

Song Exploder
Bleachers - I Miss Those Days
Episode 128

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.

("I Miss Those Days" by BLEACHERS)

Hrishikesh: Bleachers is the moniker of Jack Antonoff, a songwriter, multi-instrumentalist, and producer. He won two Grammy awards as a member of the band fun., and another for his production work on Taylor Swift's album *1989*. He's also co-written songs with St. Vincent, Lorde, Carly Rae Jepsen, Sia, and more. In June 2017, Jack Antonoff released his second album as Bleachers, *Gone Now*. In this episode, he breaks down a song from that album called "I Miss Those Days," and traces the process of making it - from the original demo to the final song.

("I Miss Those Days" by BLEACHERS)

Jack: Hi, I'm Jack Antonoff from Bleachers.

(Music fades)

Jack: So the way this started was I bought an emulator, thing's called the E-mu 2. It was one of the first, like, sampler systems. It's like a big machine, takes floppy disks. I put one of the floppy disks in, not knowing what it was, and just held down one D note.

(E-mu 2)

Jack: So that is me just holding down a D, and there's this arp on the emulator playing the piano pattern.

(E-mu 2 fades)

Jack: The machine is so from a different time that when you switch between sounds, it takes about 45 to 60 seconds. The screen literally says, "This will take a minute." It is the most un-user-friendly machine that breaks every 5 seconds. Basically,

whenever I can get it working or on, I'll just like hit record and just get as much out as possible. And then I found this patch on it that sounded like Christmas.

(E-mu 2)

Jack: That is Christmas to me. Like when you play that, I just get this rush of every Christmas thing in my mind. I feel so much love and hope in Christmas [laughter], and I'm Jewish [laughter]. I don't know if people who actually celebrate Christmas feel this way, but I just see it from afar and it's perfect. And I love Christmas music.

(E-mu 2 ends)

Jack: So I found this sound and it made me want to be very sincere. If you listen to the demo, I was like, "Alright, let's just loop that."

(E-mu 2)

Jack: And then I just started like talk-singing. When I'm writing, sometimes I'll put Auto-Tune on my voice, and just sort of like not care about pitch, and talk-sing.

(Vocals with E-mu 2)

(Vocals ends)

(Beat with E-mu 2)

Jack: And sometimes when you have an effect on your voice, you can say things that you would otherwise feel embarrassed to just say in your normal tone.

(Vocals, E-mu 2, and beat: "And everyone is changing / And storefront's rearranging / I picked up a quarter and I just saw my face")

Jack: And so, I just started telling these stories, just looking for anything that jumps out.

(Vocals, E-mu 2, and beat: "Sixteen in a van and we took it all the way down to Florida / You know I never really left that street / Nights and weekends breaking on the scene")

Jack: And then, I just kept capping it with, "I know I was lost, but I miss those days."

(Vocals, E-mu 2, and beat: "la-la-la-lost, but I miss those days")

Jack: That first demo, that was from day 1.

(Music fades)

Jack: And I remember thinking like, "Oh that's kind of nice for like a chorus. That's like a big bow on everything I'm saying." But I couldn't think of any lyrics in time, so then I just started going, "La-la-la-la-la-la-lost."

(Vocals, E-mu 2, and drums: "I was just la-la-la-la-la-lost, but I miss those days")

(Music fades)

Jack: But the melody in the verse was so, in many ways, not melodic. It's so, just like sits in one place that I wanted a, just grand, melodic line and so I wrote the [sings melody line].

(Guitars)

Jack: So that's two 12-strings, and then 2 regular guitars stacked.

(Guitars)

(Guitars end)

Jack: And that was cool, but it wasn't, it wasn't it. And actually, if you listen to the song, it ends up sitting very far in the background and the thing that really plays the line is the tubular bells,

(Tubular bells)

Jack: which are gorgeously out of tune.

(Tubular bells)

Jack: The tubular bells are pretty Christmas to me. The one bridge too far was, at one point, I tried to put sleigh bells.

(Sleigh bells join)

Jack: As soon as I laid that down, like, me and my engineer were just like, “Ugh! That’s disgusting.”

(Sleigh bells end)

Jack: So it’s good to know the limit.

(Tubular bells)

(Tubular bells end)

Jack: I didn’t actually write about Christmas. But it’s a Christmas song to me because it has things a lot of Christmas songs have, which is this super joyous, friends and family feeling with an incredibly depressing lyric attached [laughter]. About versions of yourself that are just lost in the wind [laughter]. You know, if I have a song called “I Miss Those Days,” it buys me some space to say some pretty gnarly things in the verses. And so, I was like, “Oh I’ll tell these very sad stories, taking pieces from my past and then I’ll cap it off with this super universal statement, “I miss those days.” But the lyric is, “I was lost but I miss those days.” Because what the song is about is the quote-unquote worst times of my life, which now are so precious. Sixteen in a van driving myself to Florida, my first tour, no one’s coming to the shows. No one cares about the work I’m making besides me and a couple friends I’ve convinced to get in the van with me. I can see all the ways I’m trying to put on a show but I’m not connecting with myself.

(Vocals: “I was sixteen in a van driving myself to Florida”)

Jack: And you think you’re such a mess, but what you don’t realize until you move into better phases of your life, is being that messed up or lost is also a great freedom. Kind of nowhere to go but up. Because all that shit aside, everything was wide open.

(Drums)

(Drums end)

Jack: At my house in New York, I have a tiny drum room. And a lot of times, I’ll play the kick and the snare separately.

(Drums)

Jack: Because I'm not a good enough drummer to just make it feel great.

(Drums)

Jack: I'm more interested in the sounds I can get, and then I'll mix it together like one person played it.

(Drums)

Jack: And then sort of jam them all together and get sloppy on top of it.

(Drums)

Jack: So even right there on that fill, you can hear it's two drum kits. Because the backbeat stays and then another drum kit just comes rolling on top of it with a totally different tone.

(Drums)

(Drums end)

Jack: I don't like to use cymbals. There is cymbals in this song, but they're harder to control. I like to use like a voice.

(Cymbal sound)

Jack: I like to take the last line of something that hits on a 1, and use it as like a cymbal. So I sing, "Miss those days," so the "ays" of "days," cut that out, pitched it up 12 semitones, reverb'd it. It's like here's the next part, which is what a cymbal does.

(Drums)

(Cymbal sound)

Jack: It's always fascinating, wherever you're at, to visit the worst time of your life because it always changes. I'm really talking about, in the verses, specific moments talking about 9/11, can't shake that.

(Vocals: "Those days when I'd sit on my sister's rooftop / Watching our city burn into the night / I'm not sure that we were meant to survive")

Jack: Before 9/11, I had a pretty simple life. I had a nice family, I went to school. You know, my sister was sick, but it was still, everything looked and felt contained to a kid. It all looked right. 9/11 happens, shortly after that, my sister dies, shortly after that, my cousin was killed in Iraq, who was in the war. And just one after the other, it was this moment, the before and after moment. Before simplicity, and then things get complicated. You sort of, the bubble bursts, you're in the real world. And that's one thing I wanted to talk about. In this song, I'm talking about those things very specifically. I never thought I'd write a song like this because it's so direct. Like if a cop was like, "What happened? Tell me just the most direct feelings about this time period or that time period." And I wasn't trying to impress anyone or be poetic, I would just say this. And it made me nervous that I was a level of sincerity that would almost ring insincere. That's why I went through so many different versions.

(Strings)

Jack: This one is the Vocoder because I was just like, "I don't even want to hear myself saying this. I want to, I'd rather be a robot."

(Vocoder version)

(Vocoder version fades)

Jack: I'd play it for people, and they would just be like, "Just make it sound like you." And then, I just realized I'm either going to do it or I'm not.

Jack: So this is my voice, just a little bit of reverb, slightly compressed. Just more in line with the song.

(Vocals: "I said la-la-la-la-la-lost, but I miss those days")

Jack: My favorite part of making this song was around the time that I put the saxophone in, I was like, "I hear just a swarm of bees roaring sax coming in like, I hear Evan Smith," who's my sax player, I hear him just playing like his head is on fire.

(Saxophone)

Jack: And that comes in the post-chorus.

(Saxophone)

Jack: And huge baritones [mimics the baritone saxophone].

(Saxophone)

(Saxophone ends)

Jack: When I heard that sax, I was like, “OK. It comes off as irony, but it’s that space right beyond it, which is just actual sincerity. And it’s so sincere that it’s sort of hard to even accept but I like the way it feels.” You know, I’m not trolling anyone, I don’t like that. There’s no cynicism.

Hrishikesh: The song ends with a fade out. How did you decide to end it that way?

Jack: This song to me, it didn’t feel like it was supposed to end. I used to think of a fade out as something you do if you couldn’t figure out how to end the song. And then, I realized that’s actually a very potent move for a certain song. Certain songs are meant to just sort of go on forever.

(Vocals, guitars, and cymbal sound: “la-la-la-la-la-la-lost, but I miss those days”)

Jack: As the song fades out, I’m just sort of like walking off into the distance, and I’ll pick the story back up when I find a reason to miss the days I’m in right now.

(Music ends)

Jack: This song, it sounds like New Jersey. It’s where I’m from, it’s where I grew up, it’s where I’m talking about a lot, I wanted it to sound like that. You know, your blaring saxophones, Jersey beach culture, and Springsteen, and it’s big and it’s hopeful. Just feels like barreling down the Garden State Parkway or the New Jersey Turnpike. You just fly down the highway and sort of dream.

(Guitar)

Jack: You know, Springsteen, I think he said “blues in the verse, gospel in the chorus.” And what I’ve learned from Springsteen specifically is that you can stand up there and that you can tell your whole story, but also still speak to everyone.

(Keyboard joins)

Jack: The whole thing is like a message in a bottle. All the things you were afraid to say in life, you put in the song, and then you send it out. And then someone in Australia or Duluth pops their hand up like, “Oh, me too.

(Guitar ends)

Jack: I was also messed up, but I miss those days.” You're not alone in that feeling. Because so much of the hardship in life is thinking you're alone in the feeling. If you wake up in the morning with a weight that you can't describe, and nothing's technically wrong in your life, and you don't know what it is, no one sees that at the supermarket. You're alone on Earth, until you talk about it with someone and find out you're actually not.

(Keyboard)

(Keyboard fades)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's “I Miss Those Days,” by Bleachers, in its entirety.

(“I Miss Those Days” by BLEACHERS)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net/bleachers to learn more, and to find a link to buy this song.
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