

Song Exploder
Kelly Lee Owens - On
Episode 192

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.

("On" by KELLY LEE OWENS)

Hrishikesh: Kelly Lee Owens is an electronic music producer and songwriter originally from Wales. She's released two critically acclaimed albums and done remixes for Björk and St. Vincent. Her most recent album is called *Inner Song*. It came out in August 2020, following what Kelly described as the three hardest years of her life. In this episode, she takes apart her song "On" and she explains how the song's tone and tempo shifts mirrored her own journey processing her own trauma.

("On" by KELLY LEE OWENS)

Kelly: My name is Kelly Lee Owens.

(Music fades out)

Kelly: The last two or three years before making this album I had been through quite a lot personally. And I would say, you know, suffered a lot of losses which involved a lot of grief. The day I made this song was the day that Keith Flint from The Prodigy passed away and The Prodigy I've loved my whole life, and I think actually it technically counts as having been my first CD single. Yeah, I've loved them for most of my life so when I heard that he passed, it really affected me, and this song in a sense was born of that energy initially. But even though this song was inspired by the passing of Keith Flint, you know, which is a very emotional thing, I often start songs with inspirations from samples that I take.

(iPhone recording of train)

Kelly: So anyone that knows me knows that I am obsessed with capturing sounds. One of the samples that I had laying around in my iPhone was of a train that I recorded like a year earlier. It was at a London station and I was on my way to an airport. It sounded so high definition and there was a specific rhythm. And so, you know, I just whipped out my iPhone and recorded that quickly.

(iPhone recording of train ends)

Kelly: So I'll bring those little samples to the studio and often that can spark an idea. And that sample as a percussive tool, as a hi-hat really stood out, and so I thought that would be a great starting point but the original sample was quite slow

(iPhone recording of train)

Kelly: and this track wasn't necessarily going to be that. I wanted to find a BPM that felt good and then sped up the train sound to sound like a hi-hat or a maraca.

(Train sound sped up)

Kelly: It's just way more exciting to me, at least, to find a sample that sounds like a maraca than actually use a maraca. So we started with that sample and then built up the percussive ideas around that.

(Train-maraca along with beat)

Kelly: Initially this track was called for a very long time, "Spirit of Keith," because I genuinely felt like partly like his spirit was coming through and this kind of like that slight breaky Prodigy influence with the percussion as well.

(Train-maraca along with beat)

Kelly: I knew I wanted a kind of crazy, kind of, you know, quite hard section. But wanted to go into the more kind of melodic stuff.

(Train-maraca and beat end)

(Synth chords)

Kelly: The chord sequences came out very quickly. I feel like they're quite emotional, tinged with sadness but also, you know, quite euphoric.

(Synth chords)

Kelly: I work with James Greenwood who co-wrote and co-produced on this record and it's his synth. It's a synth from 1984 and analog and I just fell in love with it.

(Synths fade out)

Kelly: Once the main chords have been established, there's always like harmonies usually on the same synth just to kind of like enhance and build like a wall of sound.

(Synth harmonies)

Kelly: Kind of like a sonic hug.

(Music ends)

Kelly: I wouldn't romanticize, you know, feeling low or depressed as being the only way that you can access good art. I think we're kind of moving on from that cliché, you know. But I had a body trauma release therapy session and I became very low a week after that. And I was able to really feel all of these things I had been suppressing. And so I could access things more truthfully, and it was actually that week that I happened to be putting aside to write lyrics for the album. And so it was kind of like the floodgates opening.

(Chorus vocals along with synths: "So, this is how it must go / And now I am moving on / Now I am moving on")

Kelly: The words like, "This is how it must go. Now I am moving on," they're quite open, they're quite simple. But it definitely felt like when initially I was singing over the music that that was just what needed to come out. The emotions came through, and I really needed and wanted to be very direct and very honest. It was cathartic for me.

(Music ends)

(Chorus vocals with harmony: "So")

Kelly: When I find like a melody that really works, and lyrics that really work, I then start to build harmonies around that.

(Chorus vocals with harmony: "So, this is how it must go / And now I am moving on / Now I am moving on")

Kelly: When it actually comes to the recording, I can't have anyone in the room. It's really important for me to be able to have that time and space to be able to do that freely. It's a real like intimate experience for me that I really treasure.

(First verse vocals: "Head and heart in unison / We can't go forward")

Kelly: There's a simplicity in the melody where it sometimes feels like a, not a lullaby, but it has that quality to it, you know, where it's like kind of holding a dreamy emotional space for you.

(Synth)

Kelly: My favorite lyrics in this is, "Can only love as deeply as you see yourself." And this was something that like going through therapy and my personal situations that I had been through is like I realize like someone can only love you as deeply as they're willing to see themselves. We all have that responsibility and the deeper you go into that, the deeper I feel you can actually truly love.

(First verse vocals: "Can only love as deeply as you see yourself / And you don't see me / You don't see me")

Kelly: I don't think I've written a breakup song before. Sometimes you know you feel like that oversimplifies it because actually, you know, there can be things that come like that are derogatory with that in a sense that people are like, "Oh, another breakup track." But it's more complex than that. The losses I experienced, the most devastating loss I experienced, that was the loss of myself. In the chorus, I just keep going with the harmonies and the layers until I get to the point where I feel like it's emotionally connected. That moment when you can kind of just go like all out, you know?

(Chorus vocals along with all harmonies and synth chords: "So, this is how it must go / And now I am moving on / Now I am moving on")

Kelly: After the second chorus, I mean I was aware that it was quite an emotionally heavy song. And I wanted to almost free myself from what I had created, you know. So while it's important for us emotionally in life as well to like lean into those cracks, I think it's important to have hope. I wanted to create that sonically

and sort of transmute pain and the sense of loss within the sounds of the first half and create this whole other second half that just allows you to move on.

(Siren sound)

Kelly: As the second chorus ends, there's a synth. But purposely made it sound like a siren as a clack sound like, "Okay, here we go. We're moving from one state of being to another. We're moving from one phase to the next phase." And then the kick comes in.

(Kick joins the siren sound)

Kelly: And it just becomes quite in your face.

(Kick along with bass and synths)

Kelly: Just being like, "Right, here we go. We get on with this."

(More drum elements join)

Kelly: So the chorus is saying, "Now I am moving on." The second half was the moving on bit and celebrating that with movement.

(Drum beat)

Kelly: I believe we store traumas in the body and it's well known that kind of movement can shift a lot. So I wanted it to be like a dancefloor moment.

(Drum beat along with synth)

Kelly: There's like a synth line and sometimes it can feel like the synths are lining up but then wait, are they? It's kind of like the back and forth of "Can I move forward? Like can we do this? Yes we can. Okay, right." That's what I needed in that moment myself.

(Drum beat along with a higher synth line)

Kelly: The notes in the outro change

(Synth line)

Kelly: but that is just simply the beauty of working with analog synths and sequences. They have a mind of their own and basically they're technically mistakes, but I always leave the mistakes in.

(Lower synth line)

Kelly: Those last little few notes really made me chuckle so they had to stay in there, and that was representative of like nothing's perfect and the mistakes sometimes, they're actually not mistakes at all.

(Synth ends)

Kelly: The vocals that come in, in the second half, they don't happen very often and they were one of the last things to be placed in the track. It was completely instrumental and then it felt like, "Okay, I need to knit in something that connects to the first half."

(Second half vocals along with kick)

Kelly: For me, it just made sense that, at those moments in particular, that we connected back to the initial feeling because actually in life you can move forward from stuff, but of course like we all have memories and we feel like we're always going to be connected to the things that have happened to us. It's what makes us and I think it's important to acknowledge that, and so I'm just acknowledging that sonically.

(Bass)

Kelly: There would be times where James and I were working on it and I'd just say, "Oh, sorry crying again [laughter]." And I know that can be an amazing sign, right? When something is moving you. But it happened so often that it wasn't a problem, but it was like, "Okay, Kelly like pull yourself together now. Focus, right? [laughter]" So this one in particular hit me hard.

(Drum elements join)

Kelly: What I had experienced was so deeply traumatic and, you know, it was a situation that zapped heaps of my energy to the point that I didn't know if I could create anymore. So just the fact that this

(Synth joins)

Kelly: album exists is like a testament in itself to my spirit, I think. There's something about when we go into the pain and we access those feelings of sadness or melancholy, I think there's, it can be transformed. Transforming that pain and finding the blessings within it.

(Second half vocals along with synth)

(Second half vocals along with synth fade out)

Hrishikesh: And now, here is "On," by Kelly Lee Owens, in its entirety.

("On" by KELLY LEE OWENS)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net to learn more about Kelly Lee Owens. You'll also find links to buy or stream the song and you can watch the music video for it. Song Exploder is made by me, Hrishikesh Hirway, along with producer Christian Koons, production assistant Olivia Wood, and illustrator Carlos Lerma. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a collective of creative, independent podcasts. You can learn more about our shows at radiotopia.fm. You can get a Song Exploder t-shirt at songexploder.net/shirt. You can also follow the show on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook @SongExploder. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.