

**Song Exploder**  
**Jay Som - Tenderness**  
**Episode 172**

Thao: 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 Thao Nguyen.

*("Tenderness" by JAY SOM)*

Thao: Melina Duterte goes by the name Jay Som. She's a singer, songwriter, and multi-instrumentalist. She's released three albums as Jay Som, and has produced, engineered, and mixed each one. Her third album, *Anak Ko*, came out in August 2019. And in this episode, Melina breaks down a song from it called "Tenderness."

*("Tenderness" by JAY SOM)*

Melina: I'm Melina from Jay Som.

*(Music fades out)*

Melina: I started writing "Tenderness" summer of 2018. I just moved to LA, and I was doing a lot of like production work for other people. This artist came over to like work with me for her whole record. And there was one day where I had to clean her entire hard drive, and I noticed that there was a folder that said "Vintage Drum Machines." And I just like copied and pasted it onto my computer because I was like, "Well, it's right there [laughter]." She doesn't know that, but it's okay [laughter]. And I just like experimented with all of those. I started off by recording this Linn LM-1 drum machine.

*(Drum machine)*

Melina: That's like the Prince drum sampler, and I know he used that on like all the hits. And at the time, I was listening to a lot of Steely Dan. They make a lot of songs that have like a shuffley beat, and I wanted to emulate that, because you don't get to hear that often, especially in like pop music too. Just like [Melina beatboxes the beat].

*(Drum machine)*

Melina: And I thought it'd be really cool to have this languid guitar part that strums as if it's a piano.

*(Guitar along with drum machine)*

Melina: Just [Melina sings the guitar part] just pretty, like minor seventh chords.

*(Drum machine fades)*

*(Guitar)*

Melina: The concept and like the meaning of the track came as I was writing it. Those chords are used in lots of like R&B songs. And it just felt right to like make a song about love.

*(Guitar ends)*

Melina: I was trying to like conceptualize this idea of sitting in your bed thinking about your new romantic partner that you just started dating, and you're kind of like wondering if they're thinking about you and wondering if you're like their right person.

*(First verse vocals along with guitar and drum machine: "Tell me / Did you fall in at first glance? / Do you think you'll take a chance? / Do you think on the weekend I could know?)*

Melina: As I was doing the vocals, I really wanted that lo-fi effect. I imagine myself on my bed with like a old telephone, and you're kind of like speaking into the telephone. I really wanted that conversational feeling as if like you're either leaving a voicemail or you're the only one that's speaking, and you really want to put your heart on the line.

*(Second verse vocals: "Show me / Before you haunt me on the screen / Will my affection pull the strings? / Another forgotten memory")*

*(Guitar along with drum machine)*

Melina: And that was originally supposed to be the whole song. It was going to be like a minute and 30 seconds. It was going to be like the intro of that and one chorus.

*(Chorus vocals along with drum machine, guitars and bass: I'm feeling like we've just begun / Nothing's ever good enough / Tenderness is all I've got")*

Melina: But I sat with the demo for a couple months, and it just didn't sound right to me.

*(Demo ends)*

Melina: That was the first time for like an album-making process where I had demos. Usually when I write songs, I record them at the same time because I really like having the idea in my head and going through with it. But, this time, I started to get like a little frustrated because I was writing songs that I couldn't play, when it like goes into the part with the drum fill and it comes into the rest of the song.

*(Pre-chorus into the chorus transition)*

Melina: That's just like drum samples and it started sounding too like rigid, it didn't have like a flow. And that's when I decided like I need to have Zach play drums on it.

*(Drums)*

Melina: That is my touring mate, Zach. We've been playing music together since middle school and high school like in jazz bands and like concert bands and indie cover bands. We just went up to his parents' house in our hometown, which is in the East Bay area. They have like this bonus room that he has his drum set in, and he usually records music in there because it's always quiet.

*(Drums)*

Melina: I just set up some mics on his drums, and he just like nailed it. He did more to it than I would if I played the drums. More taste and style and like flavor.

*(Drums end)*

Melina: So I had the drums for "Tenderness," and I was super happy because I was like, "Oh, I can finally have it sound the way that I want it to." And then I went back to LA, and started doing bass.

*(Bass)*

Melina: Bass is my favorite instrument to play. I started playing the bass after I like really learned guitar. And then I realized that the bass was the most important instrument in every song. I think it just like has so much meaning in like the foundation of a song. It like really drives and like motivates the groove of it. With the bass, you can just do the roots. But I think I always like to do a little more. I like little nuggets of jazzy notes that work in the chord progression.

*(Bass along with with guitar)*

Melina: And I think it like gives it like a really cool flow.

*(Guitar along with bass end)*

Melina: Most of the guitar tracks were done in Joshua Tree. I rented this house for like a week.

*(Intro guitar)*

Melina: So the intro guitar, I wanted it to sound like the guitar was coming from an old record player, to sound like vintage. And then I wanted to introduce these new elements for guitar layering to make the intro build a little more. So I played through a cleaner setting, and put like a tremolo on it, and that was panned left.

*(Second guitar)*

Melina: And then the end of the intro introduces like another guitar, panned to the right.

*(Third guitar)*

Melina: And then for the first chorus, I added in a guitar with a Leslie effect.

*(Fourth guitar)*

Melina: I love layering guitars. I think that is the secret to making a song sound lush.

*(All guitars together)*

Melina: The Wurlitzer was done in Joshua Tree as well.

*(Wurlitzer)*

Melina: I thought that the Wurlitzer would really like serve its purpose as being like a Steely Dan part of the song. It just has that like classic electric piano sound that can make the song come to life. It like brings a certain energy that like a guitar doesn't bring.

*(Wurlitzer plays then fades)*

Melina: I grew up playing jazz trumpet and throughout that time, I was like really heavily invested in like music theory and like learning about everything. I've always had the mindset that like music can speak for itself and music can tell a story and like evoke the sort of emotion that lyrics and vocals can't. So I just wanted to have an instrumental passage rather than like more lyrics in the bridge of the song.

*(Bridge)*

Melina: I did the final vocals for "Tenderness" right before I turned in my album. That was the only song where I was like, "I don't know if I'm going to release this, because I don't know if I'm singing it good or anything like that." And I think there was just a moment where I like forced myself to keep doing the vocal takes over and over again for like hours, and I had like hot tea with me at all times so that I can like coat my throat to like sing it, because I'm not, I don't consider myself like a singer or like someone that can belt. But if I can sing sweetly, I will.

*(Chorus vocals: "I'm feeling like we've just begun / Nothing's ever good enough / Tenderness is all I've got")*

Melina: I got my friend, Taylor Vick, to sing harmonies. I really admire her voice and can relate to the way that she records her voice. She sings really quietly, kind of in a whispery fashion.

*(Taylor vocals: "I'm feeling like we've just begun")*

Melina: I also got that style from learning about like how you can make your voice sound bigger by singing quietly. And I just think our voices sound really cool together.

*(Melina's vocals along with Taylor's vocals: "I'm feeling like we've just begun / Nothing's ever good enough / Tenderness is all I've got")*

*(Guitar)*

Melina: I think when you're starting off in a new relationship, you feel the effects of like puppy love. You're like obsessed with this person, and you're always thinking about them, and everything you do together is really important, like where you go out to eat and like the sort of vacations that you take. You feel like you're in this environment that's like yours. You feel like you're sinking and you can't get out of that. It's just sort of like you're falling in love.

*(Guitars)*

Melina: It feels really good to write songs that are about being loving and showing like that you can be vulnerable and emotional in relationships, and actively wanting people to know that you love them rather than like being emo, I guess [laughter]. I can write songs about being emo anytime [laughter].

*(Guitars end)*

Thao: And now, here is “Tenderness,” by Jay Som, in its entirety.

*(“Tenderness” by JAY SOM)*

Thao: Visit [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net) for more information about Jay Som. You’ll also find a link to buy or stream this song.  
Song Exploder is made by executive producer Hrishikesh Hirway, producer Christian Koons, and me, I’m guest hosting for 2019, production assistance from Olivia Wood, and illustrations by Carlos Lerma. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a curated collective of independent, creative podcasts. You can learn about all of our shows at [radiotopia.fm](http://radiotopia.fm). You can also follow Song Exploder on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter @SongExploder. And you can follow me @thaogetstaydown. I’m Thao Nguyen, thanks so much for listening.