

Song Exploder
Jack Johnson - You Can't Control It
Episode 132

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.

("You Can't Control It" by JACK JOHNSON)

Hrishikesh: Jack Johnson is a Grammy-nominated singer-songwriter from Hawaii. He's had four number one albums on the Billboard charts. In September 2017, he released his seventh album, *All the Light Above It Too*, and in this episode, Jack Johnson breaks down one of the songs from that album. It's about parenting, politics, and the ocean. It's called "You Can't Control It."

("You Can't Control It" by JACK JOHNSON)

Jack: I'm Jack Johnson and happy to be here.

(Music fades)

Jack: This song, it started from a little jam that my good friend Zach Gill, that Zach and I had made. He's got this little space in his garage. We go in there sometimes and just jam around, make noises and stuff, and this one day I jumped on the drums,

(Drums)

Jack: and he started playing on the keys.

(Keyboard joins)

Jack: And then I added a little bass part to it.

(Bass joins)

Jack: Zach, we're like brothers. He was born on the same day, same year, everything. We've been friends since we were 18. We would get together and stay up all night, and like get a 4-track out, write down ideas, and then try to sing them. And I learned a lot from that. He was the first person I ever met where, you

know, I felt that comfort to share lyrics with and those kind of things. I love playing the drums. Probably my favorite instrument to play, but I'm pretty limited in my drum beats. But it's just so meditative to just sit there and get into a groove.

(Guitar joins)

Jack: So, we're just goofing around and I think it was time for dinner, and we're like, "Don't forget that idea, let's just put it down." Yeah, he sent it to me like a month later. He's like, "Hey, remember this jam?" And I was thinking, "Ah, it's nice." So when I started making the record, I played it for my friend Robbie that was helping me produce, Robbie Lackritz. And he dug the groove but the first thing that Robbie said when I played it to him was like, "Ah that's cool, but we have got to get rid of those 90's drums,

(Music ends)

Jack: sounds like every 90's hit right there." And I was like, "No way, that's like James Brown "Funky Drummer" beat.

("Funky Drummer" by JAMES BROWN)

Jack: He's like, "Nah,

(Music ends)

Jack: not at all." [laughter] He was like, "That's more the "Wonderwall" beat."

("Wonderwall" by OASIS)

(Music ends)

Jack: And so anyways, I was like, "Alright, whatever," I was a little offended but

Hrishikesh: [laughter]

Jack: not that much. So, when we started, I went with like a cross stick on the snare.

(Drums)

Jack: And instead of trying to use my foot, which is pretty clumsy, I just took the mallet and hit the kick drum with my hand, just started with the [imitates kick rhythm].

(Drums)

Jack: So then I would go with the hi-hat, and it was nice because I could use 2 hands on it, and [imitates hi-hat rhythm].

(Drums)

Jack: You know, I could do all these things that I can't do if I'm sitting behind the drums. We just kept layering it.

(Drums)

(Drums end)

Jack: And then, we were kind of both thinking like, *It needs a little more like ambience, a little more ethereal kind of a feel.* We had this old-school tape machine, Robbie patched it in through the tape.

(Beat)

Jack: As soon as it came through that machine, I was like "Oh! record that! That sounds so cool," and then he started doing those, like I don't even know what they're called, where you kind of throw it,

(Beat ends)

Jack: [imitates tape machine noises]. Every time on the snare, he was like cranking it up and like throwing it.

(Beat)

Jack: The guitar part was the next part I added on. I played so much alone that I used to try to fill a lot of the space with my guitar on tracks. All on the acoustic guitar, and so that's been kind of something nice over the years is just starting to realize like, "Oh yeah, guitar doesn't need to be on everything, you know, pull it out a little bit." So this one is cool because it didn't have any kind of rhythm guitar track.

(Acoustic guitar)

Jack: I like the way an acoustic kind of grounds it, you know, and then the electric is that one that has a nice sustain.

(Electric guitar joins)

(Guitars end)

Jack: It's the first time I've worked with Robbie in the studio. And it was fun, Robbie brought his family over too, so we were on the exact same schedules. Robbie and I would shape sounds and stuff in the day, and then be finished around dinner time. Sometimes we'd be really excited to get back in there, so we'd get the kids to bed and like, "K, call me when your kids are down, I'll call you when mine are down," and then we'd get back in the studio. A lot of times I would write the words back at home at night because I was thinking about how your environment influences your music, like the noises you hear.

(Ocean sound)

Jack: I live in Hawaii. And so for me, it's like I hear a lot of this wave hitting the sand, real soft in the summertime. And it's like it happens about every 12 seconds. Shhhhh.

(Ocean sound)

Jack: And it's a pretty relaxing slow sound.

(Ocean sound ends)

Jack: So yeah, the ocean's a big part of my kids' life too. Yeah, I have a 13-year-old, an 11-year-old, and a 7-year-old, and they know the ocean's really powerful. They see it when it's really calm and they can snorkel and it's, you know, very inviting, then they see it where there's like days that it's coming up over the bank, and underneath our house, and like pulling trees down, you know, it's just like a monster that you have to just stay away from. And so, they see every side of it.

(Bass with drums)

Jack: So then, I was thinking about trying to explain things to my children sometimes.

(Guitar joins)

Jack: Things you see on the news, things you read in books. And you do your best as a father.

(Guitar ends)

Jack: But every once in a while, I think it's the best thing just to admit, it's like, "Look dad don't know everything. We're just little beings out here in the middle of this vast universe that goes on and on, and we have no idea where it ends." And so, that's kind of what this song is to me, is like a dad telling his kid, "I'm going to do my best, but in the end, understand one thing: like once you drink from this ocean, you can't control it. You know, just life itself."

(Vocals with percussion: "Understand one thing / If and when you drink from this vast ocean / You can't control it / Na, na")

Jack: Then I added the guitar line, the vocals do, in the chorus.

(Guitar)

Jack: There was this one sound Robbie found that I really liked, it was kind of like [makes blowing noise], it was almost more air than it was a tone, you know. It sound kind of like watery, almost.

(Synth)

Jack: That's the OP-1, it's just like little small keyboard. That's Robbie's little tool, it's very funny because it always has these strange sounds. Like sometimes you hear like, [makes chirping noises], "Like come on man, give me something I can [laughter] like relate to. But once I heard that the first time I really liked it.

(Synth)

(Synth ends)

Jack: It's a really interesting time in our country right now, there's a lot of division. And the political climate definitely influenced even a song like this. The verses become a little bit about thinking about people who are in charge of things, and maybe taking a whole culture into a war. Sometimes you look at these people making those decisions and you think, *What's wrong with this person?* I don't know yeah, so that's where it began, it's like, "Did your mum forget to tuck you in?"

(Vocals: "Mom forget to tuck you in / Make you begin a war within your head / One that you could never win")

Jack: To me, it was like trying to be empathetic with somebody like that, since I'm kind of singing to my own children in this song. I tried to take it all the way back to when they were a child. Even though, like, your first instinct is to be like, "What a jerk." I mean, it's not going to be empathetic to the point where I pretend to agree with it or anything, but I think it's important to go deeper.

(Synth)

Jack: It's really about anybody who wants to build any kind of walls that are going to divide us: by race, by culture. I mean I grew up in Hawaii, it's a very multicultural place, like I've learned so much, made my life so much richer. So whenever I feel anti something, I try to like quickly catch myself and say, "Okay, well, if I'm against these ideas, then what ideas am I for?" You know, and I try to at least come from this place of, if you're going to try tear something down, what are you trying to build?

Hrishikesh: Have you actually sung the song to your kids?

Jack: Yeah, they've heard it, they've heard all the songs. They are really sweet about letting Dad play the songs around the house a lot to listen to mixes. I'll put them on like while they're doing

(Guitar joins)

Jack: homework, and just by the end, it's funny, I hear them singing all the words.

(Synth ends)

Jack: For me, music has always been a very family thing, even before I had my own kids. I learned how to play guitar on the front porch, and like in the living room where it was always a lot of people around. My grandma used to live next door, and she was always at our house. And my brother's kids were always around. It was just real natural for me to always

(Synth with guitar)

Jack: kind of write in a way of knowing, "My grandma's going to hear these songs. My kids are going to hear these songs." I'm going to sing all these songs at my house at some point with everybody around.

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "You Can't Control It," by Jack Johnson, in its entirety.

("You Can't Control It" by JACK JOHNSON)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net to learn more about Jack Johnson, and for links to buy or stream this song.

This episode was produced by me, along with Christian Koons, with help from intern Olivia Wood. Carlos Lerma creates original illustrations for each episode of the podcast, which you can see on the Song Exploder website or Instagram. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a curated network of creative, independent podcasts made possible by listeners like you. Learn more at radiotopia.fm. Let me know what you thought of this episode. You can find the show on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter @SongExploder. You can also leave a review or a rating on Apple Podcasts. My name's Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.