

Song Exploder
Vagabon - Water Me Down
Episode 177

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.

("Water Me Down" by VAGABON)

Hrishikesh: When Laetitia Tamko started making the second Vagabon album, she really wanted to produce the entire thing on her own. It would be a new sound, and producing was still a relatively new skill for her, but she wanted to tackle it head on, and do it all herself. On this song, though, "Water Me Down," Laetitia actually had a co-producer, Eric Littmann. It's the one exception to her otherwise entirely self-produced album. In this episode, she breaks down how she and Eric collaborated to make the song, and why it was worth making that exception.

("Water Me Down" by VAGABON)

Laetitia: Hi, I'm Laetitia Tamko, and I make music as Vagabon.

(Music fades out)

Laetitia: I was at my friend Eric Littmann's house in Bushwick, New York. We met at a mountain show. Our friend used to host these shows where you hike up a mountain with your instruments in Cold Spring, New York, and you play at different points of the hike. So, I performed one and Eric just needed a ride, so we met through the carpool and became great friends. He is someone who has been really supportive of my journey as a producer. During the winter, every Wednesday we would get together and make music, so we were in his very small bedroom. And the plan was to demo a Vagabon song that I had started writing a few days earlier, so I came there with the intention of recording another song and then he showed me this synth line that he had started working on for another project.

(Synth)

Laetitia: I heard it and I was like, "Oh my god, what is that?"

Eric: I'd been playing around a little bit with my minilogue, and I made this patch, it's this very like soft keyboard kind of sound.

(Synth)

Eric: I was just playing around with a couple of chords and then was playing around with a lead line with some delay where the notes kind of cascade into each other.

(Synth lead)

Eric: And then, you know, I added this fluttery MS-20 lead line.

(MS-20 synth)

Laetitia: The MS-20, it's a synthesizer, a bass synth, essentially, and you can kind of make any sound from it.

(MS-20 synth)

Laetitia: And I heard this 909 kick.

(Kick)

Eric: I didn't have a big intention, going in. I was just kind of chasing a feeling and was just kind of excited by it. It was this kind of like soft pulsating, little house-y song.

(Kick along with synths)

Eric: So this is all kind of going on and Laetitia had come over and one of my roommates must have let her in or something. And she kind of overheard that like, me kind of playing around with this and like her ears kind of perked up like, "Oh, like what's that you're playing around with?" You know, like, "Oh, I kind of want to like play around with this actually." And I don't know what we were planning on doing that day, but this became our focus.

Laetitia: I was like, "I have to have this song." And so, I asked him if I can hop on it and just do some vocals. So he gave me the room for 30 minutes and, you know, immediately I had an idea for melodies and lyrics. Oddly enough, I had just

gotten off the phone with someone I was dating at the time, and it was the most infuriating phone call that I had been on in a long time, and I think I had this epiphany moment where it's like, "Wait. I don't need any of this. I am not in survival mode. I don't need anything that doesn't serve me or make me feel good. I need more. I was having this conversation in Eric's room, so as soon as I got off the phone, I had just had all these things that I wanted to say to the person, and so I sat on his bed with a microphone to my mouth and I just sang the entire song.

(Chorus vocals: "Never meant to be you / Never meant to be me / Never meant to be us")

Laetitia: It was very much like I wish I said it on the phone, but I used those feelings very much in the moment, and that's why it came pouring out. I was just in it. In a time when you don't know how to communicate with someone, it has served me well in my entire career so far to put those messages that I wish I can have with people into songs.

(Chorus vocals: "Never meant for all of this / Never meant for you to love / Never meant for you to trust")

Laetitia: I was entirely freestyling and improvising. I've come to find that my strengths are just getting on a microphone and singing whatever comes to mind, and it tends to be pretty accurate and raw, and I prefer that.

(Chorus vocals: "So I'll take my time, next time / And I'll do it right")

Laetitia: The vocals on the final track is exactly the same as those vocals that I tracked that night. And I actually redid the vocal, but the performance was not emotionally where I needed it to be. It was too perfect, almost. It was too like, "Okay, this is rehearsed and I know it now," whereas this is very off the cuff.

(First verse vocals: "It really waters me down")

(Kick drum along with synths)

Eric: I like left and made a cup of tea for a bit and come back like 30 minutes later and like she had just like recorded all those verses and it's just amazing. And I was just like, "Holy hell." This is incredible. And Laetitia's voice is just incredible and her melodic sense. It's like I'm constantly amazed by the melodies that she comes up with.

(Chorus vocals along with kick and synths: "Never meant to be you / Never meant to be me / Never meant to be us")

Laetitia: I often contribute toplines and vocals and melodies and drums to his own project. So there are just so many of my melodies that he has on his computer and that I can't really reuse again, and this one was one that I couldn't part with. I didn't tell him right away that I wanted it to be a Vagabon song, but after I tracked the vocals, I had this thought that's like, "This is too good to not be a Vagabon song." So, as soon as I said that, he just got excited that I felt so strongly and passionately about it, and kind of let me take the reins of the whole entire track. And so when I got home, you know, I took the whole project, because I was like, "This is my song [laughter]." I took the whole project and I bumped up the BPM of this track from where Eric was doing it originally by a whole lot. After that, I started to work on the drums.

(Kick)

Laetitia: Eric and I made our own samples. The only electronic drum is the kick. Everything else was recorded in the bedroom. We had tracked some snare in his bedroom with brushes.

(Snare joins kick)

Laetitia: On the snare, I threw in two tape delays to kind of have that like dance-y, house beat. The hi-hats are live hi-hats.

(Hi-hats along with snare)

Laetitia: And then we did another track where we pitch shifted it.

(Pitch shifted hi-hats added)

Laetitia: And that's me snapping.

(Snaps join)

(Beat ends)

Laetitia: I consider myself a student. I like to learn things that I don't know, and I've always liked electronic music, R&B music, dance music. But making it has never felt accessible. On my last records, largely indie rock record, all guitars, for the most part, I was playing with a lot of punk bands. But with this album, I set the intention of working on being a good producer.

(Beat)

Laetitia: I wanted to have the experience of making an album be one, where I'm learning something and practicing a skill. I like to have a practice. And so, this one was, I want to be the sole producer. But the way that Eric and I work together and our friendship was very much tied to the making of this song. I would be lying if I said I didn't grapple a little with relinquishing the control of sharing the producer role, but it has taught me that through collaborating you can actually make something really special and open a part of your creativity. So trusting the person that I'm collaborating with, not just their tastes and their technical ability, but just how they are as a person made it easier, and I am a better producer for it.

(Beat ends)

(Viola)

Laetitia: That's Oliver Hill on viola. He made this three part harmony that's very mournful. I wanted these strings that sound sad if you isolate them. If you isolate the strings and the vocal, you have a whole different song. With these lyrics that are really raw and emotional and ending. It feels like an ending.

(Second verse vocals along with strings: "You know me better than that / You know I hate it like that / It really waters me down")

Laetitia: But within the context of the beat,

(Beat joins in gradually)

Laetitia: you have a whole other world because the instrumental feels like a beginning. That is exactly what that phone call felt like [laughter], and so I really wanted to chase that. I wanted to express the triumph of feeling this thing, but not feeling like it's the end of the world.

(Second verse full track: “You know me better than that / You know I hate it like that / It really waters me down / You know me better than that / You know I loved you like that / It really waters me down”)

Laetitia: “Water me down,” it means to be diluted like someone taking away from the pure concentration of a person, and so the way that I'm using it in the song is this really dilutes everything that is good about me.

Hrishikesh: Do you know if the person, who you were talking to on the phone, ever heard this song?

Laetitia: I don't know for certain, but I'm positive [laughter]. I'm sure of it [laughter]. Almost immediately I was like, “I know he's going to hear this, so that's perfect [laughter].” You know? A little petty behavior turned into a pretty good song [laughter].

(Synth)

Laetitia: This was a very specific time in my life too. I demo'd this in March of 2017, which is right when my first album came out. And here I am, my life has changed, I am a computer engineer by work. Like, I'm full time coder at the time, and I'm about to quit my job, so it really was a time of such transition, and really coming into who I am going to be, and this person just didn't fit the mold, and so I had this like breakthrough moment, and I wasn't sad. This was not an ending that was sad. That was exciting to me.

Hrishikesh: And now, here is “Water Me Down,” by Vagabon, in its entirety.

(“Water Me Down” by VAGABON)

Hrishikesh: To learn more about Vagabon, visit songexploder.net/vagabon. You'll also find the music video for “Water Me Down,” and the link to buy or stream the song. Song Exploder is made by me and producer Christian Koons, with production assistance from Olivia Wood, and illustrations by Carlos Lerma. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a collective of independent, creative podcasts. Learn more about all of our shows, including my new podcast, Partners, at radiotopia.fm. You can find Song Exploder on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook @SongExploder. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.