it. And it felt like it really supported the idea and the way that I sang things. And that's why I really love working with Luca because we both have a very similar sense of when we need to add things and when we don't. So I really trusted the way that he went with it. And then I went into the pre-chorus, I guess building up the picture of that sense of desperation. I would do anything, let's go here, let's do this. I wanna get you out of this somehow.

(Vocals, guitar, and drums: "Let's go to the corner store and buy some fruit / I would do anything to get you out your room / Just take your medicine and eat some food / I would do anything to get you out your room / It's so cruel what your mind can do for no reason")

Arlo: Being economical with my language is something that makes me a better writer because I'm forced to go right to the heart of what I mean. For me, it was about going to the core of the friendship and that idea of care. It was like, "I would do anything to get you out of your room." And I remember saying those words to her as well.

(Pause)

Arlo: I saw this cartoon that described depression as this dog that you carry around with you. And sometimes it bites and it's a bit feral, and sometimes it sleeps or creeps up on you when you're not expecting it. And then the last frame of the cartoon is all these different people in the park with their different dogs following them around. And I guess there was that notion of, you know, you're not alone. And it gets to this point, we'll say where the person has learned to kind of tame their dog and learned that doing meditation or going for walks, the dog ends up sleeping for most of the day. And that kind of gradual progression to this positive message, I dunno, it just spoke to me. And I remember writing down that phrase, black dog, in my notebook. And as I was flicking through the book to find the poem that I knew I wanted to base the lyrics about, then I remember just seeing that briefly. And then, when Luca asked me what I wanted it to be called, that just made sense.

(Vocals, guitar, bass, and drums: "I'd take a jump off the fire escape / To make the black dog go away")

Arlo: I love when vocals feel like they're intimate, when it feels like they're almost being sung into your ear, I want it to feel like I'm sitting beside you as I sing. I remember recording this with a lump in my throat, on the verge of tears. And so it wasn't so much of a performance, it was more just like, I'm in this right now, you know. When I write a song, all the emotions bubble to the surface and come out through my voice.

(Vocals: "Alice, I know that you are trying / But that's what makes it terrifying")

Arlo: The backing vocals are always the last piece of it. So I added BVS on the chorus to create something that felt very soaring and gooey and free, juxtaposed with that drum beat that felt quite plodding and grounded.

(Vocals: "It's so cruel")

Arlo: I think, honestly, that higher, "It's so" is like one of my favorite backing vocals that I've ever done. And I remember just going high up in my register for that moment and it just felt right.

(Vocals: "It's so cruel")

Arlo: Wanting to be somebody's guardian angel and just swoop them out of whatever they're feeling, but kind of knowing deep down that it's not possible.

(Drums)

Arlo: And then we just sat back and played it really, really loud on the speakers. And I felt like this weight had been lifted. I felt this sense of stillness.

(Vocals, bass, and drums: "what your mind can do for no reason")

(Guitar)

Arlo: At the end of the song, there's this distorted guitar lick, and the song slowly fades away into the distance.

(Guitar with drums)

(Music fades)

Arlo: I'm a big fan of the fade out. It offers whoever's listening a moment to kind of breathe and take in what they've just heard. And I think I wanted it to end in a way that was quiet and gentle almost, you know, as you listened to the song, you get transported and then you get gently dropped back down where you started. Hopefully those feelings of darkness and depression will also lift, and I guess that was my way of introducing a bit of hope into it.

Hrishikesh: And did you

(Guitar)

Hrishikesh: end up sending the song to your friend Alice?

Arlo: Yeah, I sent this song to her as a text. It was something like, "I wrote this for you. I wrote this about you." I had been sending her demos since I was 14. And so, only felt right that I shared this one with her as well. I think the fact that now as well, she is doing so much better and is healthy, and has this lust for life. I think it almost makes the song even more special to me because it's that pain does change and it does end and that, you know, you will get through these difficult things.

(Piano joins)

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Black Dog," by Arlo Parks, in its entirety.

("Black Dog" by Arlo Parks)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net to learn more. You'll find links to buy or stream "Black Dog," and you can watch the music video. And again, if you're having thoughts about suicide, if you're worried about someone, or you'd like emotional support, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is available 24/7. There are some links with more information on this episode's page on the Song Exploder website and in the show notes for this episode.

Song Exploder is made by me, with editing help from Teeny Lieberson and Casey Deal, artwork by Carlos Lerma, and music clearance by Kathleen Smith.

Special thanks to Sally Tamarkin and Demi Adejuyigbe. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a network of independent, listener-supported, artist-owned podcasts. You can learn more about our shows at radiotopia.fm. You can follow me on Twitter and Instagram @HrishiHirway, and you can follow the show @SongExploder. You can also get a Song Exploder t-shirt at songexploder.net/shirt. I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. Thanks for listening.

© 2020 Translucence