

Song Exploder
Jon Batiste - We Are
Episode 205

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.

("We Are" by JON BATISTE)

Hrishikesh: Jon Batiste is a pianist, songwriter, and composer from New Orleans. He's been nominated for multiple Grammys, and just won the Golden Globe and got an Oscar nomination for the soundtrack to the Pixar film *Soul*, which he composed along with Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross. Jon is also a recipient of the American Jazz Museum's lifetime achievement award, and on weeknights, you can see him as the bandleader on *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*. In March 2021, he put out his new album, *We Are*. But the title track from it actually came out much earlier last year in June 2020.

Jon: We put the song out during the Black Lives Matter protest before it was even finished being mixed and mastered.

Hrishikesh: In this episode, Jon talks about how he drew from his roots, both at a personal level and at a cultural level, and wove all of it into the song.

Jon: I'm Jon Batiste.

(Music fades out)

Jon: So I started working on this song in September of 2019 with Kizzo, a great producer from the Netherlands, and Autumn Rowe. We met up in New York City. And this is pre-COVID, my life is busy - I'm doing the Late Show, I'm writing the score for *Soul*. I have so many different things going on at the same time, but I really wanted to find a way to write. And we got together for nine days, and with a laptop and a MIDI keyboard and a bunch of instruments in my dressing room at the Ed Sullivan theater, we started working on songs. Autumn and Kizzo would be in the dressing room working, I would be in there working, popping in and out to do things. And there wasn't a lot of time for the critical, analytical side of music-making. It was more along the lines of sparks of inspiration that we capture and then move on to the next spark.

You know, Carol Burnett, she told me something that I didn't even realize until four years into it being my dressing room, that that was her dressing room, when she was doing the Carol Burnett show. And she was telling me all kinds of stories of what happened in that dressing room; and obviously the Ed Sullivan theater has all of these titans of culture and music that have all walked through those halls, and played on that stage and I think that we captured some of the spirits that are in that space. But at the end of 10 songs or so, this was the first day where we'd hit a wall and we felt, "oh maybe this is the end of the road." And we thought we had kind of maxed out. And I left the room to take a phone call, it was a long phone call, maybe an hour or something. I come back into the room and there's this beat.

(Jon beatboxing along with drum beat)

Jon: There's drums and chords.

(Piano chords)

Jon: And I was like, "oh, well maybe we're not done here yet." It's always the same feeling when I get inspired, I just feel like I want to dance. I feel like I want to get up and grab it and hug it. Autumn has this really wonderful gift of creating melodies. And she had something on the track that resonated with me.

(Jon hums the chorus melody)

Jon: So she's doing something, and I was just like, "Woo!" Typically the way that we work is, she'll have a melody or something like that, and then I'll write to my heart. And what came out is, "we are the golden ones, we are the chosen ones"

(A cappella choir: "We are, we are, we are, we are, golden ones / We are, we are, we are, we are the chosen ones")

Jon: That's Autumn, and Kizzo, and myself capturing the vocal trying to create a choir. Because I wanted it to feel like it's the whole world singing.

(A cappella choir: "We are, we are, we are, we are the chosen ones / We are, we are, we are, we are the golden ones.")

Jon: We are the golden ones, we are the chosen ones.

(Drums)

Jon: The idea that our destiny is in our own hands, through free will, and the expression of our own personal power, comes from me seeing the ancestral line of the Black diaspora. And all of the superpowers that they have been endowed with that have been given to me as a part of this sacred lineage. And to see how we've overcome such marginalization, but there are still so many unsung heroes who have taught, and picketed, and protested, and stood, and created.

(Drums fade)

Jon: I think about my grandfather who, he was the president of the hotel workers union, and the postal workers union in Louisiana, and he was an activist, and now he's an elder in the AME church. And he is a manifestation of what I'm talking about. He's an unsung hero in the sense that he's not a name that you know, he's not one of the five people that we picked to put in our social studies textbooks. But when I wrote the first verse, I was thinking about his wife, my grandmother. Her nickname was Nana.

(Verse lead vocals: "The ghetto is full of stars / Watch them shine from afar / On days when it's hard / And always / Nana knows how to sing")

Jon: She passed away when I was a kid, but I saw her and the strength and the resilience that she had. Raised eight kids, strength mixed with this nurturing, knowing quality. As I got older and now have been in this world of celebrity, I see the resonance of a star of a person who is revered in that way, and she had that in spades. She was a star. So that was the first thing I wrote.

(Verse lead vocals with percussion: "The ghetto is full of stars")

Jon: I started to think about, how many of our greatest natural resource, humans - how much of it do we waste and undervalue? There are ghettos all over the world that are full of people to be celebrated, full of people who could shine their light, all of those kids. One of those kids could be Shirley Chisholm or could be Albert Einstein, the next Miles Davis could be somewhere in a school where they cut the music program. In Holly Grove with my grandmother, where I used to go sit on the porch, it's full of stars. I was there, I saw it.

(Rhythm track)

Jon: As I was writing it, I felt that this is an anthem that the whole world will sing. I'm envisioning us playing this at the Super Bowl, which led to the dream of a marching band. So we made a demo out of MIDI instruments - obviously we didn't have a marching band in the dressing room.

(Marching band recorded with MIDI instruments along with chorus vocals:)

Jon: So after that day, this is literally all in one day, working 12-16 hour days. You know, we left with a full song that could have been the final version, but it didn't feel as authentic to who it is that I am. I needed to expand on the palette of sound, and we weren't going to be able to finish the entire vision in the dressing room. But this was a roadmap.

(Choir: "We are!")

Jon: My friend Ryan Lynn, he was also the executive producer of the album. He functions almost as a mirror for me, keeping me authentic and keeping me honest. So the next month, we were listening to music and thinking about doing all these different things with the record, creatively. And one of the songs that had stood out was a song by Mac Miller called "Ladders." I had the great honor of knowing Mac a bit, and playing with him. His last television appearance was with us.

(Stephen Colbert: "Performing 'Ladders' from his new album, Swimming, with Jon Batiste and Stay Human, please welcome back to the late show, Mac Miller!")

Jon: The times that I played with Mac and heard his recordings, the stuff that stood out; there was a common thread with all of it, the elements of the tracks that really stood out sonically to me, which was that Pomo, this producer, was involved or produced or it was all done by him. So we set up sessions with Pomo, and the next month is a process of working with Pomo on "We Are," crafting a certain world that that puts us in sonically.

(Piano stem)

Jon: So, the piano is a character throughout the record. With the bare piano chords you feel the eeriness, the hovering of the spirits over the waters, the lack of knowing what's around the corner.

(Piano stem along with chorus lead vocals: "We're never alone, no, no / We're never alone")

(Mellotron stem along with the piano)

Jon: The Mellotron was also very important in creating that feel. The Mellotron has a ghoulish quality in particular when you're dealing with the choir.

(Mellotron stem along with the choir)

Jon: But to capture what I love, and one of the things that I do best, we have to have a band in a room.

(Electric guitar stem)

Jon: So we set up sessions with Cory Wong, Nate Smith,

(Drums stem)

Jon: And Sam Yahel on the organ.

(Organ stem)

Jon: And we re-recorded the rhythm track.

(Live band rhythm track)

(Lead vocals: "Watch them shine from afar / On days when it's hard / And always / Nana knows how to sing")

(Recording of Jon's grandfather: "And then I said...")

Jon: That's my grandfather, that's how he talks, he talks in a preach, he's a spiritual man.

(Recording of Jon's grandfather: "We gotta get our soul / We get that inner peace, you know / [Laughter]")

Jon: That was recorded, me and him sitting in his bedroom and he was talking to me. He was telling me about his life.

(Recording of Jon's grandfather: "Ain't nothing / Man cannot give you that!")

Jon: I knew that I needed something of his because it fit so much with the narrative of what the song is about, and how he's a representation of unsung heroes who are largely the engine of inspiration for this whole album. And he is a manifestation of what I'm talking about, that's also in my family. And then,

(Recording of Jon: "Neither angel nor a king could break this thing")

Jon: That's me saying - "neither angel nor a king can break this thing" - and that counterpoints his talk about how we have to get our souls to a place of inner peace, and "neither angel or a king can break this thing," is a reference to something that I read in the Bible, in the book of Romans. How nothing can separate us from God and his love being in us, and that is something that I think would give you a lot of peace, if you actually were able to live that out and understand that.

(Recording of Jon along with background vocals and piano: "Neither angel or a king could break this thing")

(Recording of Jon's grandfather along with background vocals and piano: "We gotta get our soul / We get that inner peace, you know / [Laughter] / Ain't nothing / Man cannot give you that!")

Jon: When we recorded the demo, I remember explaining the vision of it.

(Chorus vocals along with the marching band)

Jon: And seeing my high school marching band, who represent a lot in my community, the Saint Augustine High School Marching Band, the Marching 100, the Purple Knights, represents so much about black culture, and empowerment; all of it just collided in my mind. So we flew to New Orleans to capture the marching band.

(Marching band recording)

Jon: It took a few pep talks, I said push to the limit of the instrument and the sound that you can produce on it and the meaning that you can produce through it. You have to have a level of intensity that borders on hysteria, because that puts you in the place of urgency that I wanted to convey through this song.

(Marching band recording ends)

Jon: They did a great job.

*(Choir stem: *oohs*)*

Jon: That's the Gospel Soul Children. They're an institution really, in New Orleans music. They're representing the world that will one day eventually sing this song. And I explained that I don't want it to be too singery. I want it to feel like it's a chant, in unison.

(Choir stem: "We are, we are, we are, we are the golden ones / We are, we are, we are, we are the chosen ones / We are, we are, we are, we are the chosen ones / We are, we are, we are, we are the golden ones")

Jon: Craig Adams is the conductor of the Gospel Soul Children.

*(Craig Adams' vocals stem: "We are never alone" / *vocal run*)*

Jon: As we were recording, he didn't want to sing, he wanted to conduct only. And I told him that this moment calls for somebody who can represent that thing that happens in the Black church, when somebody gets up to testify and it breaks into song.

(Craig Adams' vocals stem: "We are never, we're never alone")

Jon: The essence of that is a very specific sort of singing that's just so Black and so rooted in our tradition of music-making and of overcoming. It goes back to singing spirituals in rural fields in the South, I needed that. And Craig is the organist at my grandfather's church. So I want Craig to sing that part, because it's a life experience. It's not a musical part. You have all of these different things that we're putting together, and they all have to be wrapped in intensity.

*(Craig Adams' vocals along with the marching band: "We are never alone / *vocal run* / We are never, we're never alone / We are never alone")*

*(Choir along with the marching band: "We are, we are, we are, we are the golden ones / We are, we are, we are, we are the chosen ones" / *oohs*)*

Hrishikesh: So, I wanted to go back to this idea of the whole world singing this song. Was there ever a point of tension where you were like, I am singing about something

that is so essentially about the Black experience in America. And yet, I am inviting all of these other people to participate?

(Choir along with the marching band ends)

Jon: To me, the specific is the most universal. Because it's so deeply rooted in your experience that you could be talking about your life, and your lineage, and the things you've overcome, and somebody who's from a completely different cultural perspective and different generation can resonate with that.

(Organ)

Jon: I mean this song is an effort of 200 people, of about 200 people. It's so deep rooted in my blood, in my soul, but there was just these moments of real connection and meaningful connection that seeped into the song in a real way.

(Piano joins organ)

Jon: And when you get specific, super specific, it just becomes about experience and humanity. So when I'm saying, "We Are," if you look at people and their experiences, we're way, way more alike than the things that make us different.

(Piano and organ fade)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "We Are," by Jon Batiste, in its entirety.

("We Are" by JON BATISTE)

Hrishikesh: To learn more, visit songexploder.net. You'll find links to buy or stream "We Are." You can also watch the video of Jon performing "Ladders" with Mac Miller on the Late Show.

This episode was made by me, with editing help from Teeny Lieberman and Casey Deal, artwork by Carlos Lerma, and music clearance by Kathleen Smith. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a network of independent, listener-supported, artist-owned 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 and Instagram @SongExploder. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway. Thanks for listening.

