

Song Exploder
James Vincent McMorrow - Get Low
Episode 86

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.

("Get Low" by JAMES VINCENT MCMORROW)

Hrishikesh: James Vincent McMorrow is a singer-songwriter whose first albums fell somewhere on the folk music side of things. But his sound has changed over the years, incorporating elements of R&B and electronic music. On the album *We Move*, James worked with the producer Nineteen85, whose credits include tracks by Drake and Nicki Minaj. In this episode, James breaks down the song, "Get Low," from that record and how it was inspired by Clipse, minimalism, and Los Angeles.

("Get Low" by JAMES VINCENT MCMORROW)

James: My name is James Vincent McMorrow.

(Music fades)

James: I tend to base everything off of rhythm initially. Like this song was based on a drum pattern.

(Beat with percussion)

James: That was the inception of the song. And it was a total Neptune's thing like with the little like bongo and the conga hits.

(Beat with percussion)

James: It was like totally me doing like a silly, little Pharrell thing.

("Grindin'" by CLIPSE)

James: Like "Grindin'" by Clipse.

("Grindin'" by CLIPSE)

James: I would go [laughter] so far as to call out that like the perfect song. It's just like there's no music in it until this tiny little thing comes in at one point.

("Grindin'" by CLIPSE)

(Music fades)

James: It's such a perfectly executed track, isn't it? You know, what's crazy about that song, the first keyboard I ever owned was like a Korg Triton. And if you go to, I think it's Percussion Bank 1 on the presets that come within it, the first four keys on the left-hand side are the entire beat for "Grindin'" by Clipse.

(Beat)

James: And that was like a huge thing for me when I was a kid, because it was just like when you want to produce or you want to like make beats, and you grow up loving hip hop production, it's such a hard thing to figure out. Because like there's so much gear you need to buy, and there's so much learning you need to do. But it was just like, "I don't need to own an MPC or be super proficient in how to cut up a sample."

(Beat with percussion)

(Music ends)

James: So I just liked the energy of the drum pattern. And then, I had the chorus pattern. It was like a right-hand part, like a Rhodes thing that I had written one day.

(Rhodes, bass, and beat)

James: And it was like, "Okay, there's a song there."

(Music fades)

James: I decided to get out of Dublin for a while, and see something different. And I really liked it. It was just, I'm sitting in like an alien environment like with not like my full range of gear. It's a good way for me to like find a different way of working that put me in an uncomfortable position, and I had no choice but to face it. Because when you're at home and you've got your studio, it's

comfortable, and it's nice, and you can, I can pull up anything that I need within five minutes. It was like, "Let's see what happens when you're just working on a one octave keyboard, and you've got a guitar and a crappy mic."

(Guitar)

James: When I started writing on the guitar, it was all based around this like A minor, E minor, F major thing. And it got busier and busier.

(Bass and beat join)

James: I was in that vein of just like doing what I do historically, which is just like adding a lot of ideas. Like, what else can I fit in this song? What else can I do? Which was grand, but it just wasn't what I wanted the songs to ultimately be on this record.

(Music ends)

James: I knew I couldn't produce this record myself because I just wouldn't, like those demos, that's where I had it. And I would've gone in the studio, and I would have probably kept it quite similar. So that's how it sort of came to be. Nineteen85 produced this song. I knew 85 through his work on the Drake record, on *Nothing Was the Same*. And when I sent the stems to 85, I actually left the guitars out of what I sent him. There was a part of my brain that thought like, *Ah, I don't think that 85 will be into the guitars*. He was listening to it, and he was like, "Yeah, it's cool, but, you know, but something else needs to be there." And I just pulled them up, and was like, "Well, I had this."

(Guitar)

James: And he was like, "Yeah, that's the song. That's it." The guitar is the beating heart of the record until the 808 comes in.

(Beat)

James: Drums are what 85 does incredibly well.

(Beat ends)

James: Because I had written the bassline on the Prophet 6, and it kind of had this sort of, I guess, west coast, almost like Bay Area feel to it.

(Synth bass)

James: But it needed something more aggressive underneath it.

(Synth bass with 808)

James: When I used to hear like tuned 808s on tracks, I'm like, "How do people do that?" 808 is 85's world.

(808)

James: And we just like added some distortion to it, and filtered it out a little bit. And then, he tuned it, so it just follows the bassline.

(808)

James: 85 was great.

(Horns)

James: He really brought it down to like the bare bones of what it needed to be, which is like a singer-songwriter song with an 808 underneath it, which is the thing I've been going for my entire life.

(Horns end)

James: My process on the two records, previous to this, has been work on music, and then work on lyrics. And I wanted to try and force myself to get in the rhythm of writing lyrics quicker.

(Vocals: "I love the way your heart had no rules / Loving what your heart becomes")

James: "I love the way your heart had no rules / Loving what your heart becomes." The thing with like songwriting is like, you always tell yourself every time you finish your records, you're like, "I'm never going to say the word "love." I'm never going to say the word "heart" again." Because I probably got three or four songs where the word "heart" has like a pretty prominent role in the chorus. And you

just think, *I'm never going to use that word again because it's played out to me.* But there's no better word to use. For that, what you're trying to say there, so it just was a thing. I wrote it down, and was like, "Ah, I'm going to write another heart song? I can't do that." But I just couldn't find a better, you know, sometimes you just can't replace the thing. Sometimes it just needs to be a heart lyric. So it's just, that's what worked.

(Vocals: "I love the way you hang with no fools / Loving what your heart becomes")

James: When it comes to reverb and like how dry a vocal is, my experience has been that the better I've gotten, the less reverb I've used. And I have gotten better as a vocalist, and I'm more at ease with my vocal being front and center. And I've worked a long time to get to that point. So the idea of then like wrapping it up in reverb seemed redundant to me at this point. I wanted the lead vocal to be very unadorned.

(Vocals: "Heard you're getting married / Everybody says")

James: But I still wanted these harmonies to be in the song somewhere, so the idea I had was to have like a call and response. So they are the response to the lead vocal. So they cut in really harsh.

(Vocals: "Heard you're getting married (Get low) / Everybody says (Get low) / (I could never show, I could never show) / (Get low)")

James: Nineteen85, when we were first talking about working on the record, and we were sending ideas back and forth, and then he had this guitar thing buried really deep in it. And I was like, "What is that?"

(Guitar)

James: And he messaged me back, and he was like, "Oh, it was like kind of a joke. Like I just had this guitar that I'd recorded so I just cut it up in Ableton, and like flipped the notes around to fit your song."

(Guitar ends)

James: I was like, "That has to be the thing." It's a lean section, and having like a screaming electric guitar over it, like it will elicit reaction. Like when people hear this song, everybody first reacted to it, was just like, "That guitar part though like

where did that come from?" That's great to me. Yeah, we found it funny when we first heard it, but it does have a very like visceral, reactive sense to it, which is something that it's hard to get.

(Guitar with beat)

(Music ends)

James: I came to LA, because LA was like the place I'd always wanted to kind of hang out to make music. "Get Low" was very much about my LA experience. When I first wrote the title down, it elicited quite a funny response because obviously "Get Low" has like connotations with like being in the club. And obviously there's this really famous Lil Jon song from a few years back, which I love.

("Get Low" by LIL JON & THE EAST SIDE BOYZ ft. YING YANG TWINS)

James: But I had watched, there's a Robert Duvall movie from like 2007, 2008 called *Get Low*, which is about a man that like, he organizes his own funeral. And *Get Low*, it's him, he's dying.

(Synth)

James: I love that movie, first of all, I think it's really great. But I really just loved that saying and that idea, you know? I'm not saying that like being in LA to me was like dying or anything, but the idea of growing up, and moving, and change is part of this record, it's in its bones.

(Synth)

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Get Low" by James Vincent McMorrow, in its entirety.

("Get Low" by JAMES VINCENT MCMORROW)

Hrishikesh: For more on James Vincent McMorrow, visit songexploder.net. James brought my band Moors out on tour to open for him a couple years ago. It was great to talk to him again for this episode.

You can find all the past and future episodes of Song Exploder at songexploder.net. This episode was edited by Christian Koons and me. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.

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