

Song Exploder
Black Pumas - Colors
Episode 191

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.

("Colors" by BLACK PUMAS)

Hrishikesh: Black Pumas formed in Austin, Texas in 2017, when singer Eric Burton met producer Adrian Quesada. Their self-titled debut was released in June 2019, and got them a Grammy nomination for Best New Artist. In this episode, they break down their hit song "Colors," which Eric started writing ten years ago, when he was first learning how to play guitar.

("Colors" by BLACK PUMAS)

Eric: My name is Eric Burton, and I sing and write music for the Black Pumas.

(Music fades out)

Eric: I wrote "Colors" probably a little bit over 10 years ago. At the time, I was leading praise and worship at this Presbyterian Church, and the hymnal music just wasn't doing it for me at the level that I was kind of yearning for it to happen. I loved experiencing the beautiful hymns and the airy music for what it was, but I wasn't attracted that much to singing those songs over and over again before creating my own. I always wanted to see like what a hymn might sound like from Eric Burton.

(Acoustic guitar plucking)

Eric: When the song first came to me, I was taking a nap on my uncle's rooftop actually, and I was having such a great day. The weather was great, the sunset looked pretty amazing, as it always does in New Mexico anyway, and I was just singing to, you know, exactly what I saw.

(Demo vocals along with acoustic guitar: "I woke up to the morning sky first / Baby blue, just like we rehearsed / When I get up off this ground, I shake leaves back down / To the brown, brown, brown, brown 'til I'm clean")

Eric: The sky there is amongst some of the most beautiful skies I've ever seen in my entire life. I was just trying to speak to, you know, to what helped me to feel connected to God, and to my higher self.

(Demo vocals along with acoustic guitar: "With all my favorite colors / All my favorite colors / My sisters and my brothers, they see 'em like no other / All my favorite colors")

Eric: It was just a classical guitar and vocals before meeting Adrian Quesada, when I moved to Austin.

Adrian: My name is Adrian Quesada, guitarist and producer of Black Pumas. We met in 2017. At the time I had recorded a bunch of instrumentals that I wanted somebody to write songs to but I had been asking a lot of friends around the world like, "Hey, I want to start this thing and I want to kind of work with somebody who would be a singer and a songwriter, yada, yada." And people would kind of throw out names and email me suggestions.

Eric: We met through a mutual friend of ours, his name is Brian Ray.

Adrian: I said, "Do you know anybody?" Because he's a producer himself, and he was like, "Oh yeah, yeah, you got to try Eric Burton." And I remember him saying like, "That's the best singer I've ever worked with."

Eric: I was doing solo gigs around town and I had worked with a few other people before and I just really wasn't finding the sound that I really wanted. So I started building my own studio, and I just started learning how to do it myself. And so during that time, I'm like, "Man, I don't know if I want to talk to any more producers, man." I don't know who this guy is but I ended up looking up Adrian's track record and I realized that it would have been kind of silly not to hit him back. So I did.

Adrian: At first, he came in here writing songs to these instrumentals that I had.

Eric: And once we came together and we started recording, I think we both just found that we just loved doing it together.

Adrian: We kind of looked at each other like, "Man, there is musical chemistry here for sure." And that's when we kind of became Black Pumas.

Eric: Then I started sharing with him like, "Hey, I've got a catalog of material here actually." But I didn't share it with him at first, I'm like, "Oh, maybe I think I'm going to save "Colors" for me." And I just realized that, "Hey, if this guy is as passionate and loves the music as much as I do, and if "Colors," you know, is fitting for this project that we're starting together, then by all means man," I just gave him full access.

Adrian: I do remember the day that he pulled it out and played that, it was just like this, "Oh crap," reaction that I had.

(Demo vocals along with acoustic guitar: "all my favorite colors, colors, colors / Got all my favorite colors, colors / All my favorite colors / My sisters and my brothers / All my favorite colors, child")

Adrian: My initial reaction was like, "That's a hit." You know and that sounds like a cliché producer guy in a music biopic, but I mean that was what I heard. I'm like, "Oh my god, that's like a song that you hear once and you're singing it back."

(Electric guitar)

Adrian : We recorded it in my studio here in Austin, Texas. Eric played electric guitar on that.

(Electric guitar continues)

Adrian: Something that Eric doesn't quite get enough credit for sometimes is the way he plays guitar. There's so much nuance and rhythmic feeling in the way he plays and it's so unique. And I remember telling people like, "His rhythm guitar part at the beginning is a hook already so we can't like step all over that. You know, we have to spread out that arrangement to let that breathe." So Steve, our drummer, came up with this super sparse beat.

(Drums)

Adrian: I remember myself and our keyboard player, we're just doing like downbeat chords just to like really let his guitar part breathe.

(Electric guitar along with keyboard)

Adrian: So we're just providing like rhythmic bounce.

(Drums join)

Adrian: But there's something about electric piano and two guitars that sometimes, frequency-wise, they're kind of swimming in the same area.

(Electric guitar along with keyboard)

Adrian: So it's hard for one to cut through and I really wanted it to cut through. I used to really like the way he played on acoustic guitar so I remember telling him like, "Man, we should go re-record that and see what it does." So we went and re-recorded the acoustic guitar, and that's the guitar that's on there.

(Second verse vocals along with acoustic guitar and electric guitar: "Now take me to the other side / where the baby blues birds fly")

Eric: When you take me to the other side, the other side can mean from light to darkness or from happiness to sadness. And when you got the blues, you just got the blues. And so, I want to be taken to the other side where the baby blues birds fly to encourage them that in gray clouds and white walls, blue skies, we're going to fly, so feel alright.

(Second verse vocals along with acoustic guitar, keyboard and drums: "In gray clouds, or white walls, or blue skies / We gon' fly, feel alright")

Eric: And this is what it sounds like when we feel alright.

(Second verse vocals along with keyboard: "And we gon', ooh-ooh, ooh-ooh, ooh-ooh, oof, yeah / They sound like ooh, ooh-ooh, ooh-ooh, ooh, yeah")

Adrian: That ooh-ooh, ooh-ooh part, that I'm not even going to try to sing, the strings pluck it as well.

(Second verse vocals along with strings plucks: "And we gon', ooh-ooh, ooh-ooh, ooh-ooh, oof, yeah / They sound like ooh, ooh-ooh, ooh-ooh, ooh, yeah")

Adrian: I didn't know for sure if we were going to add strings to "Colors." But I had strings on the initial instrumentals before I even met Eric. And you know, I definitely wanted to have somewhat consistent sonic tonal palette on the whole

album, and we were on tour in Colorado, and I remember we went and found a studio and we went and added violin.

(Violins)

Adrian: The very beginning of the song where he says, "I woke up to the morning sky first," there is a little trinkle like [*Adrian mimics a trinkle sound*], you know, little Wurlitzer part that I ran through my Roland space echo, which is a tape delay. Because he always told me the story of how he wrote it and I imagined him literally waking up and lighting this like smoke offering to the gods. I thought I was doing the coolest thing of all time, but nobody ever notices it.

Hrishikesh: [Laughter]

(First verse vocals along with processed Wurlitzer: "I woke up to the morning sky first / Baby blue, just like we rehearsed")

Adrian: He's a great improviser, you know, and there's something that like these little kind of in between yells that he does

(Instrumental break vocals: "Closer / love machine")

Adrian: There's really like a lot of magic in those because they were in the moment, you know, they weren't like, that wasn't scripted.

(Chorus vocals, consisting of Eric and The Soul Supporters: "All my favorite colors, right / All my favorite colors, yes, ma'am / My sisters and my brothers see 'em like no other / All my favorite colors")

Adrian: Angela Miller was a backup singer and she was part of a group called The Soul Supporters, which is her and Lauren Cervantes. So like we brought Lauren in as well to have two voices.

Eric: To have the ladies sing the chorus part with me, that choir sound, oh my goodness. Because of where the song came from in the first place, it was just so appropriate to have those black voices singing in a way that was reflective of what I would hear in church sometimes.

(Post-chorus vocals, consisting of Eric and The Soul Supporters: "It's a good day to be, a good day for me / A good day to see my favorite colors, colors / My sisters and my brothers, they see 'em like no other / All my favorite colors")

Adrian: I remember Angela one time at a rehearsal, she would sing that and she said to me like, "This is church." She was like, "I sing that and I feel like, you know, the spiritual moment."

(Organ)

Eric: I would say that my love for songwriting definitely started in the church. And I'd have to blame that on my family, for sure, when I was younger, I didn't like going. I didn't want to go to church, I didn't want to go to choir, and then I saw that my little brother was getting candy because he was in the choir, and the older women thought he was just so cute. It encouraged me just to kind of give in to my grandma's request. And when I did, the praise aspects of it was always my favorite part of it. Because when you're in song and you're trying to reach that state of bliss that is coming from wanting to reach something a little bit higher, to grasp something that you can't quite put into words, that was developed in my songwriting, was my earnestness to grasp that thing that I knew I would never fully comprehend.

(Acoustic guitar)

Eric: When I wrote "Colors," it started with me trying to get to God myself. But then it was to see about how I could connect universally with everyone from all walks of life.

(Strings join acoustic guitar)

Eric: Because it's not an exclusive thing. To me, God is the poetry in nature. All of these things that we experience, that we take in with all of our senses,

(Acoustic guitar ends)

(Strings continue)

Eric: that is God to me.

(Strings end)

(Acoustic guitar final strum)

Hrishikesh: And now, here is “Colors,” by Black Pumas, in its entirety.

(“Colors” by BLACK PUMAS)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net to learn more about Black Pumas. You’ll also find links to buy or stream the song and you can watch the music video for it.

Song Exploder is made by me, Hrishikesh Hirway, with producer Christian Koons, production assistant Olivia Wood, and illustrator Carlos Lerma. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a collective of creative, independent podcasts. You can learn more about all our shows at radiotopia.fm. You can get a Song Exploder t-shirt at songexploder.net/shirt. You can also follow the show on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook @SongExploder. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.