

**Song Exploder**  
**Sarah Kinsley - The King**  
**Episode 228**

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.

*("The King" by SARAH KINSLEY)*

Hrishikesh: Sarah Kinsley is a singer, songwriter, and multi-instrumentalist. Her most recent release is an EP called *The King*, which came out in 2021. When it came out, she was in college in New York city - and, at the moment, she still is. But the title track on *The King* was written at a time when the pandemic had shut things down, and she was back in Connecticut, living with her parents. In this episode, Sarah tells the story of demo'ing the song in her childhood bedroom, and then recording it in the studio with producer Jake Aron, before it went on to become a hit with over twenty million streams online so far. Also on March 16th, Sarah's performing at the Song Exploder show at South by Southwest, along with Perfume Genius, Kimbra, and more. I hope to see you there. Here's Sarah Kinsley on Song Exploder.

*("The King" by SARAH KINSLEY)*

*(Music ends)*

Sarah: My name is Sarah Kinsley. I had been in college for about three years, and it was exciting and riveting, and then I went home for this uncertain amount of time.

*(Synth)*

Sarah: I was at my parents' home in Connecticut. A lot of my old books are on the shelves, you know, the same sort of bed frame and my walls are kind of covered in the same things, and nothing has changed. And I was craving the feeling of being like overwhelmed by life, and by music, and art, and people. And I miss that feeling a lot. So 10 or 15 days before my birthday, I remember being really moody that day, because I was just thinking so much about like I'm turning 20, you know, this is the sort of shedding of a decade.

*(Synth ends)*

Sarah: I had written this list of things that I wanted to do before I turned 20: stay up all night to watch the sunrise from my window, dance in the rain barefoot on my driveway and go through the street. And then, the last thing on the list was like, write the song of my youth, of my life so far, you know, something really big [laughter], telling myself to do something to remember the past few years by. And then, I got this piano idea [sings piano melody].

*(Piano)*

Sarah: It's this piano in my parents' home. My phone is always propped up in front of me on this upright piano that I've been playing since for as long as I can remember.

*(Piano)*

Sarah: I get really sucked into the instrument, and I just feel like sometimes once I start playing, I forget everything. But I've never gotten a feeling ever before in music where it feels like something has fallen out of the sky and into my fingertips.

*(Piano)*

Sarah: I had grown up with the piano. It was like my introduction to music. So it made perfect sense that that was the thing that would be the catalyst for the rest of the song.

*(Piano ends)*

Sarah: And then,

*(Vocals with guitar)*

Sarah: I can't believe you're making me listen to this [laughter].

*(Music ends)*

Sarah: That recording is just hilarious, because it's from the day that my brain figured out what the pre-chorus melody would be, and you can hear me mumbling, like a fool [laughter].

*(Vocals with guitar)*

Sarah: [laughter] You can hear my fingers going up and down the fretboard, because I know that there's a really, really sick chord, but I don't know where it is [laughter].

*(Vocals with guitar)*

*(Music fades)*

Sarah: Before I even finished writing it, I just started producing a demo on my computer. I had this horrible little drum rack of like [mimics drum beat]

*(Beat)*

Sarah: [laughter] that I had programmed, and I found a couple synths.

*(Synth joins)*

Sarah: I don't have a bass, so I would cheat by just tuning my guitar part an octave lower [laughter].

*(Synth with bass)*

Sarah: But I knew exactly how I wanted certain things to sound.

*(Bass with beat)*

Sarah: I recorded it in my childhood bedroom, in my closet. I had this makeshift setup of like three really thick blankets kind of taped to my doors. [laughter] And I would just put my mic there.

*(Vocals join: "We were dancing in the rain / Our feet on the pavement / You said I was your second head / I knew exactly what you meant")*

Sarah: And I put this kind of wonky demo together.

*(Piano, bass, and beat)*

Sarah: In between the half demo phase and then the final thing, there are so many big decisions to be made. I had never worked with another producer or collaborator

on any of my own work. And so, that was a big decision. I landed on Jake Aron, who has a studio in Greenpoint in Brooklyn, and we had a great phone call, and I just, I loved his earlier work. And it was a relatively short phone call, but I remember feeling very amped and thinking like, “Okay, we are going to turn this into the thing, you know [laughter]?” So,

*(Drums)*

Sarah: one of the first things we did was we brought in an actual drummer, which was crazy because I had also only ever sort of programmed MIDI drums.

*(MIDI drums)*

Sarah: But Jason Berger, who played with Big Thief, came in.

*(Drums)*

*(Drums end)*

Sarah: And then, we went to this other room in the same building of Jake’s studio. And I remember this squeaky clean, white piano in the room, and it was all mic’d and set up. But when I had made the demo, I had found this piano sound for the introduction.

*(Piano)*

Sarah: And I loved the sound.

*(Piano)*

Sarah: So I was really hesitant about giving that up and replacing it. But I remember going and sitting down, and playing one note,

*(Piano)*

Sarah: and it was exactly the same as what I had programmed.

*(Piano)*

Sarah: Jake had a friend who was in a different studio there, and he was sort of listening to me.

*(Piano)*

Sarah: And I just remember seeing him nodding like furiously like, “Yeah, yeah, yeah,” like it was [laughter], it was so validating.

*(Bass)*

Sarah: Jake played the bass part, I played the guitar parts, and we kind of wrote those simultaneously.

*(Bass, percussion, and drums)*

*(Bass)*

Sarah: We had to go back and forth about the rhythm of the bass

*(Drums join)*

Sarah: during the chorus, like maybe five times. I wanted it to move faster. But Jake was like, “No, no, I think we should go just on the beat every four.”

*(Bass)*

Sarah: And we, it was so great.

*(Music ends)*

Sarah: I played a lot of classical music up until I was in high school really. That was like my whole life for a long time. And I played the piano and violin, and I loved classical music.

*(Synth)*

Sarah: The chord that I played in the synth is like this really lush, really layered chord. And it was something that I learned about like impressionist music or like romantic music, which made use of these kinds of chords. And that was a huge part of “The King.”

*(Synth fades)*

Sarah: My favorite lines of the entire song were the first ones that I wrote, which was that first verse, "I built a time machine to see you again." It felt like a really guttural, very expressive way of admitting to myself that I was longing for something that I didn't have anymore.

*(Vocals: "I built a time machine to see you again")*

Sarah: And I was just thinking, like, "Who am I talking about?"

*(Vocals: "To hear your phone call, your voice down the hall / The way we were back then")*

Sarah: I was speaking to myself in the past saying, you know, I wish I could call myself, and hear my own voice, and know what it was like to feel so abundantly happy like I had, and what I had known.

*(Vocals: "So tell me / Before we get older let's do everything")*

Sarah: Those background vocals during the verses are from my first demo.

*(Vocals)*

Sarah: I'll just sing into the mic over and over again on loop. And then, eventually something comes out of it.

*(Vocals: "You could never love again")*

Sarah: I really wanted to keep the background vocals as how I had recorded them. And we did, and Jake mixed them in, and it was great.

*(Vocals with synth: "And you said you could never love again")*

Sarah: There is more background vocals at the end. I'm singing like, "Again, again," and we did like a bunch of layers of those.

*(Vocals with synth: "Again, again, again")*

Sarah: We talked a lot about layering when we were in the studio. The fact that the meaning of the song was about the multiplicity of life, or like me talking to

myself, I feel like that influenced the kind of production choices we made. You know, we layered tons of instruments.

*(Piano, synth, and beat)*

*(Piano)*

Sarah: That piano arpeggio, the idea came in D-flat major. I tried playing it in other keys, and I would go back to that original idea, and just sink into it because it felt so right. So the hardest [laughter] part to sing in the song is the chorus [laughter], because it's, it is so high.

*(Vocals with synth: "I want to be the king of your heart / Let's fall apart and start again / You'll see the end of me / I want to be the king")*

Sarah: When I think of just the word, the king, I think of this greatness. And I thought about this a lot after writing the song, like why the king? There's so many connotations immediately imbued into the word, you know, it's gendered, it's, has to do with power, it has to do with status. There's a lot of things like wrapped up into it. But when I think of "king of your heart," I think of

*(Synth)*

Sarah: living in a way that's loving and loving very powerfully, and in a way that's sort of unashamed. It was really funny when the song came up, because I remember people saying like, "It's about love. This song is about loving someone, and it's about wanting to be the king of their heart, and giving yourself to someone." I was like, "Yes, that's, that's true. Except it's about myself." I would love to say, and I think I can very peacefully and like [laughter] surely say that I am the king of my heart [laughter].

*(Music ends)*

Hrishikesh: And now, here is "The King" by Sarah Kinsley, in its entirety.

*("The King" by SARAH KINSLEY)*

Hrishikesh: Visit [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net) to learn more. You'll find links to stream or download this track.

This episode and the show's theme music were made by me with editing help from Craig Eley and Casey Deal, artwork by Carlos Lerma, music clearance by Kathleen Smith, and production assistance from Chloe Parker. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a network of independent, listener-supported, artist-owned podcasts. You can learn more about our shows at [radiotopia.fm](http://radiotopia.fm). You can follow me on Twitter and Instagram @HrishiHirway, and you can follow the show @SongExploder. You can also get a Song Exploder t-shirt at [songexploder.net/shirt](http://songexploder.net/shirt). I'm Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.