

Song Exploder
Gorillaz - Andromeda ft. D.R.A.M.
Episode 102

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.

("Andromeda" by GORILLAZ ft. D.R.A.M.)

Hrishikesh: Gorillaz is a creation of musician Damon Albarn and comic book artist Jamie Hewlett. They're a virtual band made up of four animated characters. The songs are written by Damon Albarn and a roster of collaborators. Since their first album was released in 2001, Gorillaz have sold over 16 million records worldwide. In this episode, Damon breaks down the song "Andromeda" from the 2017 Gorillaz album *Humanz*. It's a dance song, but also an elegy to people in his life who he's lost, like legendary soul singer, Bobby Womack, a former Gorillaz collaborator. "Andromeda" features guest vocals by the rapper and the singer D.R.A.M., whose own hit single, "Broccoli," went quadruple platinum in 2016. Coming up later, D.R.A.M. tells the story of how he got involved with this track. But first, Damon Albarn. It's Gorillaz on Song Exploder.

("Andromeda" by GORILLAZ ft. D.R.A.M.)

Damon: I'm Damon Albarn.

(Music fades)

Damon: This originated from a conversation between myself and Twilite Tone, the guy who co-produced the record. We were talking about two of the greatest 80s pop songs. And we decided that "Billie Jean"

("Billie Jean" by MICHAEL JACKSON)

Damon: by Michael Jackson, and "I Can't Go For That"

("I Can't Go For That" by HALL & OATES)

Damon: by Hall & Oates were two of our favorite tunes, in their tempo and their kind of pop sensibilities.

(Music fades)

Damon: And how could we somehow alchemically channel the greatness of those into our own music. So we had a title for this song before we actually started it, which was, "I Can't Go For Billie Jean." For copyright purposes, I want to emphasize that the eventual outcome bears no resemblance, and any resemblance is purely fictitious [laughter].

(Beat)

Damon: Twilite tone is responsible for the beats. Well, with tunes like this, the rhythm, that was the primary source of the song, was get this vibe going, get this feeling, this good solid dance thing going. That and the bassline.

(Bass)

Damon: [mimics bassline]

(Beat joins)

(Music ends)

Damon: In my studio, Studio 13, I have a fantastic piano, which is an upright, acoustic piano that has been adapted to read MIDI information.

(Synth)

Damon: So it's very easy to use in the studio. That's my main instrument, but I didn't use any of the piano on the record, I just used it to sort of get my harmonic map sort of established.

(Synth)

Damon: For example, on this record, I use a lot of Prophet sounds, a lot of Chroma sounds, Korg sounds, and a lot of iPad sounds.

(Music ends)

Damon: And that's the same on every tune on the record. No guitars, nothing acoustic at all. Synth bass, synth drums, keyboards,

(Synth)

Damon: and vocals, because I wanted it to be in the future. And the future for me has always been synthetic digital. Record narrative is really important, and on this record in particular, the narrative arc is imagining something in the near future, which happened in America, that really turned everything up on its head, and made people feel very uncertain about their future. And let's make a party record about the night that that happens.

(Beat joins)

Damon: So, it's in the future. It's futuristic, it's fantasy, it's imaginary.

(Beat ends)

Damon: Or is it [laughter]?

(Keyboard with synth)

Damon: So I've got a very basic chord sequence together, and my usual way, it usually involves a dominant minor chord and a subservient major chord. I try to make all my pop music in the minor key.

(Vocals join: "When the pulsing looks to die for / Take it in your heart now, lover")

(Music ends)

Damon: This song actually ended up being, it was a very personal song. I mean, I've never said this before. And I mean, on the record it's, next to the song "Andromeda," it says, "For Ethel." Now Ethel is the deceased mother of my partner. And she was very, very ill when I first sat down at the piano. And I was just thinking about her, you know, and it all just came out in one splurge. All those lyrics just came out, was just one take, the whole thing.

(Vocals: "When the pulsing looks to die for / Take it in your heart now, lover")

Damon: The first line of the song is, "When the pulsing looks to die for," when she was, you know, in her last few hours, I went to see her in the hospital. As tragic as it was, her passing final look and words to me were so beautiful and uplifting. They stayed with me and, you know, overwhelmed me at one point while I was

writing. Thinking of her, I started thinking about Bobby Womack as well who'd passed away two years previously.

(Vocals: "When the courts were closing / It was Bobby gracing / I know that")

Damon: And I just sort of started thinking about all these beautiful people that I've known have passed away. And so, you know, when I said, "Make it for the best times and the growing pains, the good times, the good times."

(Vocals: "Make it for the best times / Growing pains, good times / Good times, good times / Good times")

(Vocals fade)

Damon: I remember being in tears as I sang that, because I was with them at that moment. And that's why it's got that emotional tug on it. I didn't know what I was singing. It was improvised, but it felt so poignant at that moment.

(Vocals: "Take it in your heart / Take it in your heart")

Damon: I felt like, you know, it was, "Take the worst possible outcome, and be brave and remember all the goodness that preceded that. All the beauty that preceded that."

(Vocals: "Take it in your heart now, lover")

Damon: So it just came out in one splurge, and then, over the months, I tried to articulate that into something that made more sense, but realized, at the end of the day, that it was an honest thing, lyrically and vocally. That's how I sang it. That is it. The improvised vocal take. And I spent literally a fucking year trying to get it right only to go back to the thing I did in like two minutes. It's really annoying. I mean, sometimes you have to kind of put yourself through that kind of torturous process, just to really know that what you did originally was the right thing. But I tried lots of different versions of that song. We did a version with Rag'n'Bone Man that didn't work. We did a version with Christine and the Queens that didn't work. We did a whole version with D.R.A.M. that didn't work.

(D.R.A.M. version)

(Music ends)

D.R.A.M.: Hey, it's your guy, Big Baby D.R.A.M., as featured on the great Gorillaz "Andromeda." I got a random call from my manager like, "Are you down to work with Damon Albarn and the Gorillaz? And I'm like, "Fuck, yeah."

Damon: The nature of Gorillaz is collaboration. I could do it on my own, but I enjoy having people around, and enjoy comradery of that. All the laughter. I don't know. It's just cooler. Because I mean, I wanted to make a party record, and you can't make a party record on your own, can you?

D.R.A.M.: So then, he's like, "Alright, I'm sending the track over, and I swear [mimics beat]

(Beat)

D.R.A.M.: I instantly loved it, because I'm a fan of four-on-the-floor, groove-y sounds. They literally just sent it saying, you know, "do what you feel."

Damon: I always think that it's better if people write words from their own heart and their own experience. So I encourage people just to do their own thing.

D.R.A.M.: I really appreciated that too, so I just, you know, did my thing, sent it over.

Damon: He's a really lovely guy. It's like very open and honest, and a song like this, which is very heartfelt, needed that kind of vibe. It's really cool what he did. But, you know, we realized that actually all the chorus needed to be was that really lovely keyboard line that goes [mimics keyboard].

(Keyboard)

Damon: And then, "Take it in your"

(Vocals join: "Take it in your heart, heart, heart, heart")

Damon: Just that simplicity, that space was all that was needed.

(Vocals with keyboard: "Take it in your heart / Take it in your heart, heart, heart / Where it all goes down")

(Music ends)

Damon: And the bit that he did in the bridge, we kept because that was really

(Synth)

Damon: strong.

(Vocals join: "Back to when it was cool / 'Cause there's no substitute / Who even knows the truth? / The truth, the truth / Andromeda, Andromeda / Andromeda, Andromeda")

Damon: The word "Andromeda" comes from two places. Andromeda is the name of a nightclub in Colchester in the early 1980s, where I used to go on a Friday night. And it was the only place in the whole of the town. I was a teenager, and they played soul music. So there's a connection between the music I used to hear there,

(Synth)

Damon: and the feeling and the spirit of the music I was trying to evoke. And also, Ethel, the deer Ethel was very into astronomy. And I imagined her spirit, her soul being somewhere in a distant constellation now. When I look up at the sky, because I know she looked up at the sky all the time, so I think of her when I look at the stars. I loved this woman dearly and, you know, and I miss her still a lot. So, you know, it's kind of, it's nice that that exists, and I can think about her when I sing it.

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Andromeda," by Gorillaz ft. D.R.A.M., in its entirety.

("Andromeda" by GORILLAZ ft. D.R.A.M.)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net/gorillaz for a link to buy this song, to watch the music video, and to learn more about Gorillaz.
Song Exploder is produced by me, along with Christian Koons. Special thanks this episode to Zach McNees for engineering Damon Albarn's interview. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a curated network of extraordinary, cutting edge podcasts made possible by the Knight Foundation and listeners like you. Learn more at radiotopia.fm. Next time on Song Exploder, Aimee Mann.

("Patient Zero" by AIMEE MANN)

Hrishikesh: You can find 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.

("Patient Zero" by AIMEE MANN)

(Music fades)

Damon: Well, I've enjoyed it enormously, but I think it's time to terminate this very, very in-depth analysis of my music-making process [laughter], before I destroy the whole myth completely [laughter].

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