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.

("Summer Elaine and Drunk Dori" by WEEZER)

Hrishikesh: "Summer Elaine and Drunk Dori" is a song on Weezer's 10th album, the self-titled "White" album, which came out on April 1st, 2016. For this episode, I spoke to Weezer's front man, Rivers Cuomo, at his home studio in Santa Monica. He showed me all the different demo versions that this song went through as he detailed his meticulous process, which includes an array of spreadsheets that he uses to collect, analyze, and harvest his ideas. My name's Hrishikesh Hirway. You're listening to Song Exploder.

("Summer Elaine and Drunk Dori" by WEEZER)

Rivers: My name is Rivers Cuomo. I play electric guitar and I sing.

(Music fades)

Rivers: One of the first things I did was I looked in my Spotify playlist, that is a collection of songs I've heard that have cool chord progressions. I'm going to go back and basically farm those songs for cool chord progressions. So I looked in there, and there is a song called "Walk Away Renée" by The Left Banke.

("Walk Away Renée" by THE LEFT BANKE)

Rivers: And then, I kind of go back, and replay it, like Weezer style with my distorted guitar.

(Guitar)

Hrishikesh: I noticed that the final name of this first demo that Rivers was playing was called "Awaken Early." I asked him where that name came from.

Rivers: We want the identity of the original song to be obscured, so I'm not influenced by it when I'm writing my own melody. Yet, we want it, the working title, to

resemble the original title, so that if for some reason, say, for example, we're on Song Exploder someday, and we want to go back and find that original song, we can kind of make it out from the working title. We use an anagram generator online [laughter]. So "Walk Away Renée" became "Awaken Early." Now, when I come back looking for a chord progression to write over some weeks later, I don't see the original name of the song, so I'm not reminded of the original tune. All I have to listen to is my distorted guitar playing this really beautiful chord progression. I don't remember where it came from.

(Guitar)

(Guitar ends)

Rivers: And then, I'll do, like, just vocal improvisation over the guitar chords, until I come up with a cool melody; just like singing, and singing, and scatting, and searching for a melody that makes me feel great. You see, all these walls are mirrored behind you, so I can, you know, like, do all these crazy poses and stuff, but get in the mood. Always have to have, like, all the doors sealed up. I put a "Do Not Disturb'" sign out there. And there's like a lot of really embarrassing stuff on those recordings.

(Demo Vocals)

Rivers: Sometimes I feel like on a piano or guitar, I can come up with melodies that are even a little stronger, a little more dramatic. And sometimes, it's because on a piano, you can play a melody that's harder to sing. So if you hear something, you can not get it out on a big octave jump on the piano, or something, that your vocal muscles might just might be a little too lazy to, to think of.

(Guitar with Demo piano)

Rivers: I don't have a lot of facility on the piano, so I can kind of tell what melody I want to play, but I'm stumbling, playing a lot of wrong notes, feeling around for it.

(Guitar with Demo piano)

(Demo Vocals join)

(Music ends)

Rivers: So now I got the melody, chord progression and melody for a chorus. And I'm reminded of a quote from Lady Gaga, who said something like "When you're writing, just start with the chorus, because if the chorus isn't great, then you're screwed anyway." I have a spreadsheet of song titles, hundreds and hundreds of song titles, and I'm always adding to it. Sometimes it's a thought I have, something I want to say that comes out as a song title, or I hear somebody say something and that's what happened in this case. It was the last day of school, last day of my daughter's second grade. They were having a party by a pool at one of the kid's house. And my daughter's teacher was there, and she was drinking white wine, and talking to some of the other moms there. She told the story that her husband has two names for her. There's the school year Elaine, who's super stressed out and scary. And then, there's summer Elaine, who's totally relaxed and fun. And this is the last day of school, so she's turning into summer Elaine. And then, one of the other moms was there, and said, "Oh yeah, my husband has two names for me. And the second one of which is Drunk Dori, because when I drink, I'm tons of fun." So my songwriter radar started beeping like crazy, "Summer Elaine and Drunk Dori." I put it in my phone and ended up in my spreadsheet. And then, I opened up this chord progression and this melody that I love, and I look over my spreadsheet of song title ideas. First of all, I have to find one that's roughly the right number of syllables and with the right accents on the right syllables, and I identify those ones. And then, I just start singing them and seeing which ones have the right chemistry with the melody and the chord progression. Summer Elaine, it was a little bit of an awkward fit, and I was anxious about that at first, because summer is strong, weak, but the melody is like [snaps fingers and sings melody] weak, strong [snaps fingers and sings melody].

Rivers: So, you can definitely get away with stuff like that. But, at the very top of a chorus, the more natural it all flows, usually the better. That, then becomes a singer's job to, like, really make it feel natural, and sell it, and make it interesting.

(Vocals: "Summer Elaine and Drunk Dori / When I'm feelin' lonely, I don't want to go (oh oh, oh)")

Rivers: OK, so I have another spreadsheet of lines; things I want to say, or things I've read in a book, or heard on a TV show or a movie. A lot of it is taken right out of my journals. I do stream of consciousness in the morning for twenty-five minutes. I started in 2010 after reading *The Artist's Way* by Julia Cameron. It's called Morning Pages, which is basically stream of consciousness. So yeah, that's been great. And then, I come back at a later time, maybe the next day,

with a highlighter, totally detached. I don't really care what I was talking about, I just look for really cool lines. I highlight those. Then they end up in the spreadsheet. But that doesn't mean they're going to end up in a song, it just means it's, I think it's a cool line, and it gets in the spreadsheet. So then, there's couple thousand lines. Right now, I have them all tagged by how many syllable each line has, if it's accented or unaccented to start, or the last two syllables also, is it strong, weak, or weak, strong, that sort of thing. Everything's tagged and searchable. So I knew I had this melody, [sung] "Oh, she left me here", so [sung] 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. Strong, weak, strong [inaudible mumbling].

Rivers: So I can search for lyrics that have five syllables, and start with an accent.

(Vocals: "She was out too deep / Oh, she swam away")

Rivers: So then, the answer phrase is six syllables. So I made a long list of lines that would fit there.

(Vocals: "When lightning struck the bay / She left me all alone")

Rivers: It sounds like something happened in my life, and then I observed it, and then I wrote a song about it. And it's coherent, there's a beginning, middle, and end. And that's totally not the case at all. It's all, each line is from a completely different place, and I just reassembled them in some order that suggests a story that never happened. [laughter] It's a crazy way to write.

(Guitar)

Rivers: This is the way I came up with a guitar solo.

(Music fades)

Rivers: Instead of playing the guitar, I sing. Before I said I come up with a lot of my vocal melodies on the piano or the guitar, the reverse is also true. If I just go to play a solo on a guitar, often it turns into just a wank fest and, you know, like the same old muscle memory licks, you've heard a zillion times, and it's not interesting. But if I sing it, I'm much more restricted in where I can go and how fast the solo will be, and it's going to have space in it because I have to breathe, and it's going to be something you can sing along to because it was created by a voice. But guitar can go a lot higher than my voice. So, when I originally scat the solo,

it's in a lower octave, and then I go back and pitch it up an octave because I need to learn it on guitar. So I need to hear it in that higher octave.

(Processed vocals)

(Processed vocals end)

RIvers: Yeah, and again, it's like, I have all the doors closed and, you know, it's like a hundred degrees in here in the summer. There's no AC, shirts off, like jumping around, air guitar.

(Guitar with processed vocals)

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: So Rivers had come up with all the melodies and the words for the song, but there was a problem. The verse melody was pretty low for his voice.

Rivers: I don't have, like, a range that's compelling, low or super high. There's like the sweet spot where I'm really trying, and it sounds good. But it's actually pretty small range, so it gets tricky. So this is the solution.

(Vocals with guitar: "Boy in the bubble, saying "I love ya" / I should have written her a note / Summer Elaine and Drunk Dori / When I'm feelin' lonely, I don't want to go (oh oh, oh oh)")

Rivers: Key change. It seemed totally absurd like you can't do that. I associate key modulations in and out of choruses with the 1980s, the pop music that was around when I was a teenager. And it just seems totally forboden for a 90s alt rock band to do that kind of trickery, and because so often it's used for, to like create some kind of emotion in a really insincere way. But then we tried it in the room on an acoustic guitar, and it was like, "Yeah, that's really cool." And, in a way, it sounds kind of familiar for Weezer too. I just really loved that compositional moment into the chorus, and then into the second verse, into the second chorus, and there's all these key changes, and man, I never get to do that, so it's really nice.

(Bass with drums)

(Guitar joins)

(Bass)

Rivers: Brian Bell plays electric guitar and he does backup vocals. Scott Shriner's bass and backup vocals. And Pat Wilson is the drummer. I really appreciate the power of democracy. The songwriter, in this case, me, with the best of intentions, can limit the creativity of the other members of the band, because you're attached to your original demo, or you had this vision for how you thought it was going to go. And, in any case, you're just one brain, and you just have this one limited perspective, but politically, in the room, you have more power than everyone else, even with the best of intentions. Other people are going to think like, "Well, I guess he wrote the song. So if he doesn't like what I'm doing, then maybe I shouldn't do it." So it was very helpful for those guys to get time in the studio with our producer, Jake, Jake Sinclair, without me to come up with their own parts. And I don't hear it until they're done with their parts. Then I get to listen back, and, in most cases, I'm just blown away by how cool, and fresh, and layered, and complex everything has become.

(Guitar with drums join)

(Music ends)

Rivers: Jake has worked with each of the four guys separately, recording their parts, really crafting them, so they all interlock just perfectly, and it's all very carefully thought through. And what we have is a pretty great recording. What it is lacking is that feeling of spontaneity and background chatter, and just off-the-cuff ideas that you get when you have four guys jamming in a room. So, we do at least a few takes where it's me, Scott and Brian, all standing around a mic, or several mics, and we just do a couple passes through the song where, you know, you can do whatever you want. Crazy sounds,

(Whistle sound)

Rivers: hip hop ad-libbing,

(Hip hop ad-libbing)

Rivers: chorus harmonies,

(Vocals)

Rivers: anything that comes to your mind. And we end up with many tracks of all this crazy stuff.

(Vocals)

Rivers: I have got to admit Brian's pretty awesome with these freaky ad-libs [laughter].

(Ad-libs)

Rivers: [laughter]

(Guitar)

Rivers: If somebody asked me what the song was about, I would say, "I'm trying to write songs that I don't understand, so if I could answer that question and tell you what it was about, then I failed as a songwriter." I want to enjoy my own songs, and once I feel like I totally understand the song and there's no mystery there, then I can't really enjoy it anymore. So I like to create these enigmatic three minute adventures that have me scratching my head for years.

(Guitar)

(Guitar ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Summer Elaine and Drunk Dori," by Weezer, in its entirety.

("Summer Elaine and Drunk Dori" by WEEZER)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net for more on Weezer and their *White* album, as well as links to "Walk Away Renée" by The Left Banke and the book, *The Artist's Way* by Julia Cameron.

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("Ophelia" by The Lumineers)

Hrishikesh: Next time on Song Exploder, The Lumineers. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.

("Ophelia" by The Lumineers)

(Music fades)