

Song Exploder
Dua Lipa - Levitating
Episode 194

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.

("Levitating" by DUA LIPA)

Hrishikesh: This episode contains explicit language. Dua Lipa is a Grammy-winning singer and songwriter from London. Her second album, *Future Nostalgia*, came out in March 2020. It hit #1 on the charts in thirteen countries, and it was shortlisted for the UK's Mercury Prize. One of the songs on the record is "Levitating." Dua co-wrote it with some of her closest collaborators, including producer Stephen Kozmeniuk, AKA Koz. In this episode, Dua and Koz break down "Levitating" and explain how Dua's childhood memories shaped the song's sound.

("Levitating" by DUA LIPA)

Dua: My name's Dua Lipa.

(Music fades out)

Dua: The day I wrote this song, I actually know the exact date. "Levitating" was created on the 28th of August 2018. I guess I had just started writing for the second record, still figuring out where I wanted to go with it but knowing what my album title was going to be, which is *Future Nostalgia*. And I knew I wanted to touch on my childhood influences, and a lot of my childhood influences are really songs and music that my parents listened to. A lot of Jamiroquai, Prince, Blondie and when those songs are played now, it just brings back such a rush of fun and exciting like emotions and all I want to do is dance, and immediately it takes me back to when I was a kid. And I wanted to play on that emotion and that feeling and those memories, and create something with like a fresh, modern twist.

(Piano along with kick and shaker)

Koz: I am Koz, I'm the producer of "Levitating."

Dua: Koz is such an incredible instrumentalist and producer and artist in his own right, and we've worked together for a really long time.

Koz: Usually before we go into work, like I'll spend couple weeks or a month just like coming up with ideas to play when we hit the studio.

Dua: Before the session, I'd kind of like sent him

(Piano ends)

(Kick and shaker)

Dua: like some notes and some stuff that I've been inspired by.

Koz: She definitely had the idea of blending a lot of old stuff with new stuff and I just thought like the best way to reinterpret the past was to just use old instruments.

(Kick and shaker end)

Koz: I had been looking for this synth forever called the Roland VP-330. I'd probably been looking for six, seven, eight years and then one day, I found it in Tokyo, got it back to Toronto. I just plugged it in and literally the first thing I played was like what turned into "Levitating."

(Synth riff)

Koz: The whole song was basically just built around that one patch, you know. This great synthetic choir sound.

(Synth riff)

Koz: It was the first thing I played on it and I just happened to be recording because sometimes I feel it's just the best time to catch something. And then just kind of looped it and started building a song around it.

(Chord stabs)

Koz: And then it has like a sound that's like analog strings and that's also that synth. You know, it's like you don't want a keyboard that does like a hundred things,

you want one that does just a couple things really well, and it just has like a vibe and a sound.

(Chord stabs along with shaker)

Koz: I was kind of thinking it'd be cool to do it as kind of like a slinky disco track.

(Drum beat joins)

Koz: It was pretty simple, a lot of these times you don't build them out too much. You just build out like just a great vibe to kind of write to, and then forget about them until you hit the studio and then hit play [laughter].

(Music ends)

Dua: I wrote "Levitating" with some of my close friends and collaborators Sarah Hudson, Coffee Clarence Jr. and Koz, and I've worked with all three of them for so long. And Coffee is brilliant with melodies and Sarah is very much like a fairy godmother, and she starts every session with a tarot reading. It would be like another way of opening up and talking about like our experiences of what was going on in life, and it instantly changes the energy in the room.

Koz: It's always a good laugh with all of us [laughter]. But sessions are an interesting thing because it's actually quite nerve wracking.

Dua: And so we went to the studio, he was like, "Okay," he's like, "I have some tracks." He's like, "I'd love to like play some stuff that I've been working on with like you in mind and what you kind of told me." I think maybe "Levitating" was one of the first tracks he played.

Koz: Someone would have their phone out, and just as you were playing the beats and stuff like you get your immediate reaction to melody and you just kind of capture it.

(Voice memo of the "Levitating" beat played out to everyone in the studio)

Koz: Just so you don't forget it when you go back to it. This one stemmed pretty heavily from Dua in the room. It can happen so many different ways, people just start singing something. But I remember like Dua really led this one.

Dua: Almost immediately, we went into the melody of

(Voice memo of Dua singing the verse melody over the "Levitating" beat)

Dua: And then you kind of hear Sarah in the background going, "Oh my God."

(Voice memo of Sarah saying "Oh my God")

Dua: It came so naturally and we were just ready to go, and it just felt like such an easy like yes, that's what we're going into.

(Voice memo of Dua singing the chorus melody over the "Levitating" beat)

Koz: She was like instant on the melody.

Dua: You know, you make it up along the way, but it's just all about like the feeling.

(Voice memo fades out)

Dua: We had the visual of being in like an Austin Powers movie.

(Electric guitar)

Dua: And having Mike Myers just somehow like doing some random levitating dance that we were just making up. That was just like helping give us like

(Drum beat joins electric guitar)

Dua: a mood while we were writing the lyrics. We ordered these donuts because I was like, "How are we going to spice this up?" And so I bought some donuts, we all had total like sugar rush, and just started writing, and I think that we were literally levitating from the sugar rush.

(Drum beat along with electric guitar)

Dua: We had such like a good feeling like going into that song.

(First verse vocals: "If you wanna run away with me, I know a galaxy / And I can take you for a ride / I had a premonition that we fell into a rhythm / Where the music don't stop for life")

Dua: I recorded my vocals on the same day. I do all the lead vocals and then some backing vocals.

(Pre-chorus backing vocals: "You want me, I want you, baby / My sugar boo, I'm levitating")

Dua: We have the lyric "sugar boo," which is quite funny because it's something that we call each other and thought it would be kind of a cute thing to put in but it's more something that we're like, we say as a funny joke and I was like, "Are we sure we want to put this in the song?" And it just seemed like such a funny cute thing and an ode to like our friendship.

(Pre-chorus vocals along with electric guitar: "My sugar boo, I'm levitating")

(Electric guitar along with synth stabs)

Dua: I love collaborating and creating like such fun, personal relationships with the people that I'm writing with. Because we can be so silly and be so open with each other and because we have that friendship and that's really important. I think a big part of like songwriting is like daring to be a bit shit, like have an idea that's, you know, you don't know whether it's good or not, but you have to almost like say it. Doing the second record, I knew that I wanted to make it with my friends and people that I'd worked with for so long and people that I was so comfortable around that I felt like I didn't have anything to prove.

(Electric guitar along with chord stabs end)

Dua: And Coffee, he would help and like elevate the melodies and everytime it would be better when Coffee gets his hands on it.

(Dua and Coffee vocals - "Glitter in the sky, glitter in the eyes / Shining just the way we are / I feel like we're forever everytime we get together / but whatever let's get lost on Mars")

(Bass along with percussion)

Dua: I feel like we found ourselves dancing all the way through making this record like nonstop, even when we weren't completely finished or even if we were having a writer's block or even if we were like still figuring it out and working on the production like there wasn't a moment where we weren't just kind of feeling the music and having fun.

(Chorus vocals along with piano, bass and shaker: "I got you, moonlight, you're my starlight / I need you all night, come on, dance with me / I'm levitating")

Koz: The way the hook is actually thrown away like that I think is so cool in the song, because it's you know, "I'm levitating." It's just like very like [laughter], it's not where you kind of like see the traditional hook. It didn't feel like it was trying too hard, it felt a bit more like laid back.

(Chorus vocals: "I'm levitating")

Dua: And then I take it into like a more talky thing, because I wanted to get my British accent out a bit more, because a lot of the time when I sing, I guess people can't tell that I'm British and I'm like "Okay, this is, I have to take the melody out of it and I have to like talk-sing it."

(Bridge vocals: "My love is like a rocket, watch it blast off / And I'm feeling so electric, dance my ass off / And even if I wanted to, I can't stop")

Dua: And then we do some gang vocals.

(Gang vocals: "Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah")

Dua: Those are always really funny to make them. Like we wanted to make it like sound really yappy and really childish and the part that everyone can like join in on and stuff. We were all like quite in a tight area so we would put the mic on one side of the room so we would get like different sounds coming from different parts of the room and somebody would be closer and somebody would be further away.

(Gang vocals: "You want me, I want you, baby / My sugarboo, I'm levitating")

Dua: Not only do we just like go in and do it with our own voices, but then we go in and put on voices and we do like, we create like personas every kind of vocal take that we do, like for the BVs it's always really fun.

(Vocal ad libs)

Dua: It's all about like the ambience, and creating like a whole world around the song that's beyond just the lyrics and the vocal, it's about like the whole story behind it.

(Vocal ad libs)

(Electric guitar along with drum beat)

Dua: We did the whole song in a day.

Koz: We just stormed through, got all the sections, cut everything in the room.

Dua: Then like towards the end of it, we asked to work with Stuart Price.

Koz: He produced *Confessions on the Dance Floor* for Madonna and other great records, Killers, Pet Shop Boys.

Dua: And he just basically helped with like the fundamental bass groove. Like he kind of went in and brought more bounce to the song.

(Bass along with kick and snare)

Koz: And then there's like a high drone synth at one point.

(High drone synth joins the groove)

Koz: I mean, it's such like a disco trope, but it was just like, it was perfect and then it just kind of held through in this one section.

(Music fades out)

Dua: He also like added a string part in the pre-chorus, which was really cool.

(Pre-chorus strings)

Dua: Alongside that, Koz was a fan of this like talkbox player called Bosco Kante. He like reached out for him to come in and play on the song as well.

(Talk box vocals: "You want me, I want you, baby / My sugarboo, I'm levitating / The Milky Way, we're renegading")

Koz: I love talk box, I think it's like the coolest thing in the world [laughter].

Dua: There's like little bits layered here and there that just gives it like a cool like old school, eighties, zap, funk undertones into it.

(Talk box vocals along with drum beat and bass: "you, moonlight, you're my starlight / I need you all night, come on, dance with me")

(Piano along with shaker)

Dua: It's a song that just makes me feel so good, it makes me want to dance. But then once it's out and into the world, almost that song doesn't belong to me anymore but it belongs to everyone that's come to see the show and the memories that it holds for them, and it excites me so much to get out and perform a song that has just kind of taken a life of its own and has created memories.

Hrishikesh: Have you ever thought about the idea of a kid being in the position that you were in with your parents, like some kid out there who's listening to their parents, listen to your music?

Dua: [Laughter] You know, I haven't really thought of it that way. That would be so cool, it's really exciting to think that maybe someone could be influenced like that by my music, but it's also such a crazy thought [laughter].

Hrishikesh: And now, here is "Levitating," by Dua Lipa, in its entirety.

("Levitating" by DUA LIPA)

Hrishikesh: For more, visit songexploder.net. You'll find links to buy or stream "Levitating," 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 our shows at radiotopia.fm. If you'd like to support the podcast, 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.