

Song Exploder
Michael Kiwanuka - Black Man in a White World
Episode 106

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.

("Black Man in a White World" by MICHAEL KIWANUKA)

Hrishikesh: Michael Kiwanuka is a singer/songwriter from London. His second album, *Love and Hate*, came out in 2016, and was named one of the Best Albums of the Year from the BBC, NME, The Guardian, GQ, and more. One of the songs on the album was used as the theme for the hit HBO series *Big Little Lies*. And in this episode, Michael breaks down the song "Black Man in a White World." He talks about how the song began, where it came from, and what the title means to him.

("Black Man in a White World" by MICHAEL KIWANUKA)

Michael: My name's Michael Kiwanuka, and I'm a singer/songwriter from London.

(Music fades)

Michael: The song started in this studio around November time 2014. I've only done two albums. This is on the second album that's come out, *Love and Hate*. I'd done the first album, and I was struggling to make the second album. I'd written all these songs, made what I thought was an album, listened to it back, and decided it wasn't good enough. It was missing that excitement that you want to hear off an album. So I was really dejected and stopped making music, really. I just thought maybe the first album was just luck. It was the first few songs I wrote and they worked. But now it's come down to it, I just don't have the ability. Everything doesn't sound good. I kept sending things into the label. They were like, "Yeah, it's alright, but it's not really happening." And then, I knew it deep down, and I was just kind of sitting around. So my manager was like, "Why don't you work with InFlow?" And I was like, "Who's InFlow?" He's like, "He's good." And I hadn't collaborated very much with other producers, or co-written really that much. So I said, "Well, I'm not doing anything, and nothing's happening, and it's not like I've got any options." So we met in Central London, and we just talked for like a couple of hours, so I was like, "This guy's really cool," and seemed like a nice person, so let's go in the studio. But I was really, really down, and I'll, sometimes Flow would call and be like, "Let's go to the

studio.” And I just wouldn’t turn up. I just couldn't face being in the studio, and listening to music that wasn't good enough all the time. It was like, “This is just depressing,” because it was like, “I haven’t made a good song in years.” It feels like years, and, but then on like the fourth day of being in the studio every day, I just had my acoustic, and I started playing some chords,

(Guitar)

Michael: Like country-style bluesy chords. And just started singing

(Vocals join: “I’m a black man in a white world / I’m a black man in a white world / I’m a black man in a white world”)

Michael: And Flow’s in the other room, and he was like, “What's that? Sounds pretty cool.” I knew straight away that there was something to it. But when I got signed and started making music professionally, is the first time people say, “Well, you're this,” or, “You're that, you should be doing this kind of music.” Every time I’ll send a demo in or like a track in, an A&R guy would be like, “You know, you're not going to sing a country song, you're black.”

(Guitar ends)

Michael: So that used to really rile me up because I felt like being black was like, stopped me from being a successful artist. Because I thought, “Well, if I was white, you know, I'd be able to do country music,” because it would fit. It would be like, “Oh yeah, he looks like that. It fits.” So I had this feeling of like, “You don't fit.” So I thought, “Well, let's get rid of the acoustic guitar country lick.” I said to Flow, I've been listening recently to Son House, early blues music, and there's one Son House song, “Don’t Mind People Grinnin’ In Your Face,” and he's just singing

(“Grinnin’ in Your Face” by SON HOUSE)

Michael: and clapping. The whole song is just singing and clapping.

(“Grinnin’ in Your Face” by SON HOUSE)

(Claps)

Michael: So we just started clapping, and I just started singing,

(Vocals join: "I'm a black man in a white world / I'm a black man in a white world / I'm a black man in a white world")

Michael: We had no chords. And I just started singing the verse.

(Vocals with claps: "I've been low, I've been high / I've been told all my lies")

Michael: And then, you listen to it back, and it just sounded good, just like that. We thought, *Well, this is exciting*. We stacked up the choruses for "I'm a black man," and doubled it, and did some harmonies on it.

(Vocals with claps: "I'm a black man in a white world / I'm a black man in a white world")

Michael: And then, Flow went into the live room, and played a bass drum, just three beats.

(Bass drum with claps)

(Vocals join: "I'm a black man in a white world / I feel like I've been here before / I feel that knocking on my door")

(Music fades)

Michael: We'd gone as far as we can without any chords or anything. So I just picked up an electric guitar, and plugged it straight into the desk. We had no amps or, like we just plugged into the desk. And I was thinking of like Curtis Mayfield tunes, or the way people played

("Move On Up" by CURTIS MAYFIELD)

Michael: on those like 70s records. I just obsess with that still. The guitar is so cool and exciting, but it's smooth as well and clean.

("Move On Up" by CURTIS MAYFIELD)

(Music fades)

Michael: I wanted something like that, so I picked up the guitar, and then just found the key. And then, just played a G and a A,

(Guitar)

Michael: in like as funky a rhythm as I could do.

(Guitar)

Michael: And then, we had this out of tune, kind of broken bass that was in the studio. So I just plugged that straight into the desk as well, and just followed the guitar.

(Bass joins)

Michael: [mimics bass] And then, that's all we had. That was like a space of half an hour, 45 minutes. I felt validated, you know? I felt some affirmation, just even within myself, and my emotion because I was like, "I haven't been this excited about something I'm creating for so long," you know? So it was a really big moment. Like, maybe I can do it, you know? But what was holding me back was the lyric. "I'm a black man in a white world," but I can't sing that. I can't sing, "I'm a black man in a white world." Most of the people that come to my gigs, it's not really that many black people that come to the shows. So what would they think if I put this out on an album, or released it as a song? Would people think I just hate white people, you know? So all this fear kind of came in, and I tried to change the words; "I'm a black man and I feel down," or "I'm a black man in a, in the wrong world" or anything, you know? I was just trying to just shoehorn [laughter], you know, I could just say something else around what I mean, but just soften it a bit, you know? And that way no one will get upset. Because I was like, you know, no one's going to listen to this. I sound like some like racist, you know, that hates white people. I just thought, which it isn't, but I thought people would misunderstand, because it was just this repetitive, like, mantra. "I'm a black man in a white world," but I want to sing it. Because it felt so true to me, like incredibly true. Nothing had felt that clear as a lyric up until that point, in terms of what I felt like at the time.

(Piano)

Michael: For me, being a black artist, doing the music that I do, it's not, it doesn't really always connect with modern black culture as such. Growing up, I was always listening to Nirvana, I was listening to Green Day in my early teens. I was going to like punk festivals, watching Pennywise. And it would be like, none of these

bands have black guys in it, because of where I grew up, Muswell Hill, there was no real black family. So all of my environment, all my influences were from kind of middle-class white backgrounds, but my family are Ugandans. And everyone had two cars, we didn't have any cars. We had like different foods. When friends came around to stay, it would be like, "Hope you don't find my place strange. You know, we don't eat, we eat like Ugandan food." So, you know, all these things. So I was always like, "I don't fit." And on top of that, the music industry, and the struggles of just like people trying to put you in a box.

(Claps)

Michael: So back to the lyric, the feeling was like half acceptance to myself, and two just declaring like, "Well, this is it, then. That's what you see me. I'm a black man in a white world. So that's it. That's what I'm

(Bass drum joins)

Michael: supposed to be. Cool." Sometimes it annoys me, sometimes I get down about it, but at the same time, good, you know? You said that, I'm going to say it too.

(Vocals join: "I'm a black man in a white world / I'm a black man in a white world / I'm a black man in a white world")

(Music fades)

Michael: But then, after that, we just had this demo for like a year, and we couldn't finish the song. Because every time we tried things, it just ruined the excitement that we had at the beginning. We tried to re-record it with a proper band, but we just couldn't get what we wanted. We couldn't replicate that excitement. And we realized at the time, the reason why we were losing the energy of it was that we were trying to fix all the mistakes, like the out of tune bass, and the tempo just goes up and down. It's not to a click, it's just so all over the place. Then Flow and I realized, when we were back in London, it was like, "Well, maybe we just play to the demo and extend that? Because that's got the excitement. We'll have to get a drummer to just play through the weird tempo changes that happen." And so, I called my friend Graham up, who's a drummer. We said, "We've got this track. Can you play drums on it?" So he came to a studio in London, and we just kept playing the track.

(Vocals with claps: "I'm a black man in a white world / I'm a black man in a white world")

Michael: And then,

(Drums join: "I'm a black man in a white world")

(Vocals and claps fade)

Michael: It's like this second beat, he came up with just fitted the song, and kept the excitement there, but elevated it.

(Drums)

Michael: The beat that he had was like this Fela Kuti-style beat, afrobeat feel. And so, Flow and I looked at each other like, "Wow, this sounds perfect."

(Drums end)

Michael: And then, he also brought his congas along.

(Congas)

Michael: So we put a conga part down, put some percussion in it,

(Percussion)

Michael: some other sounds that we hadn't heard before, in.

(Percussion)

Michael: I mean, Graham went for it. Graham just started playing shakers, and he played everything under the sun that he had in his percussion box.

(Percussion)

(Percussion fades)

Michael: And then, we need to do some backing vocals.

(Vocals: "I'm a black man in a white world")

Michael: Those were done in London by three great singers. They come from like church backgrounds, so they can sing like really, really sing. I just had the idea to have this sound that goes [mimics vocal sound]

(Vocal sound)

Michael: just to shock people in the verse. So I sing before that, "I'm in love." And so, I just said, "Sing love straight away after that."

(Vocals with claps: "I'm in love (love) but I'm still sad")

Michael: Like a bullet to shock someone. And then, "nights" as well, "nights."

(Vocals with claps: "All my nights (nights) and all my days")

Michael: Later on, in one of the verses, there are these ahhs that they do too.

(Vocals)

Michael: There's overdrive distortion on the vocals to make it sound grittier.

(Vocals)

Michael: So there's like a crunch to it. I love that stuff.

(Vocals)

Michael: And then, there was this engineer, and an assistant engineer that was at the studio, and he's got this really low voice, and he just starts talking, and he's like, "Man, your voice is low." And Flow had the idea, he turned around and was like, "I wonder what it would sound like if after the breakdown, the assistant sings underneath my harmonies. "I'm a black man in a white world" to give an extra lift. Because he's got this really low voice that we couldn't get down to with a real strong character. So we asked him, and he was like, "What? I'm not a singer, I'm not a musician. You want me to sing on this track?" And we were like, "Yeah [laughter]." And it sounded amazing.

(Vocals: "I'm a black man in a white world / I'm a black man in a white world / I'm a black man in a white world / I'm a black man in a white world")

Michael: And then, we wanted to put some like string quartets and soulful string parts on a lot of the songs, which is the fun part near the end of a record. But I decided not to put strings on the “Black Man in a White World.” I thought it's not really that kind of lush kind of mid-tempo soul song. This is more exciting, so I don't want to take away from that to have like this really pretty string sound on top of it. Flow knows this lady called Rosie Danvers, who does strings for a lot of artists like Kanye West, Frank Ocean, Adele, stuff like that. So she's like the go-to. So Rosie's in the studio. We play her all the tracks on the album, but I leave out “Black Man in a White World,” but she hears it because she's there in the day. She's like, “What's this?” You know. “Ah, it's a song “Black Man in a White World,” but I don't really want strings on it.” She was like, “Well, let me just try something.” So I say, “Cool, you know, we can just try it, and if you don't like it, you can just take it out.” And they play these really nice, long

(Strings)

Michael: notes over the chords.

(Strings)

Michael: I thought, *that's pretty cool, but that's what I expected*. But then, the drop came,

(Bass with drums)

Michael: and she's just putting these disco 70s strings like the sound that was like [mimics strings],

(Strings join)

Michael: just like

(Strings, bass, and drums)

Michael: What?! This sounds incredible!

(Strings, bass, and drums)

(Music ends)

Michael: And this was one of my favorite parts of the song. It was like the icing, the cherry on the cake.

(Strings)

(Strings end)

Michael: And at that point, it was like the song's done.

(Piano)

Michael: I used to be just really upset with just not fitting in. I wanted just to be in a group that looked like someone that looked like me, and I just was desperate to fit in. When we would go to Uganda, it would be like, there's this word in Uganda, which is mzungu, but it basically means foreigner or white person. So they'll call me and my brother a mzungu, because we were like chubbier than everyone [laughter], like didn't speak Luganda, had different kinds of clothes. And they'd be like, "Mzungu, mzungu." And I was like, "Don't call me that man. I'm like, I'm English, but I'm not white," you know? And then, but then when I'd be in England, it would be like, "Oh, you're black," you know? So I was just in the middle of nowhere, and I hated it, and I wanted to sing about that,

(Guitar)

Michael: and it came out in this song.

(Guitar)

Michael: So "Black Man in a White World," I'm glad that's the lyric.

(Guitar ends)

Michael: I realized how much of a blessing it is to not fit in. You can relate to different things that people don't really understand. And then, I'd listen to my favorite artists, and I realize they all kind of had that in some way.

(Piano)

Michael: So, for me, this song represents all of that Eureka moment of like, “Oh, right. OK, this is like actually incredible. I get to be a bit different. And I’m so lucky that I grew up in Muswell Hill,

(Guitar joins)

Michael: in North London, in the middle class area. And I’m so lucky that I like rock music. You know, I’m so lucky that my parents are Ugandan, I’m so lucky that I’m black.”

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here’s “Black Man in a White World,” by Michael Kiwanuka, in its entirety.

(“Black Man in a White World” by MICHAEL KIWANUKA)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net for a link to buy this track, and to learn more about Michael Kiwanuka, and to watch the award-winning music video for “Black Man in a White World.”
Next time on Song Exploder,

(“In Cold Blood” by ALT-J)

Hrishikesh: alt-J. Song Exploder is produced by me, along with Christian Koons. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a curated network of extraordinary, cutting-edge podcasts made possible by the Knight Foundation and by listeners like you. Learn more at radiotopia.fm. 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.

(“In Cold Blood” by ALT-J)

(Music fades)