

Song Exploder
Vampire Weekend - Harmony Hall
Episode 175

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.

("Harmony Hall" by VAMPIRE WEEKEND)

Hrishikesh: The band Vampire Weekend started in 2006, in New York. Their third album came out in 2013 and won a grammy. But six years passed before they put out their next album, *Father of the Bride*. This album's also been nominated for a Grammy, for album of the year. And the lead single from it, "Harmony Hall," was nominated for Best Rock Song. In this episode, Ezra Koenig from Vampire Weekend takes "Harmony Hall" apart. I spoke to him along with producer Ariel Rechtshaid, and the two of them detailed the winding path the song went down, over several years, before it finally took shape.

("Harmony Hall" by VAMPIRE WEEKEND)

Ezra: I'm Ezra Koenig from Vampire Weekend.

(Music fades out)

Ezra: The very first time there was any bit of this song was me walking down the street kind of mumbling and saying something about Harmony Hall. I found a voice memo that is the beginning of the song. And I'm outside, you can hear other voices.

(Voice memo of Ezra mumbling the melody)

Ezra: And I saw that was from 2011. I was actually surprised by how old that was, but, you know, time flies. And so I remember thinking like, "Okay, there's a phrase, "Harmony Hall," and there's like a vague idea." And I definitely felt that it had potential as a song. You know maybe over the next year, try it once or twice with an eye to it being on *Modern Vampires*, our third album. But I just couldn't quite crack it. You know there was a time where I tried some version of it or I played on the piano and it would be kind of like this more twee baroque sound.

(Twee baroque piano)

Ezra: But I never quite felt satisfied with it. So I probably wouldn't have really busted it out in earnest until 2015 or 2016. Those were the years when I, after doing all the promotional stuff and touring behind the third album and taking time off, that's when I really started to think about making another album. And you know when you're in that early days period, you think about "What am I interested in now? What's something to be excited about? What type of music do I want to make?" And one answer that I had was, "I want to dig deeper into the history of rock music." There was something about like wanting to change the palette a little bit. There's this little iPhone recording of me playing piano in my apartment in New York.

(Voice memo including piano and vocals)

Ezra: There's something about the way that I was playing piano that started making me think about like Southern rock and Classic rock.

(Voice memo including piano and vocals)

(Voice memo ends)

Ezra: I guess I always had these like weird feelings about rock music and what does rock music mean. I think there was something about, that I found interesting and funny about being in a moment when people were making these really sweeping statements about like, "Rock music is dead and it's like pointless, and there's nothing interesting in it," kind of like depressed Wall Street dude vibe of just being like, "Stocks' in the toilet." I started to think of it as kind of like, "Oh great, it's a bargain then!" People are like undervaluing this, or they're not understanding it, or they're missing the humor or they're missing, I don't know. So for me in some ways that was Classic rock. But I kind of felt like Vampire Weekend was very disconnected from rock music, especially when we came out, you get like corny little dudes like Alice Cooper making fun of us because we didn't rock that hard. He had some like goofy quote where he was like "Oh I heard this name, Vampire Weekend, sounded pretty cool, checked it out." He said something about like, we must have like low testosterone or something like that. Weird thing to say about a stranger, but for me the idea of referencing Classic rock when I felt like Vampire Weekend had been so kind of disconnected from it, that there was something funny about being like kind of what's in there. So yeah I was asking those questions and I was starting to at least come up

with an inclination or something. Because you know at first, there's so many directions one can go in.

(Staccato piano riff)

Ezra: And this is what happens is like just very slowly over time, you have a song, every time you sit down to the piano, you mess around and one day you start just going bump, bump, bump, bump, bump, bom bum-bom, you know, just another way to play the chords.

(Staccato piano riff ends)

Ezra: And you know I had this guitar riff that I'd tried here and there, bom bubba dah, dah, dah, dah, dah.

(Guitar riff)

Ezra: I was hanging out with Mark Ronson. He was working on this Lady Gaga album at the time, and I think I just stopped by to visit. I was talking to him and I was just kind of mindlessly playing something. It almost sounds like an exercise, you know, you're kind of going up and down. My memory is that it was like a split second decision about like, "Is this riff that cool?" And I remember thinking like, "It sounds like an exercise. It's not that cool." And then I remember like a voice in my head being like, "But you should always record right, always be recording. Like make a little memo of everything." Musicians have to do that a lot because obviously you're already cursed with having kind of a wandering mind, but you also don't want to be a sociopath and just be like, kind of get an idea and be like standing there in the kitchen talking to somebody and being kind of like,

(Guitar suddenly ends)

Ezra: "You have to excuse me. I have creative work to do." That's like so [laughter] disrespectful and nutty. But I do find sometimes a decent middle ground, very quickly,

(Guitar starts again)

Ezra: don't disrupt the conversation, very quickly make a little memo, stop it immediately and then put the guitar down and say, "Okay."

(Guitar riff ends)

Ezra: So when I finally sat down with Ariel and said, “Okay, I have this idea for a song called “Harmony Hall.” I had more to pull from. But I still wasn’t totally sure how it was all going to come together.

Ariel: I'm Ariel Rechtshaid. I, along with Ezra and some of our other friends, produced *Father of the Bride*.

Ezra: I showed him all these disparate parts and I didn't know how they worked together. And he very quickly came up with a structure. You know, it's almost like an old movie and the kind of pre-digital era where you see somebody like go to an accountant and they're just like, “Buddy, I'm in trouble.” And they just hand them like a banker's box, just full of like messed up, you know, napkins and stuff, and the counselor, “Let me see what you got here. I can't make heads or tails of this right now, but let me arrange this and figure it out.” That’s sometimes how it feels like when I roll up to Ariel and I’m just like “I’ve got a lot of ideas,” and he’s like “Alright show me everything, let’s organise this.”

Ariel: That was constantly the journey that we went down to complete a song.

Ezra: There's a lot of different piano parts, but he put my sloppy voice memo,

(Piano riff)

Ezra: little groove thing together with my slightly more like highbrow Baroque piano thing.

(Baroque piano)

Ezra: And then suddenly they just work together.

(Piano riff along with baroque piano)

Ezra: I never thought of those two parts going together but that breakdown is one of my favourite parts of the song.

(Piano riff along with baroque piano end)

Ezra: And then we kind of agreed we were missing an A section. And I was like, “You know I do have this like little riff that maybe could work.”

(Guitar riff)

Ezra: And then I played it and then he had this idea, like “Oh you should do it twice and we'll harmonize the guitars.”

(Guitar harmony joins)

Ezra: So he very quickly came up with a structure, he took all these ideas that I had and that I was kind of confused by and he made this map very quickly.

(Guitars fade)

Ezra: So similarly to how Ariel had to kind of take all these musical moments and create like an architecture where there's patterns and there's logic and stuff, I had to do that with words.

(Chorus vocals: “And the stone walls of Harmony Hall bear witness / Anybody with a worried mind could never forgive the sight”)

Ezra: There have been places that are part of 19th century Utopian movements where somebody would start a town or a building called the Harmony Hall. And one time, I was in Antigua, I had a girlfriend at the time who had family there, so we were visiting her family and there was a place there called Harmony Hall that was, it might have been a resort or something. But it originally was a slave plantation that was called Harmony Hall. So they kept the name. And obviously this continues to be an ongoing issue because people get married at like plantations, like really bizarre things where people want to fully erase the history of a place and you know be like, “Oh it's gorgeous, gorgeous old house.” And then I think as I was looking more at places called Harmony Hall in the world, there were plantations in the South, in the US, that were called Harmony Hall. But I think there was something about that dissonance. I guess, pun intended, that dissonance of a place called Harmony Hall, that could refer to both the utopian movement and also a plantation, which is the opposite of utopia that literally dehumanizing people. And then on top of that, this edit thing of being kind of turned into like a fun thing that doesn't have the bloody, dehumanizing, racist history of a plantation. And the idea that calling something harmonious doesn't make it harmonious. That was something interesting to me. Every time I

would come across this name, Harmony Hall, there was always something dissonant about the history or the place. So for me, when I was working on the song, it became helpful to think of it as literally a building. Something that represents harmony, the highest ideal of human society, but sometimes inhabited by the worst people in the world.

(Chorus vocals along with piano: "And the stone walls of Harmony Hall bear witness / Anybody with a worried mind could never forgive the sight / Of wicked snakes inside a place, you thought was dignified / I don't wanna live like this")

Ezra: So you know it was helpful to have these conversations, like what are places that are like a Harmony Hall? And, you know, one of the first things that came up was well the White House. The White House is literally a symbol of American democracy. And this is where it gets funny, I don't want to say, "Well yeah Harmony Hall's the White House," because that's not how I think about songwriting. But as we started to like figure out the logic of the song, it was helpful to think of the White House as an example. And this is pre-Trump, so it's like, you know, it took on added resonance as we were working on it, but this idea the White House represents supposedly the things that are great about American democracy and yet all sorts of knuckleheads have been living in there doing terrible things long before our current president. So we're talking about a place that represents political power. And then that really helped me to think about the verses. So you know if you're talking about power, one verse maybe could talk about people without power, one verse is the people with power. And the way that I think about it, pretty simply, is that verse one are the people outside the palace walls, the revolutionaries.

(First verse vocals along with guitar: "We took a vow in summertime / Now we find ourselves in late december / I believe that New Year's Eve will be the perfect time for their great surrender / But they don't remember")

Ezra: And then in the next verse, I thought about the person in the palace, who is worried and who doesn't understand the logic of the people outside the palace walls.

(Second verse vocals along with kick and bass synth: "Within the halls of power lies a nervous heart that beats / Like a Young Pretender's / Beneath these velvet gloves I hide / The shameful, crooked hands of a moneylender / 'Cause I still remember")

(Bass synth continues)

Ezra: I think a lot of people, they specifically wanted to read this song in terms of anti-Semitism because I'm Jewish and I think anti-Semitism and Zionism and all aspects of Jewish identity certainly fall into this larger rubric that we're talking about, which is about the cycles of power. That idea of stateless people forming a state, and now being seen understandably as, they're the powerful ones, they're the ones in the driver's seat. So I wouldn't say the song's particularly about being Jewish, but because I'm a Jewish person, when I'm thinking about the cycles of history, of course it's going to be one of the ones that I think of. I'm Jewish and I'm American so I'm going to think about American history and I'm going to think about Jewish history, you know, among others. But yeah so when I think about that phrase, the money lender, it just makes me think about the past, and shame, and how sometimes people in power, regardless of what their background is or their ethnicity, even though they have more power than they used to because of trauma or shame, sometimes make decisions that are based in fear. In some ways that's one of the drivers of these kind of vicious cycles that we have as people, is that people are attracted to power often because they lacked power at some point in their life. Why wouldn't you be attracted to power if you didn't have it? But when you've been traumatized and made to feel fearful, it's no surprise that even with power,

(Kick joins)

Ezra: you're still seeing yourself in a shameful, fearful way. It's a tough combo. Power plus fear.

(Kick along with bass synth end)

Ezra: So then suddenly I'm thinking about the people outside the palace, will then be the people inside the palace, and one day they'll be kicked out. So then I was like, "Okay, now it's all kind of coming together."

(Pre-chorus vocals along with percussion: "Anger wants a voice, voices wanna sing / Singers harmonize 'til they can't hear anything")

Ezra: I can't help as a songwriter but to enjoy the double meaning of harmony. People getting along and then harmony in music.

Ariel: The arrangement kind of follows the narrative of the lyrics that Ezra created.

Ezra: And there is also just something funny about a large group of people proudly and triumphantly singing about how they

(Pre-chorus group vocals: "Can't hear anything")

Ariel: The backing vocals are exclusively Danielle Haim and Dave Longstreth.

(Danielle & Dave vocal harmonies: "stone walls of Harmony Hall bear witness / Anybody with a worried mind could never forgive the sight")

Ezra: Ariel and I had already talked and we knew that he was going to be the kind of main producer on the album, but you know we had this kind of like cool understanding like "Yeah, I'll go try stuff with different people, and then eventually we'll kind of go over it all together," because I think there's no limit to how many people can be part of an album, you know, whether it musicians or producers or something. So I did another version, which I started with Rostam, where one of his cool ideas was to take the piano chords.

(Piano chords)

Ezra: And then have a choir follow the piano.

(Choir joins piano)

Ezra: The choir is, I think we just busted out a choir instrument.

Ariel: That's all it is. The majority of this record was made in this room, with just Ezra and I. A lot of times we were playing around with fake instrume-, like software instruments. We were just kind of coming up with ideas for how this arrangement can go, "Oh there could be a guitar solo here."

(Guitar solo)

Ariel: That part was actually originally just a guitar sample.

Ezra: And if you can picture what that would sound like on piano, it actually like makes more sense. It's just kind of like moving in kind of a more classical way.

(Guitar solo)

Ariel: And so when we had our friend Greg Lees come back and play some pedal steel, he just mimicked that guitar synth part. And that's what that was.

(Solo ends)

Ezra: So at the end, the only piano parts that I don't play, which also are my favorite piano parts, are by Tommy King.

(Tommy King piano recording)

Ezra: We just recorded him, 10, 15 takes of him just kind of going hard at the end and we picked our favorite ones and they, you know, they all kind of slot in perfectly in these little moments.

(Acoustic guitar joins piano)

Ariel: Well it took the songwriting, and it added to the element of like a band jamming together, which is part of what we were going for, Some kind of unexplored territory for Vampire Weekend.

Ezra: Vampire Weekend never had any twang, you can go overboard, but it's like for us to sound like Vampire Weekend but have a touch of that. And I think that's why it's important to have other players because they're just playing in the vernacular that they know.

(Piano ends)

(Chorus vocals along with acoustic guitar: "And the stone walls of Harmony Hall bear witness / Anybody with a worried mind could never forgive the sight / Of wicked snakes inside a place you thought was dignified / I don't wanna live like this, but I don't wanna die")

Ezra: I guess the way that I think about it is, if the verses give you different examples of power struggles, the powerless and the powerful, and then the pre-chorus, the anger wants a voice, tells this story about the way that even good intentions can turn sour. You're giving all these examples that are kind of showing sympathy for this struggle of what it means to live in an unfair world, but also a type of fatalism about, are we kind of stuck in this like gnarly circle?

(Synth pad)

Ezra: So what's your conclusion? The conclusion is not obvious, it's just like, I don't like the way I'm living. I don't feel good. And yet I'm not ready to give it all up, as a martyr, or you know, I really want to believe in something. And then an example undermines it. It wouldn't be reflective of how I feel or how I see reality to look at all these examples of power struggles and vicious cycles and then end on a chipper note and say, "And that's why you can never give up, man." Because that's not what the song is saying, so it's like the statement had to end in that feeling of being trapped between two things and not knowing where that third path is that's going to get you where you want to go, so yeah. Don't want to live like this, but also don't want to die. So what else is there? I don't know. That's what the song is saying, I don't know what else there is.

(Kick along with synth)

Ezra: "I don't wanna live like this, but I don't wanna die," is a bit of an artist's predicament too because you can't repeat yourself and you also don't want to give up, so you're forced to find that third path. Following up your most critically acclaimed album, which our third album was, it's impossible. Nobody ever nails it.

(More drum elements join)

Ezra: Because you can't repeat that, and then if you deviate from it, you explore new tones or vibes, people are like "Woah, what happened?" You know, it's kind of impossible. But what is possible,

(Piano joins)

Ezra: is to move forward in a way that still feels like you, but still, at least lets people know that the story isn't over.

(Full instrumental track)

(Full instrumental track ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here is "Harmony Hall" by Vampire Weekend in its entirety.

("Harmony Hall" by VAMPIRE WEEKEND)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net to learn more about Vampire Weekend. You'll also find a link to stream or buy this song.

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