

Song Exploder
Aurora - Runaway
Episode 212

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.

("Runaway" by AURORA)

Hrishikesh: AURORA is a singer and songwriter from Norway, who released her first EP in 2015, when she was 19 years old. It featured the song, "Runaway" and after it came out, Aurora went on to win Norwegian Grammys for Best New Artist and Best Pop Artist. And she played the voice of the North Wind in Disney's *Frozen 2*. This year, six years after that debut EP came out, Aurora's song "Runaway" became a huge hit on TikTok. As of this recording, between Youtube and Spotify, "Runaway" has been streamed over half a billion times. In this episode, Aurora looks back at how the song first began and how it evolved over time from the demo to the final version.

("Runaway" by AURORA)

Aurora: My name is Aurora.

(Music fades out)

Aurora: I was around 11 years old when I first started writing "Runaway." I was living very happily in my childhood home. It's on the West coast of Norway. And it's very nice here, it's very quiet. You really have the space and time to kind of dream yourself away so I just sat down at my piano and played and I wrote.

(Piano)

Aurora: When I started writing "Runaway," I had a story quite clear in my mind. When I was younger, I struggled quite a lot with understanding people around me, especially the part where people kind of lie about their current state of mind, because we like to pretend that we're happier than we are and I feel like people fear to open up about whatever troubles us. So I just wanted to write a song about how we run away with our emotions rather than to face them and ask our family and friends for help. It becomes so much easier once we share what lies within us, because then we realize that it's perfectly normal. But we never get

the chance to ever understand that because we never tell anyone about what's going on inside, and I guess I just thought about that quite a lot as a child, for some reason.

(Piano ends)

Aurora: I remember the day I wrote "Runaway," I was listening to the ocean. The very first line of the song.

(First verse vocals: "I was listenin' to the ocean")

Aurora: And I am looking at it right now [laughter]. The ocean to me is kind of like human beings. It's so mysterious and it's so deep and dangerous and beautiful, which is how I feel about people.

(First verse vocals: "I was listenin' to the ocean / I saw a face in the sand / But when I picked it up / Then it vanished away from my hands")

Aurora: When I started writing "Runaway," I was going through grief for the first time in my life. And this experience really inspired me. And in the first verse, you can hear that I'm missing someone, because when you miss someone so badly in your heart, you kind of see their face everywhere. And I just wanted to write about this feeling as well as I could. And I think that's what I mean with, "I saw a face in the sand and when I picked it up, then it vanished away from my hand."

(Pre-chorus vocals: "And I was runnin' far away / Would I run off the world someday")

Aurora: That was something different the first time I wrote "Runaway." I think even it didn't have any words if I remember correctly. I just had like [sings melody] because I'm very inspired by Norwegian folk music. There's one type that's really sad, and it's just really beautiful. It sounds like a lullaby, but a really sad one. It's kind of like [sings melody]. That's a good night lullaby that you would usually sing to your child [laughter] but it's kind of sad, you know, it's kind of, it's beautiful. I think that's my biggest source of inspiration, you can hear it in the melodic universe.

(First verse vocals: "I had a dream I was seven / Climbing my way in a tree / I saw a piece of heaven / Waiting impatient for me / Dah")

Aurora: The first time I ever showed anyone, "Runaway," was about five years later, December 2012. The school asked me to sing for a little ceremony in the end of the year. Someone filmed it and put it online and then my management saw that video somehow. And they messaged me, I think, if I ever would consider meeting them and becoming an artist. And first I said, no, but then my mother actually said to me that I should give it a chance because when I sing for her, she feels both sadness and happiness at the same time, and it's good to have things in life that wakes up these emotions the world is trying to kind of shut down, I guess. So I think I just played it to a producer called Magnus Skylstad, and we made our first demo in 2013.

(2013 Demo first verse: "I was listenin' to the ocean / I saw a face in the sand / But when I picked it up / Then it vanished away from my hand / Dah")

Aurora: Oh! [Laughter] That's so weird to hear. I haven't heard this version since the day I recorded it. I can hear that my accent in English, well, it's still very there when I speak still today, but I remember people telling me to kind of work on it [laughter]. And I can hear that my timing is quite bad. That's very funny.

(2013 Demo instrumental)

Aurora: I always knew from the very first day I stepped a toe into the studio, how I wanted the music to sound. To kind of reflect the coldness from the country where I was from.

(2013 Demo instrumental)

Aurora: The original seed of why the song was written is quite cold. So I wanted the sounds to sound cold. And also, I know that my voice is quite natural and folksy, so I thought I could add some modern sounds to kind of make an interesting mix.

(2013 Demo second verse: "I was painting a picture / The picture was a painting of you / And for a moment I thought you were here / But then again, it wasn't true / Dah")

Aurora: Magnus, he is very good at listening. And I think it's very rare to be a young female in the music industry and to find a man that kind of listened to you and had respect for your wishes. It's a very good and respectful relationship and I'm very grateful for it.

(2013 Demo pre-chorus into chorus into post chorus: "And I was dancing in the rain / I felt alive and I can't complain / But no, take me home / Take me home where I belong / I can't take it anymore / And I fell like rain is falling down / I fell like a stone against the ground / This emptiness inside my heart has been there from the start")

Aurora: I forgotten about that part! That was how I wrote the song, and if you can tell, I'm switching from like a waltz beat, from 3/4, I'm switching to 4/4. And when my first ever show came along and we had to play this song live, I remember, just me and my band back then, it was too hard for us to enter the last chorus with a new rhythm and it just ended up sounding weird. So I just wrote a new middle eight during rehearsals, and then I just kept it.

(2013 Demo fades)

Aurora: A lot of things happened in 2014, I had a record deal by then, and I got asked to make an EP. So, I re-recorded "Runaway," winter 2014, and then I knew what I wanted the song to do and be. I had really learned that my biggest strength, I guess, is my voice. And I knew that I should use it as much as I can. So you can hear all these voices and choirs all around my leading vocals.

(First verse group vocals: "I was listenin' to the ocean / I saw a face in the sand / But when I picked it up / Then it vanished away from my hands / Dah")

Aurora: In the very beginning, the man that you can hear is actually Magnus himself.

(Magnus' hums)

Aurora: He can sing quite deep, which is nice for me, especially when we play live, but yeah, that's me and Magnus [laughter].

(Backing vocals along with drums)

Aurora: It's kind of like mysterious and dark and it reminds me of trolls in the mountains, just humming in the wind, you know. I just love the mood.

(Backing vocals along with drums)

(Backing vocals along with drums end)

Aurora: It felt very nice to let go of the piano. I felt like I only needed my voice and then some kind of deep sounds to accompany me.

(Drums)

Aurora: I love drums, but I'm much more a fan of drums that feels ancient and big that you could play in the circle around the fire, if you know what I mean. And I've always hated traditional drums; hi-hats and like a normal snare and I just wanted the drums to also mirror this dark and lost feeling. I feel like whoever is playing it is lost in a deep well.

(Drums along with backing vocals and guitar)

(Guitar)

Aurora: That guitar, it must've been played by Odd Martin, another producer from Bergen, and he plays the guitar very well and he has an excellent voice. And you can hear that it's a bit like weird sounding, it's because the song was a bit faster, but I asked for it to be lowered in tempo. So we had to stretch out the guitar sound, rather than just playing it again. But it made this kind of cool effect that I kind of like.

(Stretched out guitar)

Aurora: Odd Martin and Magnus and myself, we made my first album together, and then, they just joined my band because they had a sense of belonging to my music, also, to our music.

(Synth)

Aurora: To me, that synth represent this being, getting closer to you, like [sings melody]. I wanted the meaning in the verses to be reflected by the music in a way that enhances what you want to run away from, this dark and haunting feeling. And in the pre-choruses, you can hear the pattern stepping up and getting more frequent [sings melody].

(Synth arpeggios)

Aurora: That also to me represents that this being is kind of running faster and you're stepping up the pace, trying to get away from it, but it's right there behind you, no matter how fast you run.

(Second verse vocals along with synth arpeggios: "And all this time I have been lyin' / Oh, lyin' in secret to myself / I've been putting sorrow on the farthest place on my shelf / La-di-da")

Aurora: And also this deep feeling to me, made it so easy and beautiful to really open up and make it feel like you're flying in the choruses.

(Pre-chorus into chorus full track: "I was dancing in the rain / I felt alive and I can't complain / But no, take me home / Take me home where I belong / I got no other place to go / No, take me home / Take me home where I belong / I got no other place to go / No, take me home / Take me home where I belong")

Aurora: "Take me home, where I belong," it's one of those lines that makes more sense to me, the older I get. Because the longer you get from your birth, the more you long to get back to whatever that was. It just felt beautiful and heartbreaking to say to someone, "Take me home." It's just so simple, and you ask for so little but still, it's such a big need to have, and it just felt heartbreaking. Also in the last chorus, you can hear this male choir and that's also Odd Martin and Magnus

(Martin and Magnus' final chorus backing vocals)

Aurora: just shouting their lungs out.

(Martin and Magnus' final chorus backing vocals)

Aurora: And I remember looking at them and being very touched by how they gave everything [laughter]. I was very moved by it.

(Final chorus backing vocals along with instrumental)

Aurora: I knew what I wanted the song to do to me, and that's why I added the ending with a lot more emotions and kind of velocity in the vocals, where you're like on your knees. You're just begging for someone to hold you. And I really wanted to reflect that grandness.

(Final chorus full track: “no, take me home / Take me home where I belong / I got no other place to go / No, take me home, home where I belong, no, no / No, take me home, home where I belong / I can’t take it anymore”)

Aurora: I've never thought about home as a location ever, home to me is what I know. And away is what you don't know, the unsure and the unknown.

(Piano)

Aurora: Sometimes you're around people or you do things and suddenly you look in the mirror and you don't even recognize this version of yourself, and I hate that feeling. Luckily, I don't have it often but home is also just when you know that you're in a place in your life and you're surrounded by people and you're doing things that make sense with who you are, who you really are, and then it feels safe and home.

(Piano fades)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's “Runaway,” by Aurora, in its entirety.

(“Runaway” by AURORA)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net/aurora to learn more. You'll find links to buy or stream “Runaway,” and you can watch the music video.

This episode was made by me with editing help from Teeny Lieberson and Casey Deal. Artwork by Carlos Lerma, and music clearance by Kathleen Smith. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a network of independent, listener-supported, artist-owned podcasts. You can learn more about our shows at radiotopia.fm. You can follow me on Twitter and Instagram @HrishiHirway. And you can follow the show @SongExploder. You can also get a Song Exploder t-shirt at songexploder.net/shirt. I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. Thanks for listening.