

**Song Exploder**  
**Lorde - Sober**  
**Episode 118**

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.

*("Sober" by LORDE)*

Hrishikesh: Lorde is a Grammy-award winning singer, songwriter, and producer.

Lorde: My full name is Ella Marija Lani Yelich-O'Connor. So it's a whole thing.

Hrishikesh: Her second album, *Melodrama*, debuted at number one on the charts in June 2017 - five months before her 21st birthday. In this episode, Ella breaks down her song "Sober." You'll hear how it started, with the original demos she made with her co-producer Jack Antonoff, and how the song changed over the course of working on it for months and months.

*("Sober" by LORDE)*

Lorde: My name is Lorde. I'm breaking down my song, "Sober."

*(Music fades)*

Lorde: I remember I had spent the summer in New Zealand, and I was reeling from this summer, which was very much like wild and fluorescent. That first summer on the cusp of being an adult, I'd just come out of a relationship and was just like drinking all the time. I was just like either like sleeping or getting ready for like what we were going to do that night. When you come out of a relationship, you just want to fill the quiet as best you can. You know, you're like, "I just don't want to deal with this quite yet, so I'm going to make every moment full and social and busy and loud, and then I won't have to think about it." So this song in particular was set at a party, but there's such angst to it. I had this like very distinct memory of standing in the corner of my lounge having like a very tense conversation with somebody, and people on my back porch dancing. The DNA of "Sober" is wanting to tell someone how you feel, and knowing they feel the same way, and needing [laughter] the evening's theater to come and have all the

characters going, and then you can let your guard down. That was kind of the spread of the night, which became “Sober.” I worked on this record with my co-producer and co-writer, Jack Antonoff. People sort of tell you, you have to come to LA. They send you to all these like fancy studios and I think when you’re beginning a project that can be terrifying. So there’s Westlake Recording Studios, which is like very fancy and Michael Jackson recorded there, and I couldn’t make anything good there, and then [laughter] we discovered this room down the back, which is like a production room. We called it the “Rat Nest.” It’s like [laughter] this tiny little room, very dirty. And that room really was the room

*(Bass)*

Lorde: where “Sober” started to take shape. The whole thing started on a Juno 106, and I just recorded these vocals.

*(Vocals with synth join: “Oh God, I’m clean out of air / In my lungs, it’s all gone / Played it so nonchalant / It’s time we danced with the truth”)*

Lorde: This slow, kind of droning version, which existed for a long time, just like this moody emotional journey, I knew exactly where the chords had to go. I was literally pulling Jack’s sleeve going, “No no, no, here.”

*(Voice demo with synth)*

*(Synth)*

Lorde: Through a lot of this process, you know, I had such specific ideas about all of this stuff. I knew exactly what it was so early. And he was very open to me playing God over the writing session in such an intense way with that, which is cool and a lot of people, you know, I think would not be so good at doing that. [laughter] For a long time Jack was like, “I like the song, but I don’t, I don’t know if I quite, you know, visualize it like you do,” and I was like, “Trust me!”

*(Synth ends)*

Lorde: [laughter] “This is my passion project.” Like so it does the verse and then it goes

*(Vocals with synth: “But my hips have missed your hips / So let’s get to know the kicks / Will you sway with me? / Go astray with me?”)*

*(Synth)*

Lorde: And it's an uneven number of bars. It's just this weird thing that my brain absolutely needs. And like props to Jack, this is why I love Jack so much. He was sort of trying to get his head around it when we were writing it, and he was like, "Oh, there's an extra bar." And I said, "Is that wrong?" He was like, "No!" If Jack had been like, "No, we can't do that," I think that would have really changed the course of [laughter] like what we ended up doing for this album. But the fact that he was like, "No, it's cool. We can make it work." So April 2016, we go to Coachella, Jack and I. We get a studio, and we can work in the day and go to the festival at night. So we went to the studio and I was like, "I love the idea of it just snapping into this little groove," and I sung Jack the rhythm of the groove that I wanted, and he made it really quickly.

*(Percussion with beat)*

Lorde: Jack is always just like going around hitting a bunch of shit, and the main sound in this is a little bongo he like hit with the drumstick.

*(Percussion)*

*(Beat joins)*

Lorde: And then I went

*(Vocal sample joins: "Night, midnight, lose my mind / Night, midnight, lose my mind")*

Lorde: It's a vocal sample. It's me going, "night, midnight, lose my mind. -ight,

*(Music ends)*

Lorde: midnight, lose my mind."

*(Vocal sample: "Night, midnight, lose my mind / Night")*

Lorde: As soon as I heard that first loop, I went, [sings] "night, when you get to my," and I really clipped it kind of Prince-y or MJ-ish, and just put it over the top.

*(Vocals: "When you get to my night (Night, midnight, lose my mind) / When you get to my night (Night, midnight) / When you get to")*

Lorde: So the song was like really intense

*(Synth)*

Lorde: and droney and serious, and then right at the end for like 20 seconds, it just flipped into the funnest groove ever.

*(Vocal sample, percussion, and beat: "Night, midnight, lose my mind / Night, midnight, lose my mind")*

Lorde: And, you know, it felt like changing the radio station or something, which I was into, it was cool.

*(Vocal sample fades)*

Lorde: And it stayed like that for a really long time.

*(Percussion with beat fade)*

Lorde: So, flash forward, New York, November 7th, my birthday. We had a studio, we were at that stage with the album where we needed someone to take us out of our zone a little bit. And we meet Malay, who is very wonderful, works on Frank Ocean, and realized he is my favorite type of producer. He wants to hear you talk about the genesis of the song, and the emotional energy. And just like I'm sort of used to clipping my language for technical people, you know, because people don't want to hear about the color of an evening, or the way a light looked on a wall or whatever. But he really does, and it really helps him do great work. And so with the song, I really [laughter] was like, just met him, and I was kind of just like looking at the floor and telling him the story of the song, and he was like, "OK, cool." We booked the big room downstairs at Electric Lady for him to muck around in, and we went down there the next day, and Malay has taken that groove.

*(Vocal sample, percussion, and beat)*

Lorde: That groove that came in right at the end of the song. That 20 seconds, and underlaid it underneath the whole song. And he's taken out these really serious minor-y chords that were like,

*(Vocal sample ends)*

*(Keyboard joins)*

Lorde: the chords of my fucking dreams [laughter], and replaced them with these buoyant, urgent, insistent, party chords.

*(Keyboard, bass, percussion, and beat)*

Lorde: And I was like, “Woah, woah, woah, woah, woah. This song feels right for the first time in almost a year.” It was incredible, we were just floored by, it had the movement that it needed, it instantly felt like we were in the vignette that we’d been chasing for a long time. He was like, “Yeah, I had to sacrifice your perfect chords.” I was like, “It’s OK, because it worked so well.” And that was really exciting to me so it really needed to just be pushed off the edge by him. Yeah, it was so funny that that didn’t come from me but, you know, sometimes even when you do know what something deserves to be, it takes somebody else’s good idea to get it there, and for there to be fresh ears involved.

*(Percussion with beat)*

Lorde: I think in that session I also came up with the

*(Keyboard joins)*

Lorde: little stop. It goes,

*(Vocals: “Oh”)*

*(Keyboard, bass, percussion, and beat join: “God”)*

*(Beat stop)*

*(Vocals: “I’m closing”)*

*(Beat joins: “my teeth”)*

*(Keyboard, bass, and percussion join: “Around this liquor-wet lime”)*

Lorde: Just kicks down for a second and then goes back up.

*(Music fades)*

Lorde: We recorded the vocal for this verse with Kuk Harrell. Kuk is a legend, he just records vocals, that's all he does. He does all of Rihanna's vocals. And on a song like this, especially this verse, the timing is, like, very syncopated.

*(Vocals with beat: "We're sleeping through all the days")*

Lorde: And I would kind of let "days" go as long as it can, and then it would have to snap back and go to the next part. And my favorite thing to do with vocals is get so specific, just this drop more of regret, or anger, or lust, or this tiny smile on this word, which you rip away on the next word, you know. I'm really into, it's like emotional molecular chemistry, and getting this vocal bouncing off the walls perfectly, could not have done that without Kuk.

*(Vocals with beat: "We're sleeping through all the days / I'm acting like I don't see / Every ribbon you used to tie yourself to me")*

Lorde: The second verse of this song is one of my favorite things I've done with vocal production. I'm a big fan of thinking about the characters that my vocals are playing in songs. I always think about that. And there's always those moments in a party where you're sort of throwing your head back and forth and being like [laughter], "What is this like funhouse of terror that I'm running around in, you know?" Especially if you're drunk, who knows what else is going on, you know? And I love this idea of there aren't people in your house, they're just bodies walking around and you only care about one person at the party anyway. And it's like these little, kind of, voices ping out, maybe they belong to these detached bodies.

*(Vocals: "Oh, God, I'm closing my teeth / Around this liquor-wet lime / Midnight, lose my mind / I know you're feeling it too")*

Lorde: We basically recorded straight harmonies through the verse and then chose little moments for them to ping out here and there. And they, certain harmonies only exist on a certain word. It's like all those little voices in your head that are like telling you someone's bad news. There's like so many different vibes that the vocals in that second verse take on.

*(Vocals: "Can we keep up with the ruse? / Ah ah (Hey)")*

Lorde: Just seems like a little bratty, kind of [mimics baby sound], shouts in the back of the song so I feel like the lead is you saying what you want to say, and then sometimes those are what slips out. Imagine this narrator like trying to keep those voices in and just “ahhhh” and you sort of, oh shit, cover your mouth, you know, “aaahhhh,” [laughter] just like popping out all over the show.

*(Vocals: “Ah ah”)*

Lorde: There’s always an element of strange

*(Ticking sound)*

Lorde: feedback ticking away at the back of a Jack Antonoff song to really like give it body, and I love that.

*(Ticking sound)*

*(Distorted sound effect)*

Lorde: This is some classic Jack Antonoff shit right there. Jack’s always doing a lot of that, taking a sound and pitching it and distorting it and pulling it to a weird place. Oh, and then I had the idea for the horns. Do you remember all that great Hudson Mohawke, Lunice stuff? I mean it was the best.

*(“Higher Ground” by TNGHT)*

Lorde: I was raised on TNGHT. Like that’s 10% of why I make the music that I make [laughter].

*(“Higher Ground” by TNGHT)*

*(Music fades)*

Lorde: I was like, we just need like a ton of brass, you know. Our engineer, Laura, Laura Sisk, who is the greatest engineer in America, I sort of let her take charge of this horn part. So the first line, which eventually was played on a horn but was first on that Juno, was the “doo, doo, doo, doo, doo.”

*(Synth)*

Lorde: I was like, “We have to just get triumphant there.”

*(Synth ends)*

Lorde: So we started with tenor and bari sax.

*(Saxophone)*

Lorde: And I was like, we definitely need trumpet.

*(Trumpet)*

Lorde: We were sitting there and we just kept telling them to play harder and harder and harder. And they were like, “This is, it sounds like our instruments are breaking.” And we were like, “Yeah, yeah [laughter], that’s 100% the vibe we’re going for.

*(Orchestra)*

Lorde: “Just play it kind of inappropriately. I want to hear the edges of your instrument.”

*(Orchestra)*

Lorde: And then,

*(Orchestra with riser)*

*(Roar)*

Lorde: Can you hear that? That’s a fucking tiger’s roar! There is lowkey a tiger’s roar starting that bridge, which is just the kind of, like, ridiculous dramatic flourish that it needed. We were in one of the last two sessions for this song and Jack was just like going through, he just has these endless banks of bizarre samples, and we just find this tiger’s roar, which I thought was so cool! I love the way it swells the top of that part. That’s like one of my favorite sneaky things on that song. So next time you’re listening to “Sober,” please enjoy the tiger’s roar at the top of the bridge, because

*(Synth)*

Lorde: it’s our baby, and we love it [laughter].



*(Beat with riser)*

*(Tiger's roar)*

*(Vocals with drums: "Midnight, we're fading / Till daylight, we're jaded / We know that it's over / In the morning")*

*(Music fades)*

*(Keyboard)*

Lorde: New Zealand is so beautiful, and every day I just found myself kind of so moved by the light and like all of these bodies and the water and people on my back porch dancing.

*(Riser)*

*(Keyboard)*

Lorde: It really does feel like a very specific vignette from two years ago. It's a very specific, beautiful image to me, but it definitely feels like the past. Coming into, you know, early adulthood and every party felt so monumental, and so

*(Synth joins)*

Lorde: endlessly inspiring and intoxicating and interesting, and there's a reason I wrote an entire record about

*(Riser joins)*

Lorde: partying.

*(Riser with synth end)*

Lorde: But it was very interesting, like you finish the record and that door really does close. My research trip ended essentially; I did all the, like, exploration I needed to do, and it's funny to look back on remembering these evenings, and taking so much from them, and injecting so much meaning in them being so transcendent. And feeling a lot of affection for that time, but also like, you know, it's a little

more chill now. I'm like [laughter], I'm not making every drink like it's the last drink I'm ever going to make, you know [laughter].

*(Synths)*

*(Music ends)*

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Sober," by Lorde, in its entirety.

*("Sober" by LORDE)*

Hrishikesh: Visit [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net) for a link to buy this song, and to learn more about Lorde and her collaborators.

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