

Song Exploder
La La Land - Justin Hurwitz
Episode 92

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.

("La La Land" by JUSTIN HURWITZ)

Hrishikesh: The film *La La Land* tells the story of Mia, an aspiring actress played by Emma Stone, and the story of Sebastian, a jazz pianist played by Ryan Gosling, both struggling artists in Los Angeles. The musical was written and directed by Damien Chazelle in collaboration with composer Justin Hurwitz. It's the third film they've made together, the follow-up to the Oscar-winning film *Whiplash*. In this episode, Justin Hurwitz breaks down a song from the film sung by Emma Stone, called "Audition (The Fools Who Dream)." Plus, we'll hear some thoughts from Benj Pasek and Justin Paul, who wrote the lyrics. This episode is part of a series I'm doing in partnership with *New York Magazine* site *Vulture* highlighting awards-worthy film music. For more go to vulture.com/awards.

("La La Land" by JUSTIN HURWITZ)

Justin: My name is Justin Hurwitz, I'm the composer of *La La Land*.

(Music fades)

Justin: The film is written and directed by Damien Chazelle. Damien first talked to me about working on this project in 2010. We had made another musical, the first feature film either of us made, respectively, in college. That movie, *Guy and Madeline on a Park Bench*, got into some festivals. A few people saw it, and couple people suggested that we should make another musical, make something a little bigger, so we started developing it in 2011. And then, we couldn't get the movie made, so we put it down, and we worked on *Whiplash* together. And then, we picked *La La Land* back up in the spring of 2014. I did a little over 1,900 piano demos on this movie.

(Piano)

Justin: These are just piano demos. This is just to find the melodies and the themes. This was the last song I composed. Damien wanted me to tackle this last. We

wanted to kind of understand what the rest of the music was in the movie before we tackle this, a really emotional scene, and it's a really pivotal scene, narratively. Based on the script and just conversations I'd been having with Damien, I think I knew emotionally what this scene had to be. Because it's, in some ways, an optimistic song, it's about never giving up, and it's about having these dreams that you believe in, and that you chase forever. But that's also, that idea just has some sadness in it as well, because it's about never giving up, which means you're not there yet, which means life might be difficult at the moment. So it had to be somewhat optimistic, but it also had to be kind of melancholy. And I knew that it had to ultimately have this sort of bittersweet tone to it.

(Piano)

Justin: Emma Stone's character, Mia, is an actress. She's an aspiring actress, and she's kind of been through the ringer in Los Angeles. She's been through one heartbreaking audition after another. She's given up on acting at this moment in the movie, and she's convinced to come back for one last audition. And in this audition, she starts talking about an aunt of hers who inspired her to be an actress, and who has always been an inspiration in the way that she never gave up on her art. And she always dreamed big. So this song, it's about this aunt, but it also has this larger theme about dreamers.

(Piano)

Justin: I went through so many versions of melodies for other songs and pieces of material, but this one came out very easily. And I think that's in part because I really connected to the idea of being a frustrated artist, but having these dreams.

(Emma Stone: "My aunt used to live in Paris")

Justin: The scene starts with Mia talking to the film's director and the casting director.

(Emma Stone: "She told us that she jumped into the river once")

Justin: The song proper starts, when she says, "Barefoot, she smiled."

(Emma Stone: "Barefoot, she smiled")

Justin: When I first composed that, those were notes, those had pitches. But as we started thinking about actually making the scene, as we were rehearsing it with Emma, and Damien was thinking about how the scene was really going to be shaped, it became clear that those needed to actually kind of be pitchless and needed to kind of slip into song. So there's this sort of gradation from spoken to song.

(Emma Stone: "Barefoot, she smiled")

(Vocals: "Leapt, without looking / And tumbled into the Seine / The water was freezing / She spent a month sneezing / But said she would do it again")

Justin Paul: The fact that we have a song in there that talks about someone sneezing to me, "I'm like, oh, that's cool that we got to use the word 'sneezing.'"

This is Justin Paul, and I'm one of the lyricists on *La La Land*. We feel very lucky that Damien let us write songs that were specifically rich, and really told stories with details, and there was never a push to write sort of more accessible, pop-ified lyrics that were kind of general, and didn't tell stories as much.

Benj: I'm Benj Pasek, a lyricist with Justin Paul. This is something that our professor at the University of Michigan, when we were studying musical theater there, taught us in differentiating songs between pop songs and theater songs. He would say, "a pop song is like an adjective. It's all about how it makes you feel. And a theater song, you have to approach like it's a verb, and it's what the action is, and what's going to change." And so, we like thinking about songs that move story forward, and in particular, this song, it was our goal to try to make it as much of a verb as possible, because once Mia sings it, things change forever for her. And Damien and Justin sort of both giving us permission to let this be a verb and not just an adjective, not just be about a feeling, but really about story is something that we really were excited to try to write.

(Vocals: "She lived in her liquor / And died with a flicker / I'll always remember the flame")

Justin: This is not a studio vocal. She was not lip-syncing. She was singing that live on set. I was playing piano, I was accompanying her, and I was letting her lead the song and take the space she needed to act it.

(Piano)

Justin: Because I was letting Emma lead the song. I was reacting to her, so a lot of times, the piano was a little bit behind the vocal. It sounded like a recital or something where, you know, the singer is leading it, and the piano is there to accompany. And that's what happens when two people make music together, you know, things are not perfectly in sync, and that's why it feels musical, and why it feels real and honest. But I was so nervous playing the piano because this was such a big moment for Emma. And I knew we were only going to get so many takes. I knew that Emma's voice was only going to last for so long, probably, when you're singing something this passionately. And I knew that just on an acting level, I don't, you know, understand [laughter] fully what actors do, but I don't know how many times they can go back and be that emotional. And so, I knew every take was valuable. And I was so afraid of missing a note in derailing the song. Oh my God, that would have been a disaster. If I had screwed up the piano, and the song had come to a screeching halt.

(Piano)

Justin: Randy Kerber is playing the piano in the actual recording. He's an amazing session musician who played all of the jazz piano. But the piano was one thing that we felt we had to record separately from the orchestra. The piano interacts with the vocal in such an intimate way. And we had to let Randy kind of come to terms with the vocal performance, and really feel it with the vocal, and the way that I was feeling it on set with Emma.

(Piano ends)

Justin: So the melody unfolds, piano accompanies, and then, we get to the chorus. And I started introducing more dissonance into the piano accompaniment.

(Vocals with piano: "Here's to the ones who dream")

Justin: But it resolves then in the major key.

(Vocals with piano: "Foolish as they may seem")

Justin: And I use a major seventh. It cuts the major-ness of it, helps it from feeling too straightforward in its emotion. I think it helps it feel emotionally complex and unsettled.

(Vocals with piano: "Here's to the hearts that ache")

Justin: I go for so much movement in general, because that's the case for people's emotions. Like people's emotions are constantly changing. You can feel a hundred things in under a second. And I like the music to have all these different feelings in it. And I think if I just grabbed a triad and stuck with it for the whole measure, I think we would be a few seconds of feeling the same thing, which I don't think is how people feel.

(Vocals, piano, and strings: "She captured a feeling")

Justin: So, in this next verse, the strings enter.

(Strings)

Justin: It's first violins, violas, and cellos. I was saving the second violins, because I wanted them to come in later with this high, shimmering part.

(Strings)

Justin: In the second chorus of the song, the wind and the brass enter.

(Woodwind and brass join)

Justin: It's just a solo bassoon line that comes in, that hands off to a solo horn line.

(Horn with strings)

Justin: So it's this dialogue between

(Horns with strings)

Justin: bassoon and horn in this chorus.

(Horns with strings)

(Music ends)

Justin: The bridge of the song, it's, the lyric is, "A bit of madness is key."

(Vocals: "A bit of madness is key")

Justin: That's where the bridge starts, and the piano's now playing these fast arpeggios, and it's pretty much doing that for the rest of the song.

(Piano)

Justin: We wanted it to feel, start feeling magical. The orchestration now really takes over and does the heavy lifting, and the winds now start trilling.

(Woodwinds)

Justin: This is the first time that Emma's really belting in the song.

(Vocals: "So bring on the rebels / The ripples from pebbles / The painters, and poets, and plays")

Justin: We worked with Emma a lot in pre-production in the studio. I mean, she worked a lot on her own. She had a great vocal coach, Eric Vetro, and all of those rehearsals were to help learn the song on a technical level, to learn the notes, to learn the shape of it. And the idea was that she would learn the song, she'd get it in her bones, so that when she got to set, she could act it, and she could get emotional, and she's on the verge of tears at the end of the song. And she's able to do all of that, because she knew the song so well, and had it down technically so well. It's one shot. There are no picture edits in the scene. So we couldn't cut between the best of this take and the best of that take. It had to be nailed all in one shot.

(Vocals: "And here's to the fools who dream / Crazy as they may seem")

Justin: Right after the lyric, "Crazy as they may seem,"

(Strings)

Justin: the strings have this upward gesture.

(Strings)

Justin: It's the most optimistic the song gets. Mia is really singing the theme of the song. She's turned the song from being about her aunt, specifically to about dreamers everywhere.

(Vocals: "Here's to the hearts that break / Here's to the mess we make")

Justin: So she's singing about how important it is to pursue your art. It's a very dramatic lyric, it's a very dramatic emotion she's feeling, and the orchestra's equally dramatic.

(Orchestra)

(Orchestra ends)

Justin: And then, we come to the outro of the song, and we're returning to reality. We're returning to

(Piano)

Justin: Mia being in the audition room.

(Flute)

Justin: The flute trills, they're there just to keep a little bit of magic.

(Vocals, piano, and flute: "Smiling through it / She said she'd do it")

Justin: So the second to last chord is, in nerdy music theory terms, the minor four chord.

(Piano)

Justin: And we want to resolve in the key that we're in, which is A major at the end of the song. It just wants to go home in this very kind of bittersweet way, but the A is implied, but it's never given to you. The very last word of the song when Emma says "again," it's acapella, the piano has now dropped out for the last note of the song.

(Vocals, piano, and flute: "She said she'd do it")

(Vocals: "again")

Justin: This song is optimistic, but it's also, there's pain in it. And Mia's life isn't resolved at the end of this. And there's something nice about not tying it up with a bow, and just making it too tidy at the end. This song is really special for me. And I'm just so proud of it. I think it's exactly what we envisioned this scene and this song would be. You know, when Damien and I first started developing this, we had this musical we wanted to make, nobody was letting us make it. We were so passionate about it. And there didn't

(Piano)

Justin: seem to be a path at the time to actually, to realize that dream of making *La La Land*. And so, we were feeling a lot of the same things that the characters in this movie are feeling, you know, having these dreams, but not having permission to make your art yet. I still feel like a dreamer. I don't feel accomplished yet [laughter], really. I don't feel like I've arrived. And I'd like to think that will always be the case. Because if I stop feeling like a dreamer, then I don't think my music is going to be very good.

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Audition (The Fools Who Dream)," from *La La Land*, in its entirety.

("La La Land" by JUSTIN HURWITZ)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net to watch the trailer for *La La Land*, and for links to learn more about composer Justin Hurwitz and the film. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a curated network of extraordinary, cutting edge shows made possible by the Knight Foundation, by MailChimp, and listeners like you. Learn more at radiotopia.fm. This episode was produced by Christian Koons and me. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.