

**Song Exploder**  
**The Lumineers - Ophelia**  
**Episode 71**

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.

*("Ophelia" by THE LUMINEERS)*

Hrishikesh: The Lumineers released their second album on April 8th, 2016. Their first album went platinum, and they spent months touring relentlessly in support of it. That schedule took a toll on their relationship, but they ended up putting it into their songs. In this episode, Wes and Jeremiah break down their song "Ophelia." You'll hear their demos and a version that didn't make it to the album. They'll explain how the final track is not just a product of what they put into it, but what they decided to leave out. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway. You're listening to Song Exploder.

*("Ophelia" by THE LUMINEERS)*

Jeremiah: My name is Jeremiah Fraites.

Wes: Yeah. My name is Wesley Schultz.

*(Music fades)*

Jeremiah: And we're The Lumineers. Ramsey, New Jersey's where we grew up. To prepare for this podcast, I was looking through my old files and I found this file. It was this old janky idea called "Ophelia," I think, "hyphen Ramsey."

*(Piano)*

Jeremiah: I can remember that moment being at Ramsey. And it was really cool to find that. I mean, especially to hear how unpolished and there's nothing that cool about it.

*(Piano)*

Jeremiah: There's not really much there [laughter], you know, but with me and Wes, we see these ideas, and they make sense to us.

Wes: I don't know if you sent me that right away or what, but in my head, when I hear it, I hear it the same way I heard it the first time, which is, "I love this. I love this. Let's do this here. Can we change this? Can we shorten that?"

*(Studio conversation with piano)*

Jeremiah: It just reminded us how much we worked on a song like this. I mean, these songs don't come easy to us.

*(Studio conversation with piano)*

Jeremiah: You can hear that we call it the "Dee-dely-dee part" of the piano, and yeah, Wes said, "Let's cut that in half. Let's try that."

*(Piano with guitar)*

Wes: I remember playing, right around the time our first album came out, in a back bar in LA, they had this piano, this giant circular booth. And a bunch of our friends, we had played a set and now we're gathered around a piano, and Jerry's playing that. I'm singing, [sung] "Oh, Ophelia."

*(Vocals with piano: "Oh, Ophelia / Heaven help the fool who falls in love / Honey, I love you")*

Jeremiah: I'm like, "Man, how did you come up with that?"

Wes: You wish it was like that every time. And sometimes it's like pulling teeth. I heard Tom Waits talking about how, you know, you almost have to sneak up behind the muse, and like take it out.

Hrishikesh: So the song began as "Ophelia," but, immediately, they felt like they had to change it because the sixties band, The Band, already had a song called "Ophelia."

Wes: I felt like it was a parking spot that was already taken, you know? I didn't want to encroach on this sacred space, that is their song called "Ophelia."

*("Ophelia" by THE BAND)*

*(Music fades)*

Wes: But the more I started using other names, it just didn't work. It wasn't the right musicality to the word. I was trying to think of like a "Jo Jo" or something with the "O" and the "A" at the end, but it wasn't working [laughter]. Finally had no choice, but go with it.

*(Vocals: "Oh, Ophelia / You've been on my mind, girl, since the flood / Oh, Ophelia / Heaven help the fool who falls in love")*

Wes: The chorus poured out in a very effortless way.

Hrishikesh: But they got stuck. They couldn't come up with a verse they liked. Eventually they wrote something, but

Wes: I just knew, "Hey, this verse is just weak, and it doesn't live up to the power of the hook melody that Jer had come up with." So I was like, it almost makes you more upset because you know that there's this shiny, beautiful part of the song, and then, you're not really matching it with something to balance that. No one will ever hear the chorus, if you don't make the verse hold its own.

Jeremiah: And nothing can be worse sometimes than having what you know to be a chorus with no verse, or a verse with no chorus. It's like you have the winning lottery ticket, but you don't have anywhere to cash it. You're like, "What the hell is the point [laughter]?"

Wes: Then four years passes.

Hrishikesh: And when it came time to make a new record, they dug this idea back up.

Jeremiah: Yeah, we started really working on it in January of last year.

Wes: I remember thinking, *Well, it's called "Ophelia," so maybe I'll go back and read Hamlet, and I'll figure out how to tell the story of Hamlet, and combine it with something else.* That felt really contrived. So we just ended up demoing the song, and through the demoing process, just playing with the melody, these lyrics just kind of popped out.

*(Vocals: "Ah, ah, when I was younger / I, I should've known better / And I can't feel no remorse")*

Wes: “Can't feel no remorse.” It keeps talking about this idea of this massive disconnect. I felt very disconnected, emotionally, from a lot of different things, and I don't know that I had actually understood that I felt that way. I thought I was being really good at being on the road and at life, I guess [laughter], and I was really just surviving the road. I think we ended up on a bus together, and touring together, and we'd look over at each other, and it was like, we were kind of strangers to one another.

*(Vocals: “And I can't feel no remorse / And you don't feel nothing back”)*

Wes: So, a big part of the writing this record was just sort of understanding who I'm sitting next to when I do the writing, and not having it be this, literally like a stranger to yourself and to that person. I'd never planned to say those phrases, it just poured out, and I didn't really know how to feel about it.

Jeremiah: I thought Wes did a really cool job of articulating these experiences that we were really experiencing.

Wes: We went with those lyrics because I felt like they did the song justice, but that's really not how I'm usually comfortable working. I usually want to make sure, make sure of it or something. There's like an OCD quality to it.

Hrishikesh: When it came time to record, the band went to upstate New York, where producer Simone Felice had picked out a studio.

Wes: It's called The Clubhouse in Rhinebeck, New York, so right near Woodstock. It was kind of awesome to watch because the engineer, Ryan Hewitt, he's going around with, like, essentially, a stethoscope, you know, trying to figure out where in this Clubhouse recording studio is the best place to stomp.

*(Stomp sound)*

Jeremiah: We did some group stomps to get that sort of wall of sound vibe. It was me, Wes, and the producer Simone, with our boots on the wood floor in the studio.

Wes: I'm walking in, drinking a coffee, watching these guys walk around a room stomping. That's how you guys found it. It's just one corner of the room that just happened to have just enough, you know, give to the wood. And we all just gathered around, and gathered around a mic, and stomped in unison.

*(Stomp sound)*

Wes: Dinosaur foot stomp, that was the kick drum sound in our head, like a Brontosaurus, just being like, “boom,”

*(Stomp sound)*

Wes: you know, just heavy thick.

*(Stomp sound)*

Wes: You're kind of creating drums around that simple footstop that used to be the blues players. You know, that was it. And then, you're just, almost giving that some steroids, you're just pumping that up, but that's, that's all you need sometimes.

*(Stomp sound)*

Jeremiah: And the last chorus, I sort of heard this idea of dropping a beat. You know, I hate beats, but I was like, “Oh, maybe we could do a beat for [laughter] the last chorus.” And we tried it, and it just felt really sluggish, and just didn't vibe. We were like trying to be somebody else that we weren't.

Wes: As a drummer, Jerry's putting his ego aside a lot. He's not going to really show off a whole lot, even though he could play circles around a lot of players, but he's deciding that “I'm going to serve the song.” And it's, sort of, acted out in the restraint.

Jeremiah: I get so much out of my system to help write chord structure and melody and instrumentation that when it comes to writing or performing drums, I've already gotten so much out of my system of being able to help with the song that it allows me to be simple.

Wes: We had Byron Isaacs on the bass.

*(Bass)*

Wes: He's got chops, he's nasty.

*(Bass)*

Jeremiah: Wes and I have a very strong idea of what we want the music to sound like. And we can do everything, at least we think we can do everything [laughter], *but* bass, you know? This electric bass is like this, sort of, mystery to us, how to implement that into our own song.

*(Bass)*

Wes: It is the only like bass fill we've ever had on a

Jeremiah: Yeah [laughter].

Wes: record [laughter].

*(Piano)*

Jeremiah: So there was the grand piano that I used mostly, then there was an upright. And normally, I'd be more drawn to the upright, but working with Ryan Hewitt, the engineer, he was able to get the sounds that I was explaining to him.

*(Piano)*

Wes: There's a moment, the word "paycheck," where I thought the microphone clipped, and it's just the vocal chords, kind of, mashing together.

*(Vocals with piano: "I, I got a little paycheck / You got big plans and you gotta move")*

Wes: It's just, that's how it actually sounds, and it's one of my favorite moments. So every time we would listen back, it's like this natural overdrive that just happens because we picked just the right note where I probably couldn't sing anything above that, but it's the ultimate, you're sort of reaching for the note.

*(Vocals: "got a little paycheck / You got big plans and you gotta move")*

Jeremiah: I think the reverb acted as almost, as like a stitching. Wes' vocal and the piano, since there was no other instruments, literally, to glue [laughter] those, the extra reverb really made sense. And we really fell in love with that quickly, that sort of bridged the gap between one instrument and the lead vocal, and it was, it sounds awesome.

Wes: It's like an emotion combined with a physical place. You describe these really vague things, like "I'm thinking of a, you know, a very long dark cave where I can barely see the light."

*(Vocals: "Oh, Ophelia")*

Wes: That's Simone.

Jeremiah: [laughter]

Wes: That's Simone, Jer, and me. I think it was just kind of, we call it like a gang of sailors, just singing.

Jeremiah: That's got sailor gang [laughter]

Wes: Yeah [laughter].

Jeremiah: all over it.

*(Vocals: "Oh, Ophelia")*

Jeremiah: We tried guitar, and it was like, "Is this song just going to be piano?"

Wes: You remember we brought in horn players? It was like Bruce Springsteen's

Jeremiah: [laughter]

Wes: horn section [laughter]. We knew somebody who knew them, and they came in, and they laid down all these beautiful horns.

*(Vocals, piano, horns, and beat: "I, I got a new girlfriend here / Feels like he's on top")*

Wes: It's totally different, but we realized it wasn't really what we were going for. So we kind of had to laugh because we were with these world-class musicians and a band that, you know, we love, and we didn't use it.

*(Vocals, piano, horns, and beat: "Oh, Ophelia / Heaven help the fool who falls in love")*

*(Music ends)*

Jeremiah: Ultimately, like most of our songs with Wes and I, the best ideas are sitting right in front of us, [laughter] but we just still got to check out what's behind them, and like, "Ah, what's under that rock?" And it's just funny, we usually come back to something that was pretty evident from the get-go, but we still got to make sure that what we have is good.

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Ophelia," by The Lumineers, in its entirety.

*("Ophelia" by THE LUMINEERS)*

Hrishikesh: Visit [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net) for more on The Lumineers, including a link to buy this song.

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. Next time on Song Exploder, Carly Rae Jepsen.

*("When I Needed You" by CARLY RAE JEPSEN)*

Hrishikesh: Song Exploder is a proud member of the Radiotopia network, from PRX, made possible by the Knight foundation and Mailchimp, celebrating creativity, chaos, and teamwork. Find this show @SongExploder on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. This episode was edited by Christian Koons and me. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.

*("When I Needed You" by CARLY RAE JEPSEN)*

*(Music fades)*