

**Song Exploder**  
**Sylvan Esso - Coffee**  
**Episode 43**

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.

Hrishikesh: The band Sylvan Esso has two members.

Amelia: I'm Amelia Meath.

Nick: I'm Nick Sanborn.

Hrishikesh: And Amelia and Nick met while they were both working on other projects. Amelia asked Nick to do a remix for the band she was in at the time, and when that remix was done, they both loved how it turned out. So:

Amelia: We orchestrated a meeting and began talking about the potential for us to make new tunes together.

Hrishikesh: They emailed song ideas back and forth for a while, until they found time to be in the same place.

Nick: She came down to North Carolina, which is where I had just moved, while she's on her break from tour.

Hrishikesh: And it was at that point that they first started working on the song, "Coffee."

*("Coffee" by SYLVAN ESSO)*

*(Music fades)*

Nick: After we had exhausted this stuff we had already written over email, the first stuff we were like working on writing, that was one of the first beats I played for her.

Amelia: We were just scrolling through beats. And I was like, "That one!"

Nick: Yeah, it was an old beat of mine.

Amelia: Yeah, and I got attached to it because of the beautiful, the bell noises in it.

*(Xylophone)*

Nick: You know the company, Little Tikes? They make, like, toys for kids. They had a xylophone toy that you didn't hit with a stick, it was like, had piano keys. So that's me playing that.

*(Xylophone)*

Nick: I love all sorts of stuff like that, where you can really hear the functioning of the instrument. The sound the key makes is, like, 90% of why I love it. You hear all the clacking of your fingers moving over these crappy plastic keys.

*(Xylophone)*

Nick: I love that little thing.

Amelia: But I remember when I initially heard the beat, it sounded like someone playing a Little Tikes keyboard underwater, like there's something ghostly and sad about it and quiet. We put it on my phone, and I went out under the porch, and I think I wrote most of it,

Nick: right then.

Amelia: right then.

*(Synth)*

Amelia: The song's about falling in love for the second time. I fell in love when I was 18. And then, I fell in love, the second time, when I was about 23, 24. I was bummed because I was recognizing all of these really huge, beautiful, sweeping love feelings that I'd had before with my first love, with the second person that I was falling in love with. And being like, "Ah man, really?" Like I already know all the secrets? I mean the last time I really fucked that one up. Am I going to do it again? And you're feeling all these things, but at the same time, you're like, "I know all these feelings." Recognizing that love itself is a re-creatable emotion with two different people. So I started writing about it in terms of choreographed dance moves.

*(Vocals: "True, it's a dance, we know the moves / The bow, the dip, the woo")*

Amelia: I like songwriting because you can talk about things very directly, and then pretend that they're metaphor later.

*(Synth)*

Nick: So the first sound you hear is that [mimics the synth] kind of sound, which is,

Amelia: [laughter]

Nick: [laughter] I need to remember never to sing my synth parts.

*(Synth with beat)*

Nick: I had never played with this particular synth before. And it's this plugin synthesizer, it's not a, it's not a physical thing. And so, since it's not a physical thing, and I didn't have any other gear besides my laptop with me, I actually played that on the, like, the letter keyboard, like the typing keyboard, which is why it sounds so disjointed. Because I'm trying to play, you know, triplets on something that is not made [laughter] for musical [laughter] interpretation [laughter].

*(Beat)*

Amelia: So we had like the main bulk of this song really quick, and then we couldn't figure out what to do with it. I wanted to, like, add different 1950s dance move references. I was walking, singing "Coffee." And then, I realized that "My baby does the hanky panky," worked perfectly. It's from the Tommy James and the Shondells song.

*(Hanky Panky by TOMMY JAMES AND THE SHONDELLS)*

*(Music fades)*

Amelia: I liked the idea of it because one, it's a dance move, The Hanky Panky, but it was also, at the time when that song came out in the 50s, it was a way of talking about having sex without actually saying that you have sex. It was just a way of saying, "You know, that we have this cool dance move that we do." But also it

kind of sounds to me like the partner could be cheating on like “hanky panky” sort of sounds a little bit like they're seeing someone else, like another question of doubt. So there's all of those, all of those interpretations wrapped up into it.

Nick: Yeah, and I think the way you changed that melody there completely changes the way I hear that lyric.

Amelia: It makes it a sad one.

*(Vocals: “My baby does the hanky panky / My baby does / My baby does the hanky panky / My baby does”)*

Nick: Before we added that section, the song didn't feel like it took you anywhere.

*(Vocals, synth, and bass: “Get up, get down / Get up, get down / Feel the turn of rotation and stop / See the next one waiting”)*

Nick: And I think when I was thinking about how I could bring as, hopefully as much to the table as Amelia brought on it, I was trying to figure out how I could emphasize the resolution that happens in your real life. This can be a sad realization, but ultimately, it's a really beautiful thing. So then, that idea kind of got planted of, *well, I wonder if I could modulate this in such a way that it ends up major*, and like in a major key, I mean.

*(Vocals and synths: “Get up, get down / Get up, get down / Feel the turn of rotation and stop / See the next one waiting / Get up, get down / Get up, get down / Get up / Sentiments the same but the pair of feet change”)*

Amelia: It's one of the things I'm most proud of, in terms of our collaboration in the song. Being able to reinterpret such a bummed opening into a beautiful resolution at the end.

*(Vocals and synths: “Get up, get down / Get up, get down / Get up / Sentiments the same but the pair of feet change”)*

*(Music ends)*

Hrishikesh: And now, here's the full version of “Coffee,” by Sylvan Esso.

*(“Coffee” by SYLVAN ESSO)*

Hrishikesh: Visit [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net) to download this episode, and to find links to Sylvan Esso and their music. Next time on Song Exploder, Death Cab for Cutie.

*("El Dorado" by DEATH CAB FOR CUTIE)*

Hrishikesh: You can find all the past and future episodes of Song Exploder at [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net) or on iTunes, Stitcher, or wherever you download podcasts. Find the show on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram @SongExploder. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a curated network of extraordinary story-driven shows. Learn more at [radiotopia.fm](http://radiotopia.fm).

*("El Dorado" by DEATH CAB FOR CUTIE)*

*(Music fades)*