

Song Exploder
Jamila Woods - BALDWIN
Episode 163

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.

("BALDWIN" by JAMILA WOODS)

Thao: Jamila Woods is a singer, songwriter, and poet from Chicago. She's released two albums, and she's collaborated with artists like Chance the Rapper, Noname, and Macklemore. In May 2019, she put out her second album, *LEGACY! LEGACY!*, to critical acclaim. *NME* called it one of the albums of the year, *Rolling Stone* called it a "revelation," and *Pitchfork* named it "Best New Music." In this episode, Jamila and her producer Slot-A break down a song from that album, called "Baldwin," named after the late author and civil rights activist James Baldwin.

("BALDWIN" by JAMILA WOODS)

Jamila: My name is Jamila Woods, and I'm a singer and musician poet.

(Music fades out)

Jamila: This song, it was inspired by James Baldwin's *Letter to My Nephew*. I was working as a teaching artist at a nonprofit, Young Chicago Authors, teaching poetry and I often would turn to reading James Baldwin. The whole essay is written to his nephew. And he's kind of giving him perspective and advice about the world, like navigating the world as a black man.

(Synth)

("A Letter to My Nephew" by JAMES BALDWIN: "There is no reason for you to try to become like white men and there is no basis whatsoever for their impertinent assumption that they must accept you. The really terrible thing, old buddy, is that you must accept them, and I mean that very seriously. You must accept them and accept them with love, for these innocent people have no other hope. They are in effect trapped in a history which they do not understand and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it. They have had to believe for many years, and for innumerable reasons, that black men are inferior to white men.")

Jamila: And part of it, he says, is like, "It's going to cost us more to meet injustice or oppression or prejudice with that same energy of hatred." And so, kind of tasking us to meet it with love and compassion instead, which I thought was very beautiful, but also very difficult to kind of put into practice.

(Synth ends)

Jamila: So for this song, I started out by playing around in GarageBand. I'm not a producer, but I really want to hone those skills. And so I was trying to make more beats for myself.

(Sample)

Jamila: I started with that sample. It was this SWV song that I really liked, called "I'm So Into You."

("I'm So Into You" by SWV)

Jamila: SWV is a 90s R&B group. I just really loved the beat of that song and wanted to flip it into something different. So I just ripped the audio from YouTube and looped that part and then started writing over that.

(Demo vocals along with sample: "All my friends / Say I should love you anyway / My friend James / Says I should love you anyway / And that's okay / Ooo / Baby making it hard for me")

Jamila: In that first version of the song, it was more like, being frustrated at the fact that so many white people around me would be like, "Oh, well, I have a black friend, so I'm good." Or, you know, "I listen to rap music, so that's all I have to do to kind of show that I'm good with black people."

(Demo vocals along with sample: "You could put my face in a magazine / You can sell my shade at a Walgreens / That don't mean, that don't mean you're good")

Jamila: You know, like that idea of being "good." These ways in which it's like, "Oh, look, CVS has a whole aisle of hair products now." Like I mean, cool, but [laughter] that doesn't mean that corporation is supporting black lives in a tangible way. So, it was kind of like this macro and micro tongue-in-cheek critique of what does it really mean to be for black people.

(Sample fades)

Jamila: The first draft that I made, I saved it, "Baldwin, January 28th, 2014." So, it was a while ago. There was definitely a lot of time spent sitting with the song and being like, "It's not right, but I don't know how to work on it again." I was kind of, you know, in that place of, "I don't know where this song should go. Like I know, but I don't know how to get it there." The breakthrough moment of the song was when I was working with Slot-A, who was producing most of *Legacy! Legacy!*

Slot-A: What's up. My name is Slot-A.

Jamila: He didn't really know about *The Letter To My Nephew*, so I told him about that and we kind of like read the section. And then I was just telling him where I was trying to come from with the song and how I was trying to approach it, but also that I was feeling like all of my writing was just sounding a little too basic or too simplistic.

Slot-A: The point that she kind of let me know that she was attempting to make was, "They don't necessarily understand us all the way. I want to forgive them but I'm having a hard time." And so we were trying to figure out a perspective that wasn't so attack-y.

Jamila: And then he was saying, "Well, this idea of writing towards an enemy, not in like the mortal sense of that word, but just kind of like an opponent, like someone who's not on the same side as you," he kind of compared that to battle rap. And he was saying like in battle rap, you have to know your opponent so well, it's almost like you have to love them. Like you have to know like what their mom looks like, like what shoes they have on, like where they live, like all of these intimate details about them.

Slot-A: It's an assault but it's an assault with, "I have knowledge of you. I know you inside and out." Instead of saying that you're a bum, and like disrespecting you, if I come at it with the thought of, "You know what, you probably have positive intent but let me educate you and show you the other way." Then it means a little bit more, it's something less to laugh at. It has a little bit more weight to it, so attacking it with love versus just attacking you with malice. And that takes a different level of maturity.

Jamila: And so, that kind of shifted in my mind and helped me come at the song from more of a place of empathy as opposed to seeing how many cute things I could put in a bar, but more so saying like, "There is a reason why there's a wall here.

Like there's a reason why you don't understand what black people have experienced. And there's a reason why sometimes you don't want to or you feel like you can't." So the very first version of the song was a lot about my interactions with white people who I'd been encountering. But I thought that it was more interesting to talk about these larger things that happen on a broader scale in black peoples' lives. And so I was doing a lot of research. There are all these articles about the perception that black people don't feel pain as much as white people. And so, that shows up with the doctors, you know, not believing pregnant black women when they're saying, "Something's wrong." Or police officers, you know, using excessive force. There was like a study done saying like how fear is always the weapon that is used to justify violence. It's like, "Oh, the officer feared for his life. Therefore, he took a black person's life." And the things that evoke that fear are just black people living, you know, existing often. And so I was like ingesting all of that, and then writing the new lyrics.

(Vocals: "Somebody's daddy always laid out on the street / And for what? / Your precious lethal fear")

Jamila: I was coming at it from an angle of not accepting that as an excuse, but saying, "Your precious lethal fear that you cling to is doing this violence. Your silence when things happen, that's also violence." Like a white person crossing the street when they see a black person.

(Vocals: "You clutch on your purse, now you crossing the street / Brother caught your eye, now you callin' police")

Jamila: I was trying to sing in like a deep register than I had previously where it's like you took a long sigh before you say it, as opposed to coming at it so aggressive and angry and at a certain point, there's this level of exhaustion, where it's like, "I've already seen this story so many times. I can't believe this is happening again." But it's like that truth is motivating me to speak through my exhaustion.

(Vocals: "It's a casual violence in your speech and your silence / It's unnatural science, you too comfortable lying")

Jamila: We always worked out of Slot-A's house. He has like a setup in his apartment. I had him re-download the SWV song.

(Sample)

Jamila: So he started with that sample but then we buried it and then deleted it.

(Sample ends)

Jamila: We just decided to go a totally different direction and restart. I wanted some more sparseness so there would be times when you would just be listening to the words. And I had re-recorded the vocals. So we just worked from the vocals that he built around them to make the final version.

Slot-A: I found the key and then we kind of started messing with the Rhodes from there.

(Rhodes synth)

Slot-A: I wanted something that sounded a little bit more electronic but analog at the same time and Rhodes kind of falls like right in that little sweet spot. That's kind of what we started with.

(Beat)

Slot-A: The initial drums are all done in my MPC. So the kick, snare, I tapped that out. I recorded it in live, and then tried to make sure I fixed the timing. Just so it wasn't like all over the place but like still felt natural.

(Moog bass synth joins beat)

(Moog bass synth along with beat end)

Slot-A: The Moog is one of my favorite basses. And so that was the first bass sound that we used for it. Stevie Wonder, that was really the first person that I heard as a child using Moog synths. He was like a lot of the inspiration for it.

(Moog bass synth)

Jamila: Once we had the skeleton of the beat, then it was kind of going back and forth and adding more of the vocals. The verses and the chorus is kind of directed at different audiences because we're tied, but there's kind of like two conversations happening at the same time. The verses are writing towards white people but then in the chorus it's like, "We," talking about black people.

(Vocals along with Moog and beat: "We don't go out / Can't wish us away / We been burning / Brighter every day")

Jamila: And then there's choir vocals that come in. I just wanted it to feel like there's more than one voice participating, to make it feel like it's my perspective, but it's not only my perspective. And that was something that reading Baldwin and all of the black writers that I read is like, "Oh, I'm not alone in this feeling that I've been feeling." It's actually way bigger than me. And so, I wanted to have that bigness come through in the hook and to be very prideful.

(Choir vocals: "We don't go out / Can't wish us away / We been burning / Brighter everyday")

Jamila: It was my two sisters and two of my friends who are singing in the hook with me. We were all in the Chicago Children's Choir, which was founded by this man who wanted to bring together all different races of children in Chicago, because Chicago is super segregated, and have them sing together. And so, part of the ethos of the choir is to like feel what you're singing. They would always be like, "Eyebrows up," like, be present and like feel the music and let us see on your face what it is that you're singing. And so, it was really beautiful like to watch them singing it, and it was cool to think of all the different experiences that we've had together that helped that moment come together.

(Choir vocals along with organ: "We don't go out / Can't wish us away / We been burning / Brighter every day")

Jamila: Once I had the full hook with the choir vocals, the horns were added.

(Horn)

Jamila: So it was Nico Segal who's playing. And I love the texture of Nico's horns. I feel like I could just recognize them anywhere.

(Horn)

Jamila: There's like that one part where you can kind of hear the note roll off.

(Horns)

Jamila: And that just totally elevated the sound of the beat, it punctuates the hook and makes it have that kind of explosive power.

(Vocals along with choir, beat and horns: "We don't go out / Can't wish us away / We been burning / Brighter every day")

Jamila: I came up through like spoken word poetry and slam poetry and there's a community there. And also, there's a community around battle rap,

(Synth pad)

Jamila: and it's really interesting to think about being in community with people like that and how to have the vulnerability and honesty to say, "Your fear or your discomfort, that's a mask." And digging underneath that to expose it. That's a lot of what Baldwin would talk about. And that's kind of what he's saying in the letter.

(Synth pad)

("A Letter to My Nephew" by JAMES BALDWIN: "These men are your brothers, your lost younger brothers. And if the word "integration" means anything, this is what it means, that we with love shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it, for this is your home, my friend. Do not be driven from it.")

((Synth pad ends)

(Rhodes along with horns)

Jamila: We're in this country, like we're in this America together. We don't really have a choice to separate ourselves, so we might as well come at each other with love.

(Music ends)

Thao: And now, here is "BALDWIN," by Jamila Woods, in its entirety.

("BALDWIN" by JAMILA WOODS)

Thao: Visit songexploder.net for more information about Jamila Woods. You'll also find a link to buy or stream this song. Song Exploder is made by creator Hrishikesh Hirway, producer Christian Koons, and me, the guest host for this year. Carlos Lerma is our illustrator, he makes portraits for every episode, which you can see on the Song Exploder website.

Special thanks to Al Letson, who read the excerpts from Baldwin's essay, *Letter to My Nephew*. If you want to hear more of his great voice, he hosts the award-winning investigative reporting podcast, Reveal. 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 also find Song Exploder on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter @SongExploder. And you can find me @thaogetstaydown. My name is Thao Nguyen, thanks for listening.