Song Exploder
Blood Orange - Saint
Episode 144

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.

("Saint" by BLOOD ORANGE)

Hrishikesh: Blood Orange is the project of songwriter and producer Devonté Hynes. He's produced and co-written songs for artists like Carly Rae Jepsen, Solange, HAIM, ASAP Rocky, and others. He's been releasing his own music as Blood Orange since 2011. In August 2018, he put out his fourth Blood Orange album, *Negro Swan*, and in this episode, Dev breaks down how he made the song "Saint." You'll hear the original version of the track from 2015, as well as the layers and voices that were added over years to create the final version that appears on the album.

("Saint" by BLOOD ORANGE)

Dev: My name is Devonté Hynes.

(Music fades)

Dev: I tend not to remember the first time I start tracks. But this song, I remember the very [laughter] beginning of it. I distinctly remember it because I had only just moved into the place I was living in. And obviously, before taking care of anything that a human needs to survive, I set up [laughter] my music equipment in the middle. I was really into these kind of like messy beats that just have almost like sunny melodies over the top, like "Let's Go Swimming," Arthur Russell.

("Let's Go Swimming" by ARTHUR RUSSELL)

Dev: You almost don't even realize how hectic the drum track is because the melody is so sweet.

("Let's Go Swimming" by ARTHUR RUSSELL)

(Music fades)

Dev: I wanted something along those lines. So I was in my apartment, and a lot of the times, I use sounds and things I find from YouTube, and then I cut them up, and will replay them. And so, I found like a loop on Youtube.

(Beat)

Dev: I'm pretty sure that was a Youtube loop because I remember the cable system [laughter] to run it through the mixer was like a little taxing at first. And it was at a time where I was running a lot of things through this mixer that I had. It's like a Radioshack-made mixer from back in the day. And it's probably for like live DJ's, and there's a lot of like effects in it. So I found that loop, and then had a drum machine.

(Beat)

Dev: It was just me playing along with it, and then I added the 808s then too.

(808)

Dev: Ran everything through that mixer, and then into my computer.

(Beat)

Dev: And then, I added the vocals and added the chords to that.

(Vocals with guitar, keyboard, and beat: "Saving all my love for you / You never tell me all that you do")

Dev: "Saving all my love for you," that was the first line I wrote. Then after that, the second line I wrote was, "I wish I'd seen the saint you were before." And then everything else stemmed from that.

(Vocals with guitar, keyboard, and beat: "I wished I'd seen the saint you were before")

(Music fades)

Dev: So the song is kind of like a hopeful song about seeing the best in people and the best in yourself. And it's really it, it's really like a very simple concept. And

that was all that existed for half a year [laughter]. It was just that beat for maybe like 7 minutes and that melody over the top of it.

(Beat)

Dev: I usually have people hanging at my studio because just working solo, I do miss the kinsmanship of a band. So I have friends around, and so I always listen to what they say even if they're not musical, I like their input. And more and more people kept bringing this song up to me that had heard it through the years. It would always be the one that would stick out to people whenever I played them stuff. So I just decided I needed to like knuckle down on it. And then it was just constant deconstructing, and cutting, and speeding up, and slowing down.

(Beat)

Dev: And then add in like the street sounds in.

(Street sounds join)

(Beat fades)

Dev: I have a lot of [laughter] stockpiled street sounds of New York that I've recorded off my phone.

(Street sounds)

Dev: That one is the longest one I've done.

(Street sounds)

Dev: I love the sound of the iPhone audio so much. I walked from SoHo essentially up Broadway until just after like Union Square, and just recorded the whole time.

(Street sounds)

(Beat joins)

Dev: I kind of wanted it to feel alive in some way. Making it feel that it was almost like it's coming from like the streets. You know, like the beat could only have been made ripped from like [laughter] the concrete, you know.

(Beat with street sounds fade)

(Saxophone)

Dev: So that's my friend, Jason Arce.

(Saxophone)

Dev: It was recorded actually in my studio, but I wanted it to sound like when you're walking around in New York, and you hear people playing saxophones. So that's why it's so like frantic.

(Saxophone)

Dev: It's funny that I was recording these street sounds and getting Jason to do that saxophone over the top, because a lot of the times, my music, the street sound is completely natural because I shut windows and it doesn't stop it coming into the microphone. And oftentimes also it's just saxophone people playing [laughter]. So it's funny that I constructed it for this song, because other songs, it's an unavoidable situation.

(Saxophone)

(Horn sound)

Dev: So that's two things. That's me attempting to play clarinet mixed in with me just making the sound in my mouth [laughter].

(Horn sound ends)

Dev: And then I got Jason to play over the top of it, and then I added the cello stuff so that it had that kind of messy texture.

(Horn sound, saxophone, and cello)

(Music ends)

Dev: I used to have this like, you know, those like kind of fake stand-up pianos that have pressure keys and then like Wurli sounds and stuff. There was a Wurli sound on that stand-up piano that I got so obsessed with.

(Keyboard)

Dev: It was quite a digital sound, but there was a quality in it that was so nice I always really liked.

(Keyboard)

Dev: So I was recording through a tape machine direct from the stand-up piano. And it just naturally made it warmer so that I didn't really have to touch it that much.

(Keyboard ends)

Dev: There's maybe like three different synth pads that I've like made within Logic.

(Synth pad)

Dev: That was added actually to the end, pretty late, just to give a boost to that final section for like thickness.

(Vocals with synth pad: "You wish I'd seen the saint you were before")

Dev: So yeah, it's a very simple concept in this song. It's really just trying to pull the best from people. Everyone has those moments where maybe they're not as, maybe they were in a better light before and this is about accepting that. Acknowledging it, but accepting it.

Hrishikesh: Is there anyone that you were thinking of specifically when that feeling was coming out?

Dev: I mean probably myself [laughter], honestly. I'd always kind of had this ongoing feeling of being able to do better but then at the same time maybe I done better before. A lot of people that maybe don't ever listen to my lyrics [laughter] properly kind of think that they're love songs but I've never written a love song in my life [laughter]. Like ever. But I love the form and the language. But in reality, it's more talking about myself.

(Vocals: "You wish I'd seen the saint you were before")

Dev: All the vocals, if it's not me singing them, happen naturally and somewhat by accident. Usually, it's people that are around like there's BEA1991.

(Vocals: "I got to see you live for more / You said it before")

Dev: Bea is at the beginning of the song. And then there was a harmony she added towards the end.

(Vocals: "Spreading all my love for you / You never tell me all that you do")

Dev: She [laughter] came up with that harmony herself, and it's like nothing I would write. I would not have written a harmony for the main melody that is that, ever.

(Vocals: "Spreading all my love for you / You never tell me all that you do / Quiet when it's done, will you ever run?")

Dev: Then the second vocal added was Ava, Ava Raiin, in that same section actually.

(Vocals: "Spreading all my love for you / You never tell me all that you do")

Dev: So Ava Raiin, she sang a few times on my last album, and then she would sing live with me every now and then.

(Vocals: "Quiet when it's done, will you ever run?")

Dev: And then, Aaron who records as Porches, sings the opening line,

(Vocals: "Your skin's a flag that shines for us all / You said it before")

Dev: with Bea.

(Vocals: "The brown that shines and lights your darkest thoughts")

Dev: I essentially replaced myself with him for that beginning, because I didn't think it needed me. There's a feeling when you hear different vocals from the artist in a song, and adding the voices kind of takes it out of, not reality, but takes it out of being like me just singing this part. If there was to be like an ethos for Blood Orange, it's for it to not sound like it's me in a room making music. I'm glad it

doesn't [laughter] feel like a solo project because my whole goal is for it to never feel like it's just me, by myself.

(Vocals with beat: "Spreading all my love for you / You never tell me all that you do / Quiet when it's done, will you ever run?")

Dev: I also see albums as time captures of my life. And that's why [laughter] I like this song so much, because this song has existed for so long that it has such an insane mix of people singing [laughter] on it, which were all in completely different rooms at different times. As much as I'm really meticulous with things, I'm pretty good at being like, "This is done." I can change that snare a million times and it doesn't matter at this point, because it's captured those couple of years. But probably the hardest moment was the verse I sing by myself.

(Vocals with keyboard: "I got to see you live for more / You said it before / You wish I'd seen the saint you were before")

Dev: I think I redid that vocal a lot of times in the last couple of years. I just couldn't get what my performance was. And so usually when I can't get that, I cover it with effects. But the track is so messy that I didn't think that worked, having the vocal be so affected. So it was trying to get a good like dry, single vocal for that verse. I just worked on it a lot and recorded it so many times, and eventually I recorded it by slowing down the track by like 3%, and then recording my vocal, and then putting it back to regular speed [laughter].

(Vocals with keyboard: "Your skin's a flag that shines for us all / You said it before / The brown that shines and lights your darkest thoughts")

(Keyboard)

Dev: I kind of wanted it to sound like a song that was being kind of tweaked live. Like it was being adjusted, and the beat was being twisted, and things were being picked up, and microphone being passed around. Almost like it's the first try. There's something cool to me about that first try. But it's not the first try [laughter], it's like the millionth try [laughter].

(Keyboard ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Saint," by Blood Orange, in its entirety.

(“Saint” by BLOOD ORANGE)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net to learn more about Blood Orange, and for a link to buy or stream this song.

This episode was produced and edited by me, along with Christian Koons, with help from Nick Song. The illustration for this episode was done by Carlos Lerma, you can see that on songexploder.net or on our Instagram. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a collective of fiercely independent podcasts. You can learn about all of our shows at radiotopia.fm. You can find Song Exploder on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter @SongExploder. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.