

Song Exploder
Bon Iver - Holyfields,
Episode 166

Thao: 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 Thao Nguyen.

("Holyfields," by BON IVER)

Thao: Justin Vernon founded the band Bon Iver in 2006. Bon Iver's released four albums and won two Grammys, including Best New Artist. The most recent album *i,i* came out in August 2019, and in this episode, Justin breaks down a song from it called "Holyfields,." He's joined by producers Chris Messina and Brad Cook. We spoke to him in July, from his studio in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, where the song started. They finished it at Sonic Ranch studio in Tornillo, Texas, on the border of US and Mexico.

("Holyfields," by BON IVER)

(Music fades out)

Justin: This is Justin Vernon.

Brad: My name is Brad Cook and I was a producer for this record.

Justin: Brad and I go so insanely far back that it's kind of impossible to explain, but our musical language is pretty deep.

Brad: I think at this stage in the game, we've been making songs together for 20 years.

Justin: When me and Brad were growing up, we were finding life meaning out of listening to all the Bob Marley records, and learning about humanity through his lyrics and through his music and attitude. And so that was a really huge impact on me. That was really the high point of seeing what music can do in the world and why it's more powerful than maybe we even give it credit for at times.

Chris: I'm Chris Messina and I produced, mixed, and engineered this record. We're in Eau Claire, Wisconsin and we have our own studio here called April Base.

Justin: Chris has been running the studio for, what is it, seven years? We feel like partners in this band in a lot of ways. It was just the three of us in the studio at

April Base one morning. We were just trying to create environments in which songs could kind of pour out. And we just had a couple of different synths hooked up.

Chris: The core of the song is based around an EML ElectroComp 101 which is this early modular synth. I think it's like '70s-ish, and we got a sound out of it that was sort of cool, and caught a vibe.

Justin: It's that sound that goes [mimics sound].

(EML)

Justin: One of the confusing things about it is that, you know, when people hear the word synth, they often imagine like keyboard sounds. But the EML has this random noise generator. So you're twisting knobs and all of a sudden you have this totally insane, weird rhythmic pattern.

(EML)

Justin: So there was no real tone. You could just hear percussive elements.

Chris: It was really just Justin sort of learning how to use it.

Justin: We just turned it on and recorded it for a few minutes. And that sort of is the drums, if you will, or the rhythmic sense in the song.

(EML ends)

Justin: And then we tracked on top of that right away. Brad was playing a Yamaha CS synthesizer, playing all different versions of D, the note D.

(Yamaha CS synthesizer)

Justin: He just has this loop of D going or he's adjusting textures, but it's only one note. And he's kind of playing it constantly, but you only hear it based on a gate that we set from the EML so you can see it's following the same rhythm as the EML.

(EML joins)

Justin: And so while that was happening,

(EML along with Yamaha CS synthesizer end)

Justin: I was playing the Messina, which is a harmonizing machine, sort of, that Chris and I came up with a bunch of years back, and it's his last name because that's how you name things. I'll do my best to explain how the Messina works [laughter]. So Brad was playing one note.

(Yamaha CS synthesizer)

Justin: And then that one note gets fed to the Messina and when you press the keyboard on the Messina, it's like you're playing a full piano version of that one note.

(Messina)

Justin: So just being able to play multiple tones in harmony with each other of that original sound source. Being able to take that exact sound and spread it out over a keyboard in real time. And so I was just making up stuff, trying to play some cool chords. It was also going through the EML, the EML was sending like a pulse gate opening thing to everything. So there's really only three instruments happening, but they're all reacting to one another all simultaneously.

(Messina along with EML and Yamaha CS synthesizer)

Justin: And so all of us were sort of performing all at the same time, it was kind of recording an improvisation that we stuck with for the whole life of the song.

Brad: Being in the room when the initial song came to life was pretty moving. It felt cosmic in a really cool way.

Justin: It's a moment, the three of us kind of just spurred this moment that feels so magical, and it's just all of a sudden it's happening, "Oh my God, that works."

Chris: Yeah, it's just a snowball.

Justin: It just plopped right into reality in the minutes it took to record it basically.

(Music ends)

Justin: We really felt something that day. Like we had something on our record, whatever that record would turn out to be. We really had something we could gather around.

Brad: I almost remember arguing you shouldn't put vocals on it for a while, just, let's just leave it as an instrumental. It was so moving. And then Justin was like, "No, no, I hear this thing."

Justin: Kind of immediately I did, I sang like a scratch idea. You just kind of go in there and get weird and try to find little patterns that work in the cuts I suppose.

(Demo vocals: "Danger been stepping in / I'm happy as I ever been")

Justin: I don't know where the lyrics come from. It's a mystery to me as well. But there's meaning in it.

(Demo vocals: "Couldn't tell ya what the cadence is / It's folded in the evidences")

Justin: There's a lot of like me, or the singer, or the song, talking to people with a little bit of disdain or a little anger or a little impatience.

(Demo vocals: "So you wanna leave a mark? / You're honing in on meadow park?")

Justin: "Do you want to leave a mark" to me is, "Oh you want to like rise the ranks and work in tall buildings? You're honing in on Meadow Park, you know, like you found a cool neighborhood to live. Oh, I heard you guys are very safe, caught up with the featherweights, you know, the other people that aren't pulling their weight."

(Demo vocals: "I heard you guys are very safe / Caught up with the featherweight")

Brad: I think the song definitely sort of speaks to a general rejection of status quo. I just think the narrator like Justin is pretty restless and not very satisfied with passivity, in a passive existence.

Justin: I think the only like concrete feeling that I get is the lyrics that are in the chorus, "The dawn is rising, but the land ain't rising."

(Demo chorus vocals: "The dawn is rising / The land ain't rising / No")

Justin: You know, it's just like, you're up all night, you know, the dawn's rising, you're going to work or you've wasted your life or whatever but the land is not rising, the water keeps rising. Like, you know, when are you going to figure this out? Like figure out [laughter] pollution and climate change, you know, like when are you going to stop denying the certain things in your mind and start accepting the hard things?

(Chorus full track: "The dawn is rising / The land ain't rising / No, no, no")

Brad: Rob Moose was the next step in the development of the song.

Justin: Rob Moose, he's done arrangements for different string and horn parts since the second Bon Iver record. And he's truly just unbelievable in the way he's able to add to the music we give him.

Chris: The way we work with Rob is that he'll just come and hang out at April Base for a couple days, and we'll set him up his own little recording space because he's pretty comfortable recording himself these days.

Justin: We just would feed him stuff, and he would go away and record different ideas with his violin and viola. He just really pulled out some interesting harmonies.

(Strings)

Justin: He's making harmonics with his violin, which is incredibly difficult to do, I find. But he slides the harmonics up and he gives it this really scratchy, sort of sounds like weird violins from the '20s or something. And he's so creative, and thinking what the layers, now there's probably 20 parts, 30 parts of himself playing.

(Strings)

Justin: Such a cool part comes in there.

(Strings)

Justin: And then the third section of the song, what I'd call the bridge, he comes in with this really strange kind of seventh chord or whatever the hell it is, kind of this like minor, darker element, kind of out of nowhere.

(Bridge strings)

Justin: When he solidified his part, he pulled something out of me melodically that it was written around and interwoven into Rob's string part.

(Vocals along with strings: "Bonded weights / Don't favor them / If it's all that you don't do / It's lacerate / Better let them pass away")

Justin: That whole section of the song was really the inspiration to get me through writing and finishing the lyrics through the rest of the way.

Chris: That was at Sonic Ranch, Tornillo, Texas. That's where we finished the record.

Justin: I did end up finishing and recording the final vocals while we were down there.

(Vocals along with strings: "Stay, go? / Better that you find a new way / Before my eyes / Couldn't learn it any other way / By the way")

Justin: Any one of these verses in "Holyfields," I could pretend one day or imagine one day that I'm singing as another person straight to me. Like maybe, I'm a little mad at myself for not following through or being a better person. Being that close to that border and being with, you know, everyone was Mexican at the studio almost except us. And so I think being that close to that, during this time in our lives, that just influenced everything. Not one line, not, you know, it just influenced everything. Trying to gain perspective and trying to be as good as artists as we can be while things like that are going down so geographically close.

Brad: Texas is a heavy vibe right now.

Justin: Yeah, I mean, damn [sigh]. It's quite, it's pretty emotional [heavy breath]. There's a lot of pain there, I mean, and to be able to do what we want to do, just such a simple safe, if you consider it, it's not very, it's not immediately necessary for survival. And to be able to do it is just a blessing, you know. I think all that energy really, really touched all of us [sigh]. Yeah.

(Synths)

Justin: We can never not be all of us. We're always sharing the moment that we are here living in time. And so it's really hard to separate and really truly try to

decipher what one person really is because you don't really have one person without the other. And that to me is just like, seems to be sacred math for figuring out our problems as human beings, is just understanding that there's always the other that we're kind of responsible for.

(Music ends)

Thao: And now, here is “Holyfields,” by Bon Iver, in its entirety.

(“Holyfields,” by BON IVER)

Thao: Visit songexploder.net for more information about Bon Iver. You'll also find a link to buy or stream this song.

Song Exploder is made by Hrishikesh Hirway, producer Christian Koons, and me, I'm guest hosting for the year. Carlos Lerma is our illustrator, you can see his portrait of Justin Vernon on the Song Exploder website or Instagram. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a mighty collective of independent podcasts. You can learn about all of our shows at radiotopia.fm. You can also follow Song Exploder on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter @SongExploder. And you can follow me @thaogetstaydown. My name is Thao Nguyen, thanks for listening.