

**Song Exploder**  
**Jhené Aiko - Sativa ft. Swae Lee**  
**Episode 139**

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.

Hrishikesh: This episode contains explicit language.

*("Sativa" by JHENÉ AIKO ft. SWAE LEE)*

Hrishikesh: Jhené Aiko is a Grammy-nominated singer and songwriter. She's released three albums so far, and in addition to her own records, she's been a featured guest vocalist on songs by Kendrick Lamar, Drake, Childish Gambino, and many others. In 2017, she released her third album, *Trip*, which debuted at #5 on the Billboard Charts, and includes the song "Sativa." "Sativa" features guest vocals from Swae Lee, who's one half of the band Rae Sremmurd. In this episode, Jhené tells the story of how "Sativa" was first made, and how it got stuck, and then, how it got unstuck. I spoke to her along with producer Brian Warfield of the production duo Fisticuffs, who made the beat.

*("Sativa" by JHENÉ AIKO ft. SWAE LEE)*

Jhené: My name is Jhené Aiko.

Brian: My name's Brian Warfield. I'm a producer and one half of Fisticuffs.

*(Music fades)*

Jhené: Fisticuffs are Mac and Brian. They produced my first mixtape, and the majority of all of my albums. So yeah, they're my guys.

Brian: We started with the chords.

*(Synth pad)*

Brian: Just the airy chords.

*(Synth pad)*

Brian: That specific sound was like a chord stab that I found, and from there just pitched it to different keys. With Jhené, it's like, that's kind of like the vibe that we set, it's just real airy, smooth. Her vocal tone is just so smooth that we kind of like to play off that. But at the same time, we like to have the bass in there.

*(Bass joins)*

Brian: Stuff that hits, you know, it's kind of like to juxtapose. You have the smooth vocals with just the grimy beat underneath.

*(Beat joins)*

Brian: So actually that was a drum loop that I found.

*(Bass and synth pad end)*

*(Beat)*

Brian: And I chopped it up a little bit, and then I added my own, other drums on top of it too.

*(Percussion)*

Brian: There's like some snaps, extra hi-hats, just like percussion to kind of fill it in.

*(Beat joins)*

Brian: And then the little vocal sample came in.

*(Beat ends)*

*(Vocal sample)*

Brian: A lot of times, you know, when you buy a keyboard, they're set with stock sounds that everybody can use. But taking the vocal hit like that and then pitching it out, and turning that into like a keyboard sound, now it's like you have your own original sound.

*(Vocal sample)*

Brian: And then play it for Jhené, see if she likes it.

*(Vocal sample)*

*(Synth pad, bass, and beat)*

Jhené: Whenever I go to the Fisticuffs studio, it's always just like visiting my brothers. Brian was just playing me tracks. And that one stood out because he'd named it "Sativa." And sativa happens to be my favorite strain of weed. I heard the beat and I was like, "Definitely, I want that. I have to write to this."

*(Music fades)*

Jhené: But I didn't know what I was going to say. So I did a scratch vocal. I went in and just did a melody, I had no, well I had a few words, but really no direction. I wanted it to be really simple and like easy, so I said, "I'ma keep it simple with you, baby."

*(Vocals with synth pad, bass, and beat: "I'ma keep it simple with you, baby / You know I don't ever play no games")*

Jhené: And then, it was like gibberish.

*(Vocals with synth pad, bass, and beat)*

Brian: As soon as she laid the melodies, I said, "Okay, good, like there's a vibe here."

Jhené: And definitely around that time, there was no pressure to like finish up a project, or put anything out. So that track was something that I revisited like every couple of months. Because that's what I like to do, I like to just get the track, play it in my car when I'm driving around so that I can really think of a cool melody, a cool concept, nothing forced. You know, something that just comes with me, that just flows. And I just really enjoyed listening to the track even without me singing on it.

*(Music fades)*

Brian: But there's a thing called demo-itis. When you sit with something for so long, sometimes you kind of get stuck, and so it could be hard to step away from that.

Jhené: And everyone would be like, “You should just put this out with no words! People could just make up their own words.” So I was living with it, and I was just like, “Oh, like I just, I’m stuck to this melody but I don’t know what to say.” And I pretty much had it for like a year [laughter], listened to the melody for like a year. And now we’re in album mode. I was in the studio with Amaire Johnson, another producer working on another song for *Trip*, the album. And we were just talking about like what’s missing from the album, and I pulled up “Sativa.” And he’s like, “You know who would sound really good on this? Swae Lee.”

*(“No Flex Zone” by RAE SREMMURD)*

Jhené: And I was like, “Oh my god, that’s such a great idea, because I’m a big fan of Rae Sremmurd.”

*(“No Flex Zone” by RAE SREMMURD)*

Jhené: I don’t listen to a lot of new music or know a lot of new artists so when he said that I was like, “Oh I know him!” Like and I actually know their songs, and I really am a fan. From the first song I heard of theirs, I was like, “Oh, who is this?” Just their voices alone, like the tone. They sounded like 12 years old but I loved it. They just reminded me of like, kittens.

*(Music stops)*

Jhené: I know that’s weird, I love kittens though, like kittens are like my life.

*(“No Flex Zone” by RAE SREMMURD)*

Jhené: And so, Amaire, he like set it up.

*(Music fades)*

Jhené: This was happening at No I.D.’s studio.

Brian: That’s where Swae Lee came and met us at.

Jhené: He came in, and then I pulled up “Sativa,” and I was like, “This is what I had in mind for you.” He loved it. And he’s just like, “Alright, let me go in there right now.” So my expectation was that Swae Lee was going to come into the studio

and like do a verse, like sixteen bars. But he goes in and just does like a complete song.

Brian: He was like, "Alright boom, let me get another track." So he pretty much did like three tracks like all the way down.

Jhené: And I'm like, [gasps]. He was freestyling, you know, but it was like, it all made sense. And it was very exciting because I don't work like that, you know what I mean, like I take my time but he just came in and was like super fast. From there, I got to select what I wanted to keep of his vocals. We sort of just sort through them and like treat it like a puzzle, like, "Oh maybe this section should go here, or no, maybe it should go here," and we like play around with it. And then, Brian, he'll chop it up to where it's like a song.

Brian: "Okay, like now this is the hook, and then, let's make this the verse."

Jhené: And Swae Lee essentially came up with the hook.

*(Vocals with synth pad: "Why you make it so complicated? / Off the drink, we concentratin' / I know you won't leave me hangin' / Smokin' weed out the container")*

Brian: We've been sitting with it for so long that it was nice to just have like a new spark to it.

Jhené: He just set the tone. Like okay we're at a party, it's sexy, we're smoking weed.

Brian: So, the first chorus is only Swae Lee. And then, the second one, Jhené puts a harmony on top of Swae Lee's chorus.

*(Vocals with harmony and synth pad: "Why you make it so complicated? / Off the drink, we concentratin' / I know you won't leave me hangin' / Smokin' weed out the container")*

Brian: So that just gives it a little different vibe.

Jhené: And then the last hook is us going back and forth.

*(Vocals with synth pad: "We spend cash for our entertainment / There's more where that came from, that's all I'm sayin' / It's me and you and we makin' arrangements / It's you and me and we makin' arrangements")*

Jhené: I love his voice, and I love my voice, but I didn't know what they would sound like together, so I was pleasantly surprised when we did the song. You know, because people have good voices, but it's not always compatible with one another. That is really cool when you can find someone that your voices blend really well together. So after [laughter] Swae Lee came through, I had a second wind. I was just inspired, really. He gave me a little more direction when I heard what he had put down, I was like "Oh, oh, I got it!"

*(Vocals with beat: "Is it hot in here or is it just me? / I'm so high in here, been smokin' on this weed / Told 'em, "Go on, take a shot on three" / Told 'em, "Drinks is on me"")*

*(Beat)*

Jhené: And then I got to work in "sativa" in my second verse. Sativa is known to have more of like a energetic, creative feel. I am a low energy type of person naturally, so sativa makes me feel like I want to like sing, I want to write something, and it just gives me some type of energy. So I was like, "Oh I know, I should do something a little more rappy right here."

*(Vocals with beat: "You came through with that sativa / Indica be havin' me stuck / You know just how to keep me up / You know it, better believe it")*

Jhené: My rapper spirit just came through. So yeah, I'm a rapper now [laughter].

*(Vocals with harmony: "You came through with that sativa / Indica be havin' me stuck / You know just how to keep me up / You know it, better believe it")*

Jhené: I'm really specific about how I like my vocals blended. Three part harmony, stack each note. Keep it smooth, put a little reverb on there. The B section is one of the only parts in this song that has harmonies like that.

*(Vocals: "Get ready / And now we're on / I said I'm ready / Hold the phone")*

Jhené: This part sort of like brings that sexy feel. A lot of the times when I perform this part, all the girls in the audience are like doing some type of like body wave, yeah. And I'm like, "Oh, okay, this is what this is giving off [laughter]?" And then after all the harmonies and everything, I do a few adlib tracks.

*(Vocals: "Get ready (oh, yes, I'm ready) / Now we're on (And if we're on) / I said I'm ready (I said I'm ready) / Hold the phone (please hold the phone)")*

Jhené: 90 percent of my songs, I write completely myself. Melody, lyrics, everything. And with my music, I usually am super personal, and it's like a story that has happened, and I'm being like extra real about it. But once I'm done with that song, like sometimes, it's even like I don't even want to perform it, because it's like, "Oh, I've got that off my chest." But for a song like "Sativa," it was just like a completely imagined scenario. And I think that has a lot to do with Swae Lee coming in, like swagging it out. Because I don't really go out to parties and just meet random people, and pay for their drinks [laughter] like I say on the song.

*(Vocals with synth pad: "Why you make it so complicated? / Off the drink, we concentratin' / I know you won't leave me hangin' / Smokin' weed out the container")*

Jhené: But I don't think these two characters are singing to each other, I think they're at the party with the same intentions, and they're both like, on the prowl, on some player shit, like it's not a relationship type of song. They came there like as a duo, I think. They might be like competing for like who's going to get the most numbers by the end of the night. It's just two people on the same wave.

Brian: Spending cash for entertainment.

Jhené: Yeah.

Brian: [laughter]

*(Vocals with synth pad: "We spend cash for our entertainment / There's more where that came from, that's all I'm sayin' / It's me and you and we makin' arrangements / It's you and me and we makin' arrangements")*

*(Music ends)*

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Sativa," by Jhené Aiko ft. Swae Lee, in its entirety.

*("Sativa" by JHENÉ AIKO ft. SWAE LEE)*

Hrishikesh: Visit [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net) to learn more about Jhené Aiko, and for a link to buy or stream this song.

This episode was produced by me, along with Christian Koons, with booking by Mac Burrus, and production help from intern Olivia Wood. The illustrations for Song Exploder are by Carlos Lerma. 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). Let me know your thoughts on this episode. You can find Song Exploder on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter @SongExploder. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.

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