

Song Exploder
Bonobo - Break Apart ft. Rhye
Episode 98

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.

("Break Apart" by BONOBO ft. RHYE)

Hrishikesh: Simon Green is a producer and DJ who's been making music under the name Bonobo since 2000. In January 2017, he released his sixth album, *Migration*. For the song, "Break Apart" on that album, he enlisted Rhye for vocals. And in this episode, the two of them tell the story of how the track came together.

("Break Apart" by BONOBO ft. RHYE)

Simon: My name is Simon Green, and I go under the name Bonobo.

(Music ends)

Simon: When I first started this song, I was on a flight from Miami to LA. It was an evening flight. It was a bit of a weird mind space. All I wanted at the time was just to sort of be still and stop traveling. I spent kind of a year just living nowhere, just on tour, just kind of in hotels and tour buses, living out of a suitcase. So I was feeling sort of tired and a little more somber. So I kind of, I pulled up Ableton, and I built this patch from a plugin, Korg M1, which is like the classic house piano.

(Piano)

Simon: And just drowned it in reverb, and just did these very slow notes one after another. Looking out the window at whatever was passing down underneath.

(Piano)

Simon: That was the opening chord progression. And I also had this loop, this little kind of chiming, percussive loop.

(Percussion)

(Piano joins)

Simon: I never really start out thinking, this is going to be something that I'm making for the record. It's just going to be like, *I'm on a plane, this is what I'm going to do for the next three hours. I'm just going to tinker around.*

(Music ends)

Simon: I love harps, I love kind of sampling them, I love slowing them down, I love editing them. And I went into a studio in Brooklyn, and recorded a harpist for the track that ended up with Erykah Badu on it, from the last record called "Heaven for the Sinner."

("Heaven for the Sinner" by BONOBO ft. ERYKAH BADU)

(Music fades)

Simon: We kind of spent a day recording this harpist, and there was so much great stuff in there. It ended up not being used in the track that I was recording it for. I've ended up sort of recycling some of that session back into some other stuff.

(Harp)

Simon: So this was from that same session. That phrase kept jumping out. The harp is sped up six times. I prefer to sort of re-pitch things, and slow them down, and speed them up, because it just gives them a sort of an extra quality. And you can get something that sounds a little more other worldly in a way.

(Harp)

(Harp ends)

Simon: I've been using a lot of found sound, and recording kind of textures, and just ambience just to give it some space and give it some air. When I was living in New York, I recorded my journey

(Recording)

Simon: from my house to wherever I was going in Manhattan. Walked down the street into the subway, waiting for a train, getting on the train, the noise on the train,

getting off the train. It was like a sort of 10 minute recording of this journey. From that recording of the subway,

(Recording ends)

Simon: the piece I ended up choosing was from sitting inside the train.

(Train sound)

Simon: It's also sidechained, so it dips in and out. It sort of weaves in and out of the rest of the sounds.

(Train sound ends)

Simon: I started building the drums after that. What I started with was the kicks and the claps.

(Kick and Claps)

Simon: to sort of accent where the drums would be. And they were the sort of like the leading parts. And then, what I do is I sort of shade in the space between the kicks and the claps. I'll take a drum break that was from a jazz player.

(Drums)

Simon: Those little rolls and little hits

(Hits)

Simon: shaded in between the kicks and the snares. And so, you get one hit that sort of like leads into another via this little roll.

(Drums)

(Drums end)

Simon: I was thinking about the tempo.

(Metronome)

Simon: 125 BPM, it's a difficult tempo. It's traditionally, that's kind of like house and techno

(Beat)

Simon: kind of tempo, but this wasn't what that needed.

(Beat)

(Beat ends)

Simon: This kind of jazzy thing kind of took it into a more soulful place. And the bassline,

(Bass)

Simon: when the drums come, that for me was a real switch where the drums and the bass turn it into something else.

(Beat joins)

(Music fades)

Simon: After the original piano progression and the drums, I wanted something to sort of like come into the higher register, just to sort of lift the whole thing a little bit, and take it sort of into the third part.

(Piano)

Simon: It was a recorded piano. I processed it the same way, kind of put it through lots of reverb and a little more sort of ethereal sounding.

(Piano)

(Piano ends)

Simon: It's around that point where I know whether this can sort of stand on its own narrative, or whether it would lend itself to a sort of human element. And I thought this would be really sort of sweet to bring in a voice. I think that the way that I can tell whether something is a vocal, is there's space, I can just hear it. You know, there's a lot of space between those notes. The ideas are really pretty

much fully formed before I let a vocalist hear them. I never really kind of initially give too much guidance when I'm sending this off to vocalists, because I want them to be able to not have any restraints when they're kind of writing. I just want to see what their initial idea is. I just want them to sort of have the freedom and kind of go with their instincts a little bit. It can bring a real freshness to something, to have this sort of second idea, which is away from your own sort of frames of reference.

Milosh: Hey, this is Milosh from Rhye, and I sang on the track.

Simon: I loved his music. And, like a lot of people, I thought that he was a woman when I first heard his voice.

("Open" by RHYE)

(Music fades)

Simon: And it was kind of one of those moments, someone, you meet him or someone tells you that this is a dude. I'm like, "Wow, that's, I had no idea." I sent it to him,

Milosh: and asked if it resonated with me. And it definitely did. Something about it really kind of got me. There's certain tracks like right when I hear it, I hear the melodies instantaneously, because it just connects with me, and that was definitely the case with that. And I was like, "Okay. Yeah, I can definitely do this."

Simon: His response to it was amazing. You know, he was like, so he didn't want to sort of do too much, you know, he wanted to let the song breathe. So from the outset, he was very sort of like, "I'm going to hang back on this."

Milosh: Any track I'm working on, I get put into an emotional state from the track, and then, that connects with something that I am feeling at that time. I just kind of let the feeling that I have guide the melody. And I don't really think about lyrics off the top. I just start mumbling in the melody that I want to sing. Like they're literally mumbles.

(Vocals)

Milosh: And then, I listen back to it an hour later. And I just start hearing all these words that clearly my subconscious was putting out there.

(Vocals: "It's hard to take all of this haze / It's hard to take all of this haze, this haze")

Milosh: I like to kind of turn off like an overly intellectual side of myself when I'm writing. I like to be very connected to something that's coming out of me, as opposed to trying to construct clever lyrics or something that I think sounds cool.

(Vocals: "We've thrown apart these pieces / We've grown apart these pieces")

Milosh: The stuff I was feeling at the time was definitely deep sadness [laughter]. And that song is me letting out just stuff that happened. It's just a really, it's a really long and hard breakup with someone. The lyrics that kind of sum up the entire track to me is, "You're my favorite, but we're phasing."

(Vocals: "You're my favorite, you're my favorite / But we're phasing, but we're phasing")

Milosh: That's a musical production analogy there. I am inundated with music production, so things like that come to my mind. What can happen is this thing called phasing. Two sine waves hit each other, and they create this kind of distorted sound that really bothers my ears. And it's a very distorted feeling. It's like, "You're my favorite person, but we're totally phasing."

(Vocals: "but we're phasing / You're my favorite, you're my favorite / You're my")

Simon: It was a very sort of tender

(Horns)

Simon: subject. You know, it was a very personal thing he was singing about, which I was overwhelmed that this was being poured into this track. It's shared now, and I think it's kind of richer for having a second voice on it. It's just grown, it was like sort of planting this tiny little plant in the beginning, and now it was this sort of enormous, sprawling tree.

(Vocals join: "help me out, on me / Help me out, on me, help me out, on me / Help me out")

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Break Apart," by Bonobo ft. Rhye, in its entirety.

("Break Apart" by BONOBO ft. RHYE)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net for more on Bonobo and Rhye, including a link to buy this track. Carlos Lerma has been creating illustrations for all the episodes of Song Exploder this year. And you can see those on the website too.

Song Exploder is produced by me, along with Christian Koons, and is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a curated network of extraordinary, cutting edge podcasts made possible by the Knight Foundation and by MailChimp. Learn more at radiotopia.fm. You can find and follow Song Exploder on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram @SongExploder. And you can find all the past and future episodes of the show at songexploder.net or wherever you download podcasts. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.