

Song Exploder
TOKiMONSTA - Bibimbap
Episode 120

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.

("Bibimbap" by TOKiMONSTA)

Hrishikesh: Los Angeles producer and beatmaker Jennifer Lee released her first album as TOKiMONSTA in 2010, on Flying Lotus' label Brainfeeder. She's collaborated with Kool Keith and Anderson .Paak, among others. Her newest album, *Lune Rouge*, was released in October 2017. And in this episode, TOKiMONSTA breaks down her song "Bibimbap."

("Bibimbap" by TOKiMONSTA)

Jennifer: Hey, I'm Jennifer Lee and I also go by TOKiMONSTA.

(Music fades out)

Jennifer: My parents were born in Korea. I was born in the states but they had been in the US for quite a while before I was born. I wanted to create a song that pulls from my roots and my cultural heritage. I was going through and listening to a lot of traditional music, there's a style of music called Pansori, which is like some really old school Korean folk music.

(Pansori music)

Jennifer: It involved a lot of women doing this crazy orchestrated drumming that was also very performance based. And it tends to be quite sad sometimes as well.

(Pansori music)

(Pansori music fades out)

Jennifer: I was going through and listening to all this Pansori stuff, and basically heard this woman wailing and singing over these drums.

(Korean drum)

Jennifer: And in traditional Pansori, there's this drum but it's on its side. And it has this cool stick, so one side of the stick is flat, and the other side of the stick is rounded. The performer also uses their hand so they can create all sorts of really cool sounds and rhythms. I thought it was really cool but since I don't have that instrument,

(Korean drums fade)

Jennifer: I took the sounds I heard from that and just started banging on things in my room that sounded similar [laughter].

(Percussion sounds)

Jennifer: I have a few little drums at home, so I just did my best to kind of mimic the rhythm and the sounds but with what I had available.

(Percussion sounds)

Jennifer: And then on top of that, I started singing.

(Percussion ends)

(Vocals)

Jennifer: So kind of mimicking the things that I hear in traditional Pansori. You know, I tried my best to tap into my inner folky Korean person [laughter]. My goal for this song was not to sample but to do what I could to recreate the things that I heard, to reinterpret my culture.

(Vocals end)

Jennifer: There's a few different layers of vocals on this song.

(Vocals along with percussion)

Jennifer: The vocals play so much into the percussion. And it's so rhythmic in that style of traditional Korean music, it can become very operatic. But sometimes it's just making sounds with your voice. So I'm just using my voice to mimic what the drums sounds like,

(Vocals)

Jennifer: and basically saying, “Tung.”

(Vocals)

Jennifer: With the Korean language, there’s a lot of onomatopoeia. It’s almost like if you said, “Bang.” Tung is kind of like the same sound that a drum makes when you hit it. Like if my mom was saying that the bass is too loud in my car, she would be like, tung tung [speaks Korean], “that boom boom sound is too loud,” my mom would say it that way.

(Vocals along with percussion)

Jennifer: So I’m just layering all these vocal rhythms on top of each other, almost like beat boxing.

(Vocals along with percussion fade)

(Kayagum)

Jennifer: The instrument you’re hearing right now is called a kayagum. It’s a stringed instrument in Korea. And I had a friend in Korea whose aunt was able to play the kayagum, so he just sent me a bunch of her stuff.

(Kayagum)

Jennifer: But when I received it, I didn’t really know how I would use it. Because it works in a very specific key, the scale that a lot of eastern instruments in general exist in, it’s very different than the western scale. And it is very difficult to mix that sound in with a scale that I’m used to working in, so what I ended up doing is actually chopping and pitching all the notes in this song. So the original version sounds completely different.

(Kayagum fades)

(Pitched kayagum)

Jennifer: I didn't change the cadence of it at all. So the rhythm and all that, it was kept the same, because I think that's a really important element to that stringed instrument. All I did is pitch the individual notes.

(Pitched kayagum)

Jennifer: So I took the kayagum, I had it on loop, and I started trying out different chord progressions that would compliment the kayagum, which initially proved to be a bit difficult. But then I just kind of landed on these magical chords.

(Keyboard joins)

Jennifer: I really like bell tone, Rhodes-y sounds. So I took the kayagum, it exists in this scale, and then I'm putting it next to more soulful R&B chords and drums.

(Drums join)

Jennifer: I was just so happy that I was able to find that marriage between my east and west influences.

(Shaker joins)

(Music fades out)

Jennifer: With this song, I just really wanted it to tell a story in general. I feel like there's a lot more storytelling in lots of traditional music from cultures all around the world, and there's a bit less of that in modern music. I definitely wanted to go in this like linear storytelling path where you can follow the song and sort of meander with it as it turns a corner and turns into this big, epic swell and then it slows down again to continue its journey. A lot of traditional Korean music can be kind of sad, and with this song I wanted to try something different, like a song that was a bit more heroic. That's when I decided to bring in the brass and create these big sounds and this big movement, and to kind of change the mood.

(Brass)

Jennifer: I made the brass using a patch in Kontakt. So they're not real brass sounds, but they sound pretty good to me.

(Brass)

Jennifer: A lot of times if I'm on the road or if I'm somewhere else, the easiest way to create is with what you have and a lot of times I just have these sample packs.

(Brass ends)

(Pitched up vocals)

Jennifer: The main vocals are from me but pitched up quite high. I'm not a very good singer. But I would say I am a decent producer and I can work my voice into a direction that is complementary to the music that I'm making.

(Pitched up vocals)

Jennifer: I just freestyled these weird [laughter] like ad-libs all over the song, and some of it worked, some of it didn't but you can also create such a cool sound just from the editing process as well. You know, I can take the vocals, I can pitch them up, I can pitch them down, I can pan them from left to right, and treat the vocals more or less like an instrument.

(Processed vocals)

Jennifer: That creates this ethereal melody that exists throughout the song. While you have the Korean vocals creating this movement, that's more percussive and rhythmic.

(Korean vocals, processed vocals, and percussion sounds)

Jennifer: It's just having like two different ingredients in a recipe.

(Korean vocals, processed vocals, and percussion sounds)

(Vocals and percussion fade)

Jennifer: I tend to make this correlation between food and music quite often. They're all about layers, and a lot of times it does take experimentation.

(Synth)

Jennifer: “Bibimbap” is a Korean dish, it basically translates to mixed rice. It’s sticky rice, and then you have spinach, bean sprouts, potato shoot things, shredded carrots, and then on top of that, a fried egg. And the way that you eat it is you have to just like mash it all together. So with this song, I named it “Bibimbap,” but I didn’t think I was going to keep it that name. I thought, you know, eventually I’d come up with a more profound, a more serious name for it. Because I thought the song might sound too silly, and I thought the song was a bit more serious, but when I really took a step back and listened to the entire song and the idea behind it, I realized the song very much is the dish itself, a bunch of different ingredients coming together to create this recipe.

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here’s “Bibimbap,” by TOKiMONSTA, in its entirety.

(“Bibimbap” by TOKiMONSTA)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net to learn more about TOKiMONSTA. Next time on Song Exploder, the theme to the hit Netflix show, *Stranger Things*. Song Exploder is produced by me, along with Christian Koons, with help from intern Olivia Wood. 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 listeners like you. Learn more at radiotopia.fm. You can find every episode of Song Exploder at songexploder.net or wherever you download podcasts. You can follow the show on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, @SongExploder. Let me know what you think of this episode. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.