

Song Exploder
Norah Jones - Day Breaks
Episode 101

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.

("Day Breaks" by NORAH JONES)

Hrishikesh: Since her debut in 2002, Norah Jones has sold over 50 million albums and won 8 Grammys. In 2016, she released *Day Breaks*, her sixth album. In this episode, she takes apart the title track and details how all the pieces came together unexpectedly. Coming up, you'll hear the original demo, and how the song was transformed in the studio, including a session with jazz saxophone legend Wayne Shorter. Plus, a few thoughts from Norah's co-producer, Sarah Oda. It's Norah Jones on Song Exploder.

("Day Breaks" by NORAH JONES)

Norah: Hey, I'm Norah Jones.

(Music fades)

Norah: This song came about a long time ago, maybe two or three years ago. My organ player, Pete Remm, and I were just kind of jamming. And it started out with him playing guitar, and doing this weird thing that actually ended up starting the song.

(Guitar)

Norah: It sounds like a deep tremolo, but really he's actually just turning the volume of the guitar up and down, which is funny because you could probably just do a tremolo [laughter], but he's not a traditional guitar player. You know, I feel like a real guitar player would never do that [laughter]. I don't know. I love it when people play instruments they're not as schooled on, and it's always cool. "Daybreaks in your head," was the first line I wrote.

(Vocals join: "Day breaks in your head")

(Music fades)

Norah: And I liked the line too, so that kind of started the lyric and the melody. I like that it's not "Daybreaks," one word. It's "Day Breaks," two words, which can have a couple different meanings. It's the start of the day, and it's also, you know, the day is being shattered [laughter]. I don't know. Honestly, I just liked the way it sounds [laughter].

(Guitar)

Norah: So we just had a demo of it for years, just kind of lying around, and then, just kind of forgotten about. I had gotten into playing a lot of piano, and I was writing a lot of stuff for this record, and I remember pulling it out and thinking, I wonder if this would sound cool on piano, and then I just started playing it.

(Vocals with piano: "Day breaks in your head / And you're finally alone / Trying to find a way to make it through / But it keeps raining in my heart")

Sarah: The first time I heard it was that version. I got *major* goosebumps. I'm Sarah Oda, and I co-produced the song [laughs].

Norah: We've been friends for, golly, 18 years.

Sarah: In that version, it sounded like a very somber and lonely song.

Norah: And it's very simple, and it's very different from the version on the record, too. So it really changed a lot.

(Music ends)

Norah: Whenever I go into record with other musicians, I try to be pretty open because I think whenever something happens naturally, and somebody puts their own thing into it, and it feels so good, that's something you can't plan for, and it's good to be open to that. Certainly there are songs that you *know* you want to sound a certain way. But then, there's songs like this, where I had no idea how it would come out, because I didn't necessarily want it to sound like my piano version. The piano was doing the rhythm in this demo of it that I did. I remember, I was kind of like, "Ah, maybe I won't play that rhythm." And then, I played a much more simple rhythm, which is what I played on the recording. Just like [sings piano part].

(Piano)

Norah: And I was kind of hoping they would find [laughter] the beat, because I was still kind of searching for it myself. And then, Brian just came in.

(Drums join)

Norah: Brian Blade.

(Piano with drums)

Norah: When the group kicks in, it's kind of weird, but great. And then, Chris, the bass player did that [mimics bass].

(Bass)

Norah: [laughter]. He played electric bass, and then, I had him double it later.

(Guitar)

Norah: So it had that cool, double muted guitar, bass sound.

(Guitar with bass)

Norah: For the most part, I write songs without too many chords, but this one has a lot of chords in it. They kind of cycle in a weird way. And it was a little bit of a puzzle to write because there's a lot of leading tones.

(Piano)

Norah: I tried really hard to keep certain notes on top to lead down, so that there were a lot of notes that carried over, even though the chords kept changing.

(Piano)

(Piano fades)

Norah: When we recorded it, it was just piano trio, because a lot of the songs lent themselves to more stripped down songs. And I wasn't sure if this one did or not, but I didn't want to add a bunch of stuff yet until I saw how it sounded. And it sounded kind of awesome, but it also kind of didn't go anywhere, and it needed a little bit more of something. We added the organ first.

(Organ)

Norah: Pete has a really special way of coaxing sounds out of the B3 that are pretty unique and different.

(Organ)

Norah: Pete's organ is so cool and weird.

Sarah: It's like a creepy carnival town,

Norah: [laughter]

Sarah: like music box.

Norah: Yeah.

Sarah: And that's what I think of, like an out of tune music box.

(Organ fades)

Norah: And then, pedal steel.

(Pedal steel)

Norah: That's Dan lead, he's a friend of ours, and he just came into my home studio. And he's like, "What do you want? Whale sounds [laughter]?" And I was like, "Yeah, kind of."

(Pedal steel)

Norah: When Pete's playing organ, in parts you can't tell who's who, and I like that.

(Organ joins)

(Music fades)

Norah: But it still was missing something. And then, we added the strings.

(Strings)

Norah: Dave Eggar, he put it together. He's a great cello player.

(Strings)

Norah: And I love working with them, because they come in with an arrangement, but then, we can totally change it. And I'm good at like [laughter] nitpicking. So it's great for me, because I can be like, "Oh, can you actually do this [sings a melody]?" Or whatever, and then, they'll just do it, like in five-part harmony [laughter], and they've got great ears.

(Strings end)

Norah: This song was hard in that it wasn't the kind of song I could go in and re-sing, because it needed to sound vulnerable. And there was a few lines I remember thinking, *Ah, I kind of wobble on that. Maybe let me re-sing it.* And I re-sang it, and I nailed it, it sounded right, but it didn't sound as good. So we just kept the original, which was a little imperfect, you know?

(Vocals with piano: "Day breaks in your head / And you're finally alone")

Norah: This song is high for me. It's a little high in a way that's like, "Ooh [laughter], am I going to make it?" But like I think that's what makes it cool, because there's that quality that I don't usually have, because I don't always sing that high. So most of it is hopefully raw sounding, which is the only way the song sounds right.

(Vocals with piano: "Time follows you around / Ticking slowly at your nerves")

Norah: And then, we thought, "Oh cool, it's done." And then, I ended up doing these sessions with Wayne Shorter, because I did this thing at the Kennedy Center a few years back, and I got to play with them, and I was like, "God, this is fun." I had never heard saxophone for the song, necessarily, and so, I wasn't quite sure about it. We kind of wrote it off as like, "Well, we'll try it, but I don't think it needs it." And then,

(Saxophone)

Norah: we fell in love with it.

(Saxophone)

Norah: And it sounded great, of course, because he's *Wayne Shorter* [laughter], and he can do anything. And he's amazing.

(Saxophone)

(Saxophone ends)

Norah: We booked too much studio time with him, because we didn't anticipate how quickly he would just nail it. And then,

Sarah: Yeah.

Norah: we're like, "Oh, okay. So we're done with those."

(Saxophone)

Norah: Yeah, he's amazing. I don't think any of us quite knew what was going to happen.

(Saxophone)

Norah: This song really came a really long way from how it started to how it ended up. Of all the songs on the record, I think it took the longest journey to find itself.

(Saxophone)

Norah: It's exactly what I pictured, and yet nothing I ever imagined.

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Day Breaks," by Norah Jones, in its entirety.

("Day Breaks" by NORAH JONES)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net for a link to buy this song, and to learn more about Norah Jones.

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