

**Song Exploder**  
**Empress Of - When I'm With Him**  
**Episode 149**

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.

*("When I'm With Him" by EMPRESS OF)*

Hrishikesh: Lorely Rodriguez is a singer, songwriter, and producer who goes by the name Empress Of. She's released two albums, and she's sung on tracks with Khalid, Blood Orange, and Dirty Projectors. Her first album, *Me*, was made on her own. But her second album, *Us*, features a bunch of collaborators. In this episode, Lorely breaks down the Empress Of song "When I'm With Him." She co-produced it with Jim-E Stack and Dan Nigro, and I spoke to Jim-E Stack about the making of this song too. Lorely explained how collaborating opened up her process. Plus, the song's lyrics are in English, and Spanish, and Lorely describes how she relies on both languages to write.

*("When I'm With Him" by EMPRESS OF)*

Lorely: My name is Lorely. I'm also known as Empress Of.

*(Music fades out)*

Lorely: When I made my first record, I was in New York. And it was produced by me, written by me, very isolated process. And then I moved to LA, and I started to collaborate more when I moved here. At least that was my objective, because the beauty of collaboration is you do things that you don't normally do when you're by yourself. And that's something that I wanted to achieve on this record, testing myself and pushing my boundaries with melodies and production.

Jim-E: My name's Jim-E Stack.

Lorely: He's an amazing producer and songwriter in Los Angeles.

Jim-E: The first time I heard Empress Of,

*("How Do You Do It" by EMPRESS OF)*

Jim-E: I was like, "Woah, this is just really distinct and different." And her voice is just so captivating.

*("How Do You Do It" by EMPRESS OF)*

Lorely: That's a song from my first album.

Jim-E: All I knew was that she sang obviously, and was a producer.

Lorely: And my sounds typically are very icy and bare.

*(Music fades)*

Lorely: But when I went into the studio with Jim-E, he played me this loop that he had started working on with this warm synth pad.

*(Synth pad)*

Lorely: And I was like, "I have to write on top of this," because I don't usually write over textures like that. And the whole point of working with other people is to step out of your comfort zone, and so I was like, "Yes, let's write over this track because I don't have any tracks that sound like this." And I love that sound with the drum loop.

*(Synth pad with drums)*

Jim-E: My friend Dan Nigro is a producer and writer, and he and I will get together and just kind of make instrumental tracks every now and then. And we started what became the instrumental at his studio in Highland Park. So I just started with that drum break.

*(Drums)*

Jim-E: And then I built it out, putting kicks under the kicks in the break.

*(Kick drum)*

Jim-E: And another snare sound.

*(Snare joins)*

Jim-E: Just to make it thump a little harder.

*(Drums)*

Jim-E: And then another loop, people stomping and clapping in a big room.

*(Stomps along with claps)*

*(Drums with stomps and claps)*

Lorely: I liked how the drums sounded organic, but you could tell that they were samples.

Jim-E: And then my friend Dan is super strong in laying down emotional chords. He was just kind of jamming on piano.

*(Piano)*

Jim-E: And I put in a little guitar sample I had.

*(Guitar sample)*

*(Full instrumental)*

Jim-E: From there, you know, it just like sat on my hard drive pretty much for another year or whatever, but I always really loved it.

*(Full instrumental ends)*

Jim-E: So, fast forward, when Lorely and I worked on this song.

Lorely: I was just like, "We need to write to this immediately." I didn't have any lyrics yet. But I love to write melodies just with like a handheld microphone in the room.

Jim-E: So she just, you know, went at it a few times, trying out a bunch of different melodies.

*(Lyric mumbling)*

*(Lyrics end)*

Lorely: That's me sitting on the couch in the control room with Jim-E. I like the performance aspect of writing like that because you engage with someone, and that, to me, it feels like co-writing when they're like, "That's the line, oh my god, that melody is so good." But coming up with something that is worthy enough to be a song in front of someone, is a very nervous process.

*(Lyric mumbling)*

*(Lyrics end)*

Lorely: I was mumbling in English and I wasn't thinking of stuff I liked, so I started mumbling in Spanish because it's like using a different set of tools.

*(Lyric mumbling in Spanish)*

*(Lyrics end)*

Lorely: Just because the nature of the rhythm of the language, the pacing, where you take breaths, how long words are. It provides like a different perspective on phrasing and melodies. And so when I was singing in Spanish, I was doing these more like rhythmic staccato phrases.

*(Lyric mumbling in Spanish)*

*(Lyrics end)*

Lorely: We had gotten to the point where we were like, "These melodies are good. Just like try to figure out the lyrics to this." I'm singing like subliminal things and so I sit on the couch, and I listen to myself, and I try to write down what I think I'm saying. The first lyric that really felt like it navigated this song, is where it says.

*(Vocals: "Dime dónde voy / Dime dónde fui / I'm going back and forth / Like branches in the breeze")*

Lorely: Dime dónde voy, tell me where I'm going. Dime dónde fui, tell me where I've gone. When I said that I was like, "Okay, so it's a song about not being present, about not being fully invested in a relationship. It's falling out of love."

*(Vocals along with piano: "I feel like I'm the outside looking in / When I'm with him")*

Lorely: It's something that I went through in a relationship that really stuck with me. The feeling of growing out of a relationship and your partner not noticing or not knowing. It's an internally lonely song, because you're with someone else, but you're not present.

*(Vocals along with piano: "I don't know how to love now, I pretend / When I'm with him")*

Jim-E: We really had the song at that point. So it was time to iron out the arrangement of production.

Lorely: That was the hard thing, is arranging the track. Because when you write over a loop, it almost feels like a trance. It's the same thing over and over and over again. But the arrangement needs to match the songwriting. So I spent a long time adding in rhythmic elements that don't take you away from the song, but help drive the rhythm. And I was like, "I want toms."

*(Toms)*

Lorely: I love those toms. They're not real toms. They're samples.

*(Toms)*

Lorely: We wanted to add momentum to this bridge, but we didn't want to be obnoxious. And it was pretty hilarious, balancing the perfect amount of tom fills being like, "Okay, what is obnoxious and what is drama?"

*(Toms along with beat)*

*(Both fade)*

Lorely: For the second verse, more of the Spanish lyrics come in. And so we made that a focal point. And I did those harmonies.

*(Harmonized vocals: "Querías más de lo que podría ser / Me alejo más y tú no lo puedes ver")*

Lorely: I'm saying, "You wanted more than I could ever be. I'm backing off, and you can't even see." And then, the imagery of the bridge is, for me, very vivid. Laying in bed next to someone and they're asleep and you're wide awake and you want

to tell them these things that you're feeling but, you know, they're asleep and you don't want to wake them up.

*(Vocals along with piano and toms: "I'm playing a part / But it's getting too hard / Awake in the dark / It's too late to tell you")*

*(Piano)*

Lorely: "It's too late to tell you." Yes it's late at night, yes it's late in our relationship, yes you're literally asleep. Also you're asleep to the reality of how I'm feeling. I'm unpacking a lot without saying too much.

*(Piano ends)*

Lorely: The lyrical content of the music is my life. It has to be my story because that's the only way it's convincing to me. And that's the only way I can go on stage and perform for people and convince them.

*(Synth pad)*

Lorely: And it was cool because I wrote something that was incredibly personal to me, but I was able to write it with someone else in the room. I learned how to still be myself and tap into my story with other artists, which is such a great lesson. But it can be hard to make yourself vulnerable for the song. To hear like something you wrote that is so on the nose of a time and a place, an experience that you've had, it's a weird feeling. But listening to this song is not a painful experience. I don't know it's, I love this song and I listen to it a lot. And maybe that's even more rewarding.

*(Music ends)*

Hrishikesh: And now, here is "When I'm With Him," by Empress Of, in its entirety.

*("When I'm With Him" by EMPRESS OF)*

Hrishikesh: Visit [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net) to learn more about Empress Of and her collaborators on this song, Jim-E Stack and Dan Nigro. You'll also find a link to buy or stream the song.

This episode was produced and edited by me, along with Christian Koons. Carlos Lerma made the artwork, which you can see on the Song Exploder

website. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a collective of fiercely independent podcasts. You can learn about all of our shows at [radiotopia.fm](http://radiotopia.fm). You can find Song Exploder on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter @SongExploder. You can also get a Song Exploder t-shirt at [songexploder.net/merch](http://songexploder.net/merch). My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.

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