

Song Exploder
Little Dragon - Sweet
Episode 104

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.

("Sweet" by LITTLE DRAGON)

Hrishikesh: Little Dragon is a Grammy-nominated band from Gothenburg, Sweden. They formed in 1996, and they released their fifth album *Season High* in April 2017. In this episode, singer Yukimi Nagano and drummer Erik Bodin break down the song "Sweet."

("Sweet" by LITTLE DRAGON)

(Music fades)

Yukimi: My name is Yukimi.

Erik: My name is Erik.

Yukimi: And we are from Little Dragon. This was a track that we wrote right after coming off tour.

Erik: Being on the road for a long time, it creates a vacuum almost inside you. You really want to fill that vacuum with new beats. We started with the bassline.

(Synth bass)

Erik: [mimics bassline] We listen to a lot of South African house music. That has been a big inspiration.

(Synth bass fades)

Yukimi: Erik's wife is South African.

Erik: So we go there every other year. And my wife, she's the Aunt to many kids, and some of the kids are DJs. So I just give them a USB, and please fill it with as

much as possible, you know? There's one song by DJ CNDO. She's a awesome house producer.

("Terminator" by DJ CNDO)

Erik: A lot of that style is, I wouldn't say that they're behind, but they're using older sounds that we are familiar with, and just doing it their way. And it's very refreshing.

("Terminator" by DJ CNDO)

Yukimi: Some of those songs, they have this kind of simple, naive, synth melody, it's kind of almost like Nintendo game-ish.

Erik: It feels like it's, "I know somebody who has a PC, I'm going to his place. I managed to kind of make a mix out of it. And then, there you go. It's out." That's what appeals to us, the rawness.

(Music ends)

Yukimi: We were in our studio in Gothenburg.

Erik: I don't think we would have been so free, if we would have been like in a studio in Burbank or, you know, like expensive rent and technicians.

Yukimi: Big mixing tables.

Erik: Yeah, and you're almost like you're in the spotlight. Our studio started 15 years ago with a PC, and trying to learn, and it's just developed out of that.

Yukimi: The guys each have their own studio setup. So a song will start in somebody's room. This song in particular started in Erik's room.

(Synth bass)

Erik: So I program a drum beat.

(Beat joins)

Erik: I'm very drawn into like the cheap effects, because they create sort of like a new era of the digital punk flavor.

(Music ends)

Erik: And then,

(Tambourine)

Erik: I like to record a tambourine with a vocal mic, because it's important to have that kind of organic

(Beat joins)

Erik: vibe to it.

(Tambourine with beat)

(Beat ends)

Erik: That's a real drum kit, a little kid's drum kit actually. It's very fun to play it. Because it feels like it's going to break apart any time, you know? It has a fragility

(Beat)

Erik: built into the sound.

(Beat)

(Beat fades)

Erik: And then, I got that hockey sounding organ.

(Organ)

Erik: I feel like it's both South African, and maybe like the Gospel house. It's like church elements. Something a little bit old school, I guess.

(Organ)

(Organ fades)

Yukimi: I loved it. So I kind of just like, “Oh, I have an idea.”

(Vocals: “That feeling when you know you’re hooked and you can’t get enough / Sweet”)

Yukimi: That was pretty much the first vocal part.

Erik: That’s very gospel-ish, the call and response.

Yukimi: Erik is actually a really [laughter] good vocal coach, because he’s so rhythmical. He’ll be like, you know, “Try to sing super softly, but, you know, still be bouncy.”

(Vocals: “That feeling when you’re skating down the avenue of love / Sweet”)

Yukimi: “Vocally bouncy.” That’s something that we really wanted to come through on this track. It really is, should be a dance track, you know, feel-good dance track.

(Vocals: “Wrapped up in a sugar rush, sugar rush”)

Yukimi: I’ve always loved vocal effects. It just takes you into another space again, you know, like you have a drier sound on the rest of the vocals, and then, suddenly, you know, it’s like one part is dipped in effects.

(Vocals: “The more the mystery, the more I get compelled / Sweet”)

Yukimi: I was thinking about the Gregory Isaacs song “Night Nurse,” you know, how it’s like a love song, but it’s about cocaine at the same time.

(“Night Nurse” by GREGORY ISAACS)

(Music fades)

Yukimi: I sort of wanted to write, like it was a love song, but it could be about any kind of addiction, you know? I definitely wanted to not make it solely about love, but have that angle of being disgusting almost, but sweet. I think there is that element to any kind of addiction, you know, it’s like so good, but then, it’s like, ah, you can go too far.

(Vocals: “I can’t resist this high taste / I can’t resist this sweet race no more”)

Yukimi: Once we had all the elements there, we tried to get the structure of it. And then, it was like, "What is the chorus?" And, you know, obviously we're four people in this band, and everyone sort of had their own, "I think this is the chorus." "Oh, I think this is the chorus." "Oh, I think," you know? So we were trying to just get our heads around a kind of simple structure of the track.

Erik: Sometimes there is almost like an anxious quest for a chorus, and you're like, "Actually, chorus is just a word." You don't have to have an ABBA chorus or like, you know, something to break free from sometimes.

Yukimi: So we actually took help from Patrik Berger, producer, who came in and was super helpful. I feel like we could have gone on and on for like four years, just like trying to figure out what the structure of the song was in, before we like killed each other or something.

Erik: He added drums,

(Beat)

Erik: much more of acoustic like hip hop sounding drums. It gave it a whole new energy, and it was easy to listen to the song. So we worked on the structure with the track sounding different, but then,

(Music ends)

Erik: we brought it back to the original sound.

(Beat)

Erik: There were so many chefs, like so many ingredients. I guess I stepped up because I was the originator somehow. I was like, "Let's just bring you back."

(Music ends)

Erik: It's very hard to go back in the evolution of a song, but then, if you really realize that the original was better, there's nothing wrong with going back [laughter]. But because there is always a drive to evolve things, always but

Yukimi: Yeah. It can be kind of depressing when you felt like you've spent two weeks working on a song, changing it, adding stuff, adding stuff. And you suddenly come to the conclusion that it was better two weeks ago [laughter].

Erik: [laughter] Yeah. And then, it's like, "Ah, yeah. Because that's why we actually choose that song, because of the original sound."

Yukimi: You know, sometimes you get precious with something, but we kind of have this rule in the band, well, we try to stick to it, but like, if you have an idea, try it out. You know,

Erik: Yeah.

Yukimi: instead of being like, "I don't like, I don't think that," you know, try it.

Erik: Yeah.

Yukimi: If it feels good, keep it, you know, if it doesn't, then change it back, it's not a big deal. So we were all sitting with the track and sort of adding little elements.

(Synth)

Erik: That's Håkan, the keyboard player. He is, he's very good with the synths, he's like a

Yukimi: Wizard.

(Synth)

Erik: This sound has created a big headache because that's one of the sounds that we, seem to be impossible to find the original file of it. I scrolled through all the synths I had, but,

(Synth ends)

Erik: yeah, can't find it.

Yukimi: It's a feel-good melody.

Erik: Yeah. Very Nintendo high score sounds.

("Star Theme" by SUPER MARIO BROS)

Erik: Mario hit the stars or whatever, I don't know.

(Music ends)

Erik: It's very Nintendo-ish, which for me [laughter].

(Synth)

Erik: It's called Portamento, the effect where the key you last played, if you press a new key, you will [mimics portamento] go back there. It goes bananas all over the place.

(Synth)

(Synth fades)

Yukimi: You can always feel when something feels too square, sonically. You want to put something that makes it a little bit off and, you know, organic. So it's not all perfectly symmetrical somehow.

(Breathing)

Erik: It's just me breathing with a closed mouth.

(Breathing)

Erik: [laughter]

Hrishikesh: [laughter]

Erik: I don't know why.

Yukimi: No, but it's good. I mean, I like that because it just gives it a

Erik: quite a hectic feeling.

Yukimi: [laughter]

Erik: The best way to get a raw, never heard of sound is to use your mouth, even better than like a real acoustic instrument, sometimes. Nobody can really reproduce it, not even myself [laughter].

(Breathing)

Erik: So you realize it's not so much about the language it's so much about the music or the vibe.

(Synth)

Erik: We love music from the whole world. We are able to sit and dig music for 10 hours, in a language we don't understand any word. We still get super emotional and enriched, you know, on all levels.

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Sweet" by Little Dragon, in its entirety.

("Sweet" by LITTLE DRAGON)

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("Slip Away" by PERFUME GENIUS)

Hrishikesh: You can find Song Exploder on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram @SongExploder. And you can find all the past and future episodes of the show at songexploder.net or wherever you download podcasts. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.

("Slip Away" by PERFUME GENIUS)

(Music fades)

