

Song Exploder
Eric Nam - Love Die Young
Episode 180

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.

("Love Die Young" by ERIC NAM)

Hrishikesh: Eric Nam is a Korean-American pop singer from Atlanta. He currently lives in Seoul, South Korea, where he's found fame as a K-pop star. He was named "2016 Man of the Year" by GQ Korea, and Forbes named him one of their "30 Under 30" for Asia. But Eric's success in Korea has been complicated a little bit by what he wants to do with his career versus what he's felt he was allowed to do. As his career as an artist has evolved, he's gotten closer and closer to making the music he wants to make. In November 2019, Eric released *Before We Begin*, his first album entirely in English. In this episode, Eric Nam and producer Rabitt break down a song from that album called "Love Die Young."

("Love Die Young" by ERIC NAM)

Eric: My name's Eric Nam.

(Music fades out)

Eric: I've been in Korea for about eight years now. And it's kind of like an accident that happened, and I ended up becoming a K-pop singer. And [laughter] I think it took everybody by surprise because originally, I was supposed to be a strategy consultant at Deloitte. And life happens, and I ended up on a TV show similar to X Factor in Korea, got to the top five, signed a record deal, quit my job, and then I started putting out albums. My stuff is very pop Western influence and Western-driven. And in Korea, there weren't a lot of acts that were really pushing that sound. Since the onset of my career, you know, I walk into the label and they're like, "What do you want to do?" I was like, "I want to do like Bruno Mars, Maroon 5, right in the center of the road top 40 pop." And they literally looked at me like, "What is that? Who is that?" They were baffled because they were like, "Nobody's doing that. Why would we do that?" They were like, "You're going to just do Korean-Korean music." And being so hungry to be a part of the industry and wanting to put out an album, I think I made compromises early so I could say, "We'll try it the Korean way."

("Love Song" by ERIC NAM)

Eric: "I'll do what you want."

("Love Song" by ERIC NAM)

Eric: You know, the American system is like, "We see your color, we see your talent, and like we want you to be you." But in Korea, a lot of it is like, "You're a blank slate, and whatever we make you into, we want you to be that." And a big part of the struggle that I had in Korea was like my pronunciation isn't perfect. And so they would say, "We don't understand what you're saying because your pronunciation isn't great. You can't emote the way we need you to emote." So they would also say, "You sound too white. You sound like butter." They always say butter, as in like, to be the most American thing because we always cook everything in butter. So like, "Then why are you making me do this type of music? We should be doing stuff that's more authentic to my upbringing and to what I feel comfortable in." It was like at a point where I was like, "These songs just aren't cutting it for me. Like I don't feel comfortable, and it's just not true to who I am." But it took years for us to get to that point. And so I think it's just a matter of time for people to get used to, "Oh, Eric Nam is now singing fully in English now." This song came on the back half of a songwriting trip I was doing. I've been lucky enough to have time to come to LA and to write with songwriters. And I just kind of have sessions set up for me throughout the week. Sometimes I'll do 2 a day, and I'm just in and out trying to meet new people, write, and try to see who I really connect with from a songwriting perspective. In this case, the main producer on this is Rabitt.

Rabitt: I met Eric three years ago. My girlfriend actually introduced us. She set that session up. She's in A&R, and she just said there's this really cool Korean artist who she believes is going to cross over to America, and she thought that it was a really cool project to be a part of. Well when we first started doing "Love Die Young," I think this was our third or fourth song. So we've already kind of known each other for a little bit, and we just kind of vibe out, see what he kind of wants to talk about that day.

Eric: The only thing that I was feeling was exhaustion and burnout, and a lot of stress. I had just finished tour in Europe, and I was just exhausted. I walked in and I said, "I just want to write a sad ballad, and I want it to be piano-heavy and just make people want to cry or like feel like they got punched in the face with emotions."

Rabitt: So we started on the piano.

(Piano)

Eric: I had so much, I think, pent up inside of me of just feeling burdened by all the things that I have to do and that I had to do. And that really hit me at the end of that tour because I was like, "What would happen if I stop working? What would happen if I just like fell over and like passed out because I was just exhausted and like I couldn't work forever?"

(Piano ends)

Eric: He invited Charlie Snyder and Jackie Young into the session as well.

Rabitt: Charlie and Jackie are two songwriters that I've worked with previously.

Eric: We started putting down words, and different lines, and trying to play with what fits and what doesn't and like, "Does this really speak to what the message wants to be?" And instead of it being very like "I'm burned out," we wanted it to make it into like a love song inspired from a place of like one or the other feeling exhausted from the relationship. And so that's how we got the first line of the song.

(First verse vocals along with piano: "What happens when it's over / When we've breathed our last breath / And we've loved each other to death / Can you tell me what happens?")

Eric: So, in this sense of the song, it's about a relationship. But when I take a step back and I look into what it really means to me, it's about passion. It's about inspiration, and your career, and life.

(Piano ends)

Eric: In Korean, there's this word, it's called "Han," and it's like this deep yearning and like, it has to do with passion, it has to do with, for me, the way I think of it, it's an intensity across different emotions. And there is like a lot of heightened drama in Korean ballads. So, in the pre-chorus, the first line is, "Flowers in your hair now on our grave, and a little bit of pressure is all it takes. Should've known we'd shatter, that we'd break." And it's that type of rawness and that intensity that to me feels kind of like Han.

(Pre-chorus vocals along with piano: "Flowers in your hair now on our grave / A little bit of pressure is all it takes / Should've known we'd shatter that we'd break, break / Oh")

Eric: I sang that melody with like the flowers really falling and the melody falling together, it kind of just made sense, and everybody was like, "That's it." And with the guitar coming in there, it gives us like a steadying factor as like the melody itself is like this falling down cascading kind of thing.

(Pre-chorus vocals along with acoustic guitar: "Maybe I'm the one that we should blame / For never thinking we'd end up this way / I don't need answers I need you to stay, stay")

Eric: This song starts out seeming like it's going to be just a ballad, like a really sad ballad, but then it picks up after the first hook, and we have like a bass and some percussive instruments that really drive it forward.

(Drum beat along with bass and percussion)

Rabitt: I always find ballads tricky, it's kind of hard to make ballads sound different. So I wanted to add some rhythm to it and I thought it'd be cool to have like an organic percussive element. And I love the sound of muted piano. I have the board of the piano taken out because it looks really cool, but it also records better like that. So I put my hand on the strings of the piano. And you just kind of mute it and then you play a note. And I think I recorded that on my phone.

(Phone recording of muted piano)

Eric: It's like this muted, weird, clunky piano sound. I was like, "How is this going to turn into a song?"

(Phone recording of muted piano)

Eric: But he has a way of just kind of taking that. He threw it into Ableton.

Rabitt: And basically cut it up, changed the pitches of it, and made it like a percussive instrument.

(Pitched muted piano beat)

Rabitt: You know, I wanted to put those in spots where it just moved the song forward without just putting hi hats on it or changing the drum pattern to make it more busy. I wanted to keep it simple but added those swingy pluck things.

(Drum beat along with plucks)

Eric: It's that cadence and that rhythm that kind of gives this song this like leaning forward, like wobbly kind of emotion.

(Drum beat along with plucks end)

Rabitt: And every chorus, I try to add just one little thing to make it a little bit bigger than the last chorus.

(Omnisphere patch)

Rabitt: So I just open Omnisphere, which is a great plugin I like to use. And they have this section called playable textures, and it's just really creepy, ominous sounding things. And actually it goes throughout the song. And in the final chorus, it becomes a full on part.

(Chorus vocals along with omnisphere patch: "Please don't let this love die young / Please don't let this love die young / If I'm gonna love someone / Then let it be you")

Eric: The end of the hook, "Don't let it be you," we wanted it to be something that people could kind of like latch onto and like sing as well. And when I write, I like to imagine my live shows as well to give moments where audience members can kind of just hum along easily or like attach themselves to a certain part of the song. And then I was like, "Wait, then I want to build this into as cool of a gospel choir kind of feel as possible." And so, as it goes on, it really builds into this very large sweeping kind of sound.

(Harmonized vocals: "Please don't let this love die young / Please don't let this love die young / If I'm gonna lose someone / Don't let it be you / Please don't let this love die young")

Eric: So the gang vocals are myself, Rabitt, and Charlie, and it's just the three of us running around the room in different places, in different corners, looking at walls, and looking at the ground, yelling, "Love die young," over and over and over again.

(Harmonized vocals: "love die young / love die young")

Eric: And then we have like "The Eric Nam choir" of me just doing so many different variations of it.

(Eric Nam choir: "Please don't let this love die young / Please don't let this love die young")

Hrishikesh: Do you know what your vocal range is?

Eric: I don't know. It's pretty high, I think.

Hrishikesh: Because you sing pretty high on this song.

Eric: Yeah. It is pretty high.

(Chorus vocals: "If I'm gonna love someone / Then let it be you")

Eric: Don't ask me how I did that because I don't know. I just remember being stressed. I was like, "I have got to hit this somehow." But it's funny because you don't think you're going to hit it, but you do, and when you do, it's exhilarating. I cut my chops vocally while I was in Korea. In order to make money, I was doing a lot of side work for a bunch of these idol kids. I was doing demo vocals for them, and then I would go in, direct their vocals for their albums, and then I would also do the chorus and the background vocals for them. And so learning to fit other people's singing styles allowed me to really test the limits of my vocal capabilities. It's frustrating while you're in it, but you then try all sorts of different body techniques. So it's, "How am I going to take my breath in, and what part of my body am I going to hold tight as I let this air out?"

(Chorus vocals: "Please don't let this love die young / Please don't let this love die young")

Eric: Is it going to come from my head voice? Is it going to come from my chest voice? It's all sorts of things. And so I have a million things going on in my head, and when I figure it out, it's like eureka.

(Chorus vocals: "If I'm gonna love someone / Then let it be you")

Hrishikesh: Are you a K-pop idol?

Eric: [Laughter] I don't know, I want to say no. I want to say that I'm just an American pop singer-songwriter. That is what I want to do. That is what I want to be. That is how I would like to identify. Korea and K-pop was a place that really gave me the opportunity to dive into music, to develop a career, to hone my craft and like create a platform for myself, and for that, I'll be forever appreciative. But when I have the label of K-pop, it pigeonholes, and it limits what I am capable of doing in the West. "He's a K-pop guy from Korea," whatever. But in Korea, they're going to be like, "He's the American guy who came here to like try to do a music career." So it's now about, like how do I redefine it, how do I make it my own.

(Synth pad along with acoustic guitar)

Eric: Growing up as a Korean-American and being first generation immigrant family, you're left with a lot of conflicted feelings internally. I remember having a point in middle school where I talked to my dad and I was like, "I don't know what I am. Like I'm Korean, but I'm also not. American, but I'm also not." We live in like a weird middle place and I had a hard time figuring out what that meant. So, for example, I went to the 2002 World Cup in Korea, and I went to the US-Korea game. And I didn't know how to feel. Everybody going by me was like, "Are you going for Korea? Or you going for the US?" I was like, "I don't know. Like I'm both. But like I just don't know how to feel about it." I literally painted my face half and half

(Acoustic guitar ends, synth pad fades)

Eric: because I just didn't know how to react. And funny enough, the game ended in a tie, one to one.

(Synth pad)

Eric: At a certain point, I was like, "This is just the way we are. This is the way that most of us have to deal with living and growing up in the States as first generation immigrant children." And once I accepted that, I was like, "I'll do whatever I want. I like what I like. And that's the way it is." Getting to a place where you're comfortable with yourself and your voice as an artist, as a creator; it took a long time for me to get to that point because as a musician who does not make his own tracks and who has not been trained to create music or sing or whatever, it's a lot of second guessing myself, and it's a lot of questioning like, "Am I qualified to make this decision? Probably not." But then, anybody can

create music and anybody can put out a song, and it's that authenticity and that rawness that really kind of drives people to feel something.

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here is “Love Die Young,” by Eric Nam, in its entirety.

(“Love Die Young” by ERIC NAM)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net to learn more about Eric Nam. You'll also find the link to stream or buy this song, “Love Die Young.”

Song Exploder is made by me and producer Christian Koons, with production assistance from Olivia Wood, and illustrations by Carlos Lerma. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a collective of independent, creative podcasts. Learn more about all of our shows at radiotopia.fm. You can find Song Exploder on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook @SongExploder. Let us know what you thought of this episode. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.