

**Song Exploder**  
**Björk - Stonemilker**  
**Episode 60**

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.

*("Stonemilker" by BJÖRK)*

Björk: My name is Björk, and I'm here to talk about "Stonemilker" on my album *Vulnicura*.

Hrishikesh: In January 2015, Björk released *Vulnicura*. She described it as "a complete heartbreak album." And in November, she released *Vulnicura Strings*, a companion album that stripped away the electronics. In this episode, Björk breaks down the making of both the original version of "Stonemilker," as well as the strings version. She traces her writing and recording process for the track, and her reasons for wanting to make a second version.

*("Stonemilker" by BJÖRK)*

*(Music fades)*

Björk: It's about someone who's trying to get emotions out of another person. The whole song is emotionally about wanting clarity, wanting simplicity, and talking to someone who wants things to be really complex and foggy and unclear. And you're saying, "Okay, I've got clarity. So, you know, want it or not [laughter]." So it's like sort of celebrating simplicity and clarity.

*(Synth pad)*

Björk: I was walking on a beach, and I was, kind of, walking back and forth, and the lyrics kind of came along, kind of, without me really editing them. The strength of this album really is just simplicity. And, you know, this kind of like, thinking out loud feeling [laughter], and I shouldn't be too clever. It would work against it. So I, kind of, just went with the first words that actually came.

*(Vocals: "Moments of clarity are so rare / I better document this")*

Björk: Probably the most obvious lyrics [laughter] I've ever written. I actually wrote a whole other lyric to the song, which was really maybe a bit too clever for its own good, but something in me just said, "No, don't touch it. It has to be, like, almost clumsy or naive." That's sort of the strength and the weakness of the song at the same time.

*(Vocals: "I wish to synchronize our feelings, our feelings, ooh / Oh, show some emotional respect, oh respect, oh ooh")*

Björk: I'm mostly a singer, but I think the way I sing, I usually wait for a day where I'm kind of [laughter] probably more impulsive than other days in one way or another [laughter]. So when I sing, I'll go to this place where it's more similar to when I'm doing a concert. I will not touch so much of my brain in there [laughter]. I'll just, like, warm up my voice, have a coffee, and I'll just jump in the deep end where you more perform it. But I think more and more, ever since I got my laptop 15 years ago, probably the biggest part of me as a musician is the editor. I probably spend like, 90% of my time making music editing. You know, if it's editing vocals, editing beats, editing instruments, I think that's a very big part of my work now. So that's also another side [laughter].

*(Vocals: "Who can share and / Who has shut down the chances")*

Björk: That sentence is there, and the reverb is cut there, just to show, you know, what happens if you are closed. If you cut down chances, it's a certain closing a door there. And sometimes you show sonically, something emotionally.

*(Vocals: "Who has shut down the chances")*

Björk: The melody's so simple, and the words are so simple. I actually waited for the right microphone [laughter] because it had to be really like, that you hear every detail in the voice, so it's like a really high definition human that's there.

*(Beat)*

Björk: After I'd written the songs and was starting working on the beats, I met Alejandro, Arca. And it was a magical relationship, and he was obviously so talented. So I decided to take a backstep, and for it to be a handshake between me and him.

*(Beat)*

Björk: We sat next to each other, and we talked about every single thing, because I'd already written all the songs. With "Stonemilker," it was very obvious that that song is very simple, so we didn't really need a crazy beat thing going on. It just had to be really supportive of the song, and almost acoustic, like it's a symphony orchestra playing, and the beat would come from the cattle drum or something, you know, like just a very soft support, which Alejandro provided.

*(Beat)*

*(Beat ends)*

Björk: So I would sit down at a keyboard, and just work out the chords. And then, when I'm ready with the chord structure, because I knew it would be for strings, I would take it to violins, violas,

*(Strings)*

Björk: cellos, because I kind of wanted a lot of it to be in the strings.

*(Strings)*

Björk: We actually saved it until last, and I did several days of recording the strings. I had 30 players, and then I would do two shots of arrangements to basically, there are in theory 60, because it needed that sort of panoramic feeling to have that sort of smooth cream-like perfection.

*(Strings)*

Björk: For me, it was very important with "Stonemilker" that the strings were kind of cyclical, this chord cycle that, kind of, gives you this feeling, it can go on and on in circles, and gives you this feeling of equilibrium. Like the person who's singing the song is showing some sort of harmony to someone as an example.

*(Strings)*

Björk: I layered several recordings of the strings to be like a tower of equilibrium [laughter] that you're standing in like a monument of equilibrium, and you're standing in the middle of it, and you're small, and it's huge. And I just go circle in circle, and you feel very safe and secure. And that's sort of the clarity that I

would want to offer, try to offer emotionally in the song. And the strings are kind of the tool I have to try to make this, kind of, cradle. So I spent a lot of time going through all the takes, and all the mic's, and try to make this kind of tight woven net that each string instrument was equally important, because they have all these, kind of, sub melodies that they would, you could hear them all, but they would still not be a solo that it was like this balance of this kind of woven string tower [laughter] that was keeping you safe.

*(Strings end)*

Björk: Because there was so much work and so much about the textures in the strings, there, I thought it deserved a version where the beats are not shadowing the string textures, that there was another version would exist, and that I would get not just the strings functioning as a whole, but also have solo violins to do more and to, kind of, indulge more in the microphone textures.

*(Strings)*

Björk: Also, I think it's a question of like, tempo. Like I feel the main version of *Vulnicura* has more drive. You know, the beats obviously give it more energy, but I felt there was another version of *Vulnicura* with just the strings where it's more slower pace, you know, more like you reading a book at home. You know, like lying outside in the moss, looking at the sky.

*(Strings)*

*(Synth pad)*

Björk: I think "Stonemilker," it's one big question really. You're asking someone a question, suggesting something but you don't want to push too hard, trying to, in a very, most harmonious way possible, trying to prove a point [laughter]. So it's sort of a very gentle

*(Strings)*

Björk: suggestion because I think staying emotionally open, it's a choice, you know? I think it's equally hard for all of us, and we're just all doing our best, but I think there's also a choice, you know? Do you want to try, and then maybe fail half of the time and then succeed half of the time, or whatever your odds are [laughter]? Or is it your choice to not even try?

*(Strings)*

*(Strings end)*

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Stonemilker," by Björk, in its entirety.

*("Stonemilker" by BJÖRK)*

Hrishikesh: Visit [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net) for more information on Björk and this song, including links to buy both versions of "Stonemilker." On the site, you'll also find the interactive 360 degree music video for this song.

Next time on Song Exploder, Grammy-nominee for Best New Artist, Courtney Barnett.

*("Depreston" by COURTNEY BARNETT)*

Hrishikesh: This episode marks the end of two full years of Song Exploder. If you want to share your thoughts on this episode or on the podcast in general, you can find me on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram @SongExploder. You can find past and future episodes of the podcast and rate it or leave a review at [itunes.com/songexploder](https://itunes.com/songexploder). Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia from PRX. Special thanks this episode to Krista Williams, Carla Sacks, and Christian Koons. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.

*("Depreston" by COURTNEY BARNETT)*

*(Music fades)*