

**Song Exploder**  
**Unknown Mortal Orchestra - Multi-Love**  
**Episode 46**

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.

Ruban: My name is Ruben Nielson. I play guitar and sing in a band called Unknown Mortal Orchestra.

*("Multi-Love" by UNKNOWN MORTAL ORCHESTRA)*

Ruban: If you have, like, different relationships, so if you have a bunch of people that you fall in love with in your life, and then you start to wonder whether you, you're continuously in love with the same part of different people. That, to me, is what "Multi-Love" is about.

*("Multi-Love" by UNKNOWN MORTAL ORCHESTRA)*

Hrishikesh: "Multi-Love" is the title track from the 2015 album by Unknown Mortal Orchestra. In this episode, Ruban Nielson tells the story of how he made the song with help from his brother Kody Nielson, and how it was influenced by Romeo and Juliet, Questlove, and a broken synthesizer.

*("Multi-Love" by UNKNOWN MORTAL ORCHESTRA)*

*(Music fades)*

Ruban: That song, my brother had a lot to do with, because he was playing this chord progression. I just started singing over what he was doing, just kind of ad-libbing. I have this Baldwin Piano in the basement, and so, he just played that, and I just walked around in circles, ad-libbing for like two or three hours [laughter].

*(Vocals with piano)*

Ruban: You know, just put a mic up, and I just recorded what I was ad-libbing, and then we sifted through it later, and then we went and we did it again, and then, we sifted through again, because I found that the longer he played the chord progression over and over again, the more I would sing the same thing, the

strongest melody would stick. So it wasn't like I was ad-libbing different stuff every time, it was like I was slowly finding the real melody.

*(Vocals with piano)*

*(Laughter)*

Ruban: I believe that there's one true melody that you're mining for. And it's a process of eliminating all the things that aren't that true melody. But I just never, I never used this technique to get there before, so it was really interesting.

We recorded all the instrumental stuff and just a guide vocal with no lyrics.

*(Vocals with keyboard)*

Ruban: It's weird because I kind of,

*(Music ends)*

Ruban: felt like it had some connection to gospel for some reason, not musically or anything like that, it was just kind of like a vibe or something. Like, do you remember that movie, *Romeo and Juliet*? There's this kind of gospel thing with it. It has like a choir going, [sung] "Everybody's free."

*(Vocals: "Everybody's free")*

Ruban: [laughter] You know?

*(Vocals: "Everybody's free / Everybody's free")*

*(Music ends)*

Ruban: It reminded me of that, and I hadn't seen that movie since it came out, so I was kind of trying to take the song all the way home, with that feeling intact. Because that's the thing is, I didn't go back to that song. I wanted to have my feeling of what I thought that song was rather than get caught up on the specifics.

*(Drums)*

Ruban: That was Kody on this, playing drums on this. And the main reason I wanted to work with Kody on this album was for his drumming. I saw an interview with Questlove, and he was talking about how there was this drum fill that he liked playing when he was a kid, and his dad didn't want him playing that stuff.

*(Questlove: "I was obsessed with this particular fill")*

*(Drum fill)*

*(Questlove: "This fill:")*

*(Drum fill)*

*(Drum fill ends)*

*(Questlove: "My father just wanted his music dry and in the pocket. If I ever did a fill like that, I just ran the risk of him turning around and giving me that look.")*

Ruban: So I just thought it would be funny to have that fill on the record somewhere.

*(Drum fill)*

*(Drum fill ends)*

Ruban: We built a drum track, and then I played bass on it.

*(Bass)*

Ruban: Playing bass is a big part. I kind of need the bassline to be perfect [laughter]. It's like, because the bassline is one note at a time, because it's a melody, I'll just keep doing it until it's right.

*(Bass)*

Ruban: I just knew that the song is going to be called "Multi-Love" [laughter]. That's all I had because I had come up with that, wrote that phrase down in a notebook. And as soon as I wrote it down, I have this, like, notebook where it's kind of like, I circled it. I'd written, "album title? Question mark" [laughter] after it. And so, I kind of had that phrase in my head for some reason. And when we were working

on this song, I thought like, *Oh, this is going to be the first track on the album.*  
And so, that's what, really all I had.

*(Vocals: "Multi-love")*

Ruban: And I sat on that for a long time, because I didn't want to rush the lyrics.

*(Vocals: "Checked into my heart and trashed it like a hotel room")*

Ruban: "Checked into my heart and trashed it like a hotel room." I wrote that down in my notebook, and I thought that it was cheesy, but the cheesiness is made up for by just being kind of dramatic and catchy. Does that make sense [laughter]? I thought like, *Oh, this is, no, I like it,* It's just, it is over the top, but it's kind of a pretty dramatic song, so.

*(Synth)*

Ruban: I don't know why this happens, but I get really into this stuff, you know [laughter]? And if I have a phrase that I think is important enough to be the name of the next album, then it starts to take over my whole life. But what "Multi-Love" is supposed to be about, just like some kind of modern version of, like, love with a capital "L" from the 60s. You know, things like gender, or sexual orientation, or race, or all those things start to kind of, they're not like part of the transcendent value of love, we should evolve past that. That, to me, is what "Multi-Love" is about. If we were to evolve beyond the specifics of the organisms that we inhabit, then we would still probably need love. Love would still be a useful concept.

*(Synth)*

Ruban: I was not really a synth guy, but I started buying broken synths that people were selling fairly cheap on Craigslist and stuff like that. And then, I had a screwdriver, so I just started unscrewing everything, and looking inside it, and trying to figure out what's going on. And I mean, everybody that knows what they're doing, didn't know what they were doing in the beginning, I figure, so [laughter] I started, like, trying to fix them, and that's what I did. So, and then I had a synth, and that sounded really cool, so I started playing it on stuff.

*(Synth ends)*

*(Pause)*

Ruban: It wasn't really a guitar driven track. It was piano-y, and I didn't want to get in the way of the piano and the synths and stuff. I tried some different sounds, because I didn't want it to sound too much like a guitar. I put down a sitar.

*(Electric sitar)*

Ruban: It's not a real sitar. It's called a Electric Sitar, but it has the same fingerings as a guitar. So, a lot of the times, when you hear a sitar on old 60s records, that's what it is.

*(Electric sitar)*

Ruban: It feels funny, because if I feel a little bit pretentious, like talking about how into my music [laughter] I get, when I actually have to explode it, and I'm talking about, it feels like, "Ah, yeah, but you know, it's just a jam." Like I just want people to listen to it, and when they're like making their coffee in the morning, and have it improve their day a little bit, that's really what it's for [laughter]. It's just that I get really into it [laughter].

*(Electric sitar)*

*(Music ends)*

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Multi-Love," by Unknown Mortal Orchestra, in its entirety.

*("Multi-Love" by UNKNOWN MORTAL ORCHESTRA)*

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. Next time on Song Exploder, HEALTH.

*("Stonefist" by HEALTH)*

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*("Stonefist" by HEALTH)*

*(Music fades)*

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