

Song Exploder
Jon Hopkins - Luminous Beings
Episode 136

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.

("Luminous Beings" by JON HOPKINS)

Hrishikesh: Jon Hopkins is a composer and electronic music producer who's been nominated twice for the UK's Mercury Prize. In addition to making his own music, he co-produced Coldplay's Grammy-award winning album, *Viva La Vida*, with his frequent collaborator, Brian Eno. In May 2018, Jon Hopkins released his fifth album, *Singularity*. It was named Best New Music by Pitchfork. In this episode, Jon Hopkins takes apart the song "Luminous Beings," which was inspired in part by the meditative effects of psilocybin, the compound found in psychedelic mushrooms. He also details less magical moments where he hated the music he was making, and had to destroy it as part of the creative process.

("Luminous Beings" by JON HOPKINS)

Jon: Hi, I'm Jon Hopkins.

(Music fades)

Jon: When I started writing this track, I was living in California. I'd written maybe six or seven albums, including film scores and collaborations all in the same little studio in East London, and I really couldn't face the idea of starting what I knew was going to be my biggest project yet in the same room. And, you know, I'd been having quite a lot of trouble sleeping around then, which is very common amongst musicians to experience this, like, you know, you've got very late shows, lots of them, and you've got flights and time zone changes, and all these things. It's just exhausting and overwhelming, so I spent some time in Los Angeles. One of the reasons I went there was to try and find ways around this problem. So I went there to decompress, and get much more deeply into meditation and learn transcendental meditation, which I hadn't done before. And I didn't have a studio there, and I wasn't recording as such, but I just had my laptop and I was just playing around.

(Synth)

Jon: That was the Korg Trinity, which is my kind of old go-to synth for sketching things out. For me, everything's about immediacy. I'm extremely impatient.

Hrishikesh: Jon Hopkins uses the music software Ableton Live to write and record.

Jon: Ableton has two modes, clips mode and arrangement mode, and clips mode, for me, is like a sort of canvas really, blank canvas. You just chuck ideas down and they don't have to be in the right order. They don't have to be good, and you can start to build them up and try any number of different combinations of them, and it's a great way of kind of guiding your starting point along. Mostly just, I follow instinct and work very quickly and record things. I was drumming something, and I remember I had a Moog Sub Phatty, the main synth for the bass line.

(Synth with synth bass and beat)

Jon: What you're listening to there is really like, that's the stuff that all got thrown down really quickly. But there's a smoothness and simplicity to that early sketch, which is not something I'm actually looking for in a finished product. You know, it's weird, I don't think I've ever let anyone publicly hear something that was so early as that. Nothing I ever do in the beginning stages ever makes it to the end. After 18 years of making this kind of music, I've become very aware that the first things you do are really only there to capture some kind of spark or some kind of spirit of the song. So I'm very comfortable with the fact that I'm not necessarily going to use it. But it's funny, I remember arriving at the point which you're hearing and thinking, I love this so much, this is like nearly finished, and then [laughter] you take a few days away and you're like, "Oh my god,

(Music ends)

Jon: that makes me want to be sick." You go from ecstatically loving it and feeling on top of the world and then you come in another day and you're like, "Oh no, this is not actually very good. It's way too sweet, it doesn't have an unusualness to it. Let's just describe that old section maybe as something that was very much just a point to jump off from."

(Synth with synth bass and beat)

Jon: So the whole result of that week or whatever it was of work, sketching those first ideas, has resulted in one sound, which will be like the seed that I'm going to plant. But I will then change beyond recognition.

(Music fades)

Jon: For me, it's like sweetness or beauty or whatever you want to call it, is only worthy if it's counteracted by some form of disruption. You know, it's like, it has to feel like it's been earned with difficulty, you know, rather than just handed to you. So basically, I built something in order so that I could destroy it and then something else more interesting can grow out of it. With Ableton, you can just put an effect on the master channel. It's actually a really inspiring way of working because then you've got yourself a new sound that definitely [laughter] hasn't been made before. So I put the whole of that thing through a sort of delay, which repeats on the sixteenths.

(Processed music)

Jon: That is essentially, the entire old section put through a effect I use a lot on EchoBoy, which is a brilliant echo and reverb, and delay plugin. It's basically like a kind of psychedelic feedback experience. So, it's like everything you're hearing, you're hearing many times coming from all around you.

(Music fades)

Jon: And then that whole thing was bounced down, and then pitched, and distorted, and ended up with that sort of messy thing you hear at the beginning of the track.

(Processed music)

Jon: I think this is something that I go through very often, where the sonic grit and complexity comes from, is by destroying those early sketches, which are often too sweet.

(Processed music)

Jon: I like to just work destructively, you know. So messing with a sound a lot, and then committing to it. And just allowing it to get further and further removed from where it was. I think it's good to believe in your sounds and stop giving yourself

too many options. I think one of the big dangers in making music with such ridiculously powerful software that we have now, is that you have constant and infinite choice really, and freedom, flexibility to realize any idea. But actually too many choices is paralyzing, and it isn't necessarily helpful to the creative flow. So I like to narrow those down. When something works, commit to it. And with this, I mean it sounds kind of strange on its own, but I knew that it was more interesting than what I'd been doing.

(Music fades)

(Synth)

Jon: OK, so this main riff sound is an MS-20, which is a beautiful old Korg synth from I think the year I was born: 1979. I was sketching just these very simple open hearted melodies. I germed out one of them and then copied the same rhythm to another track, but changed the sound on the MS-20, and then moved the timing along, so it moved the start point along.

(Synth)

Jon: So what you can hear on the finished version is really simple melody, but actually it's not that simple because you bring in another one and then another one, they're all playing the same thing, but they start at different points, and they're on different sounds.

(Synth)

Jon: And in terms of the stereo field, they move within their own little mini universes.

(Synth)

Jon: And I really love the sort of naïveté of those sounds, but they're also quite out of time and quite strange as well. I loved the idea of them essentially forming a tapestry that would weave its way around your head and be really hypnotic. You know, I just had this image in my head of lights circling around. I can tell you where this image comes from. A lot of this music comes from a psilocybin mushroom experience. This was something I experienced in Joshua Tree. 2015 was I think around the time where I started to get much more interested in psilocybin and DMT as medicines, you know, and taking it further away from the recreational angle, which is really not how I look at these things at all anymore,

more of sort of ceremonial thing, a way of diving very deep into your psyche. I was with some, like, very close friends and we had some mushroom chocolate and I remember, the sun was coming up, and the others had gone inside, and I was sitting outside just staring at this vast, untamed desert. And it was, you know, it was just one of those moments where everything becomes still, and everything becomes perfect. I remember looking at the sky and seeing the sky fill with these geometric patterns spiraling upwards, and I remember seeing a vulture flying along that spiral, so it was as if the spiral was predicting where the vulture was going to fly. It was a moment, a truly incredible moment, one of the most amazing images, and, yeah, in my head it was like these lights came on, you know. And these sounds started appearing. In almost like a vision, and it sounds a bit ridiculous talking about it, but the genesis of that feeling, you know, and that idea, that image came in that state of consciousness. And I think, having that experience, it doesn't consciously necessarily go straight into music, but it goes in, you know, it goes so deep into your subconscious that I think it affects everything really, everything you do. And it was more like I wrote this and then retrospectively realized, *Oh that came from that experience*, you know?

(Synth)

Jon: That's kind of how I work in general. I think it's all about the unconscious, it's all about not trying to guide a track anywhere, it's just about knowing what the next step is.

(Synth ends)

Jon: These intro bass sounds.

(Bass)

Jon: I just love the way that if you play a low enough pitch with a synth like the MS-20,

(Beat)

Jon: you can hear the sounds separating out into its original components.

(Beat ends)

Jon: I just played the main bass note, which is an A flat,

(Bass)

Jon: and then just used a pitch bend to gradually slow it down more and more and more, but of course when it goes down below a certain frequency,

(Beat)

Jon: you're hearing the individual pulses that make up the sound. And I really like the idea of the rhythm of the track seeming to appear from that. So the bass sound slows down and down and down, until it becomes the actual tempo of the kick drum of the track.

(Beat)

Jon: I love that idea that it's almost like the kick drum of the track appeared from the bass,

(Beat)

Jon: grew out of the bass sound.

(Beat)

(Beat fades)

Jon: I first started playing the piano when I was about four years old. We had a kind of little practice piano of some sort, and then by the time I was 8, my parents had bought a Yamaha upright and I still have it, and that is the piano that you're hearing on this track.

(Piano)

Jon: So yeah, I've had this piano for 30 years. It's so beautiful, it's got such a soft quality to it. It's become so central to my musical life. And so, it kind of makes sense that I would just start looking for new ways of using it, really. There's the traditional way I use it, which you can hear at the end of the track.

(Piano fades)

Jon: And then there's all these other things you can do. One of them is to create drones or atmospheres or pads. The goal really was to use the piano like it was a stringed instrument, and the way that I saw that becoming possible was to hit every note many, many times, and then put it through a series of different types of echo. So I set up a chain of plugins in Ableton, a granular delay called Bubbler, which I use a lot, and then EchoBoy again, and Altiverb, which is a impulse response reverb. Meaning the company that made it, went round to loads of different spaces and set mics up to allow you to recreate the reverbs of actual spaces. I was playing the piano through all these plugins, hammering the notes really fast, playing every note at different volumes with the pedal down, straight into this chain of effects so that it became essentially one long note, so it ended up sounding kind of like strings.

(Strings sound)

(Synth, synth bass, and beat join)

Jon: I mean that definitely could have been the end there [laughter]. There is a shorter version out there where it ends there, but this song became such a kind of mini universe for me, and I love longer tracks.

(Music fades)

Jon: They are more like places than songs, they're sort of states that you can be in. They're for a certain state of mind where you just don't want them to end, you know. There's this sort of world of warmth in there that, particularly if you're listening, say at the end of a very long night or you know, you don't just want a quick track [laughter], but you actually want to live in it for a bit longer, and I just, every part of me said, "This needs to carry on, there are more ideas to explore here." And this was where the idea to have an actual string section came from. There was an idea lurking at the back of my head for years now about how cool it would be, you're listening to a completely electronic track and then seemingly out of nowhere, you suddenly realize that everything's fallen away and you're just left with a string section, it's almost like it morphs imperceptibly into that.

(Strings)

Jon: I just worked with one string player on this record, an amazing girl called Emma Smith. We just did one line at a time.

(Strings)

Jon: She's playing a violin and a viola, so all the low parts are viola, and the high parts are violin, and I get her to play a lot of harmonics as well. I find there to be something very emotive about harmonics on the strings.

(Strings fade)

Jon: So we've been in quite low pitches, and then when the strings come in, we move into a higher pitch. So that transition was a very important thing to get right. I wanted it to sound like everything was kind of lifting off the ground, you know. And the bass, at that point, the Moog bass,

(Bass)

Jon: sort of gradually becomes an octave higher, it doesn't switch up an octave, it crossfades into an octave higher than itself.

(Bass)

Jon: And at that time, this sound, called Up Filter, is playing.

(Synth pad)

Jon: So this sound is the whole track [laughter]. Again, it's the same essential trick as we're talking about with the beginning, which is to resample the entire song but with a chain of effects on it.

(Synth pad)

Jon: That was a transitional tool, something that leads the way for the ear to have some idea of what's going to follow. We're kind of left up in the clouds there with that sound, it's very celestial and kind of angelic. But it needed to be kind of earthbound again, before it could lead into the next song.

(Synth bass and beat join)

Jon: Transitions between songs are always a focus for me, I just love them. For me, it's almost like scenes in a film, you know, they just have to join up beautifully.

Even if people aren't listening to them in that order, it's still important for me to do that. This record is a complete one hour story really.

(Music ends)

Jon: So sonically, we needed to be on the ground because the next track is as earthbound as it gets really, it's just pure acoustic piano. And I had this idea, the way that I would morph "Luminous Beings" into the next track.

(Piano)

Jon: So I'm playing like an 8 or 9 note arpeggio,

(Piano)

Jon: but at a certain point, I had to manually omit one of the notes because I wanted that note, the repetition of that note would become the next track. So there was a point at which, on End Piano Figure, I stopped playing the B-flat.

(Piano)

Jon: It was actually quite hard, there was no technological way around this, I had to learn to play it without that note. After a few go's that worked out, and then when I was just left with the B-flat,

(Piano)

Jon: because B-flat is the first note of the final track, "Recovery."

(Piano)

Jon: And it just repeats that slowly for a while.

(Piano)

(Piano fades)

Jon: So I'd written the End Piano Figure, which was the lead instrument of the end section. And then, I bought this plugin called Una Corda, which Nils Frahm actually made and recorded, which is basically a single string piano. Nils Frahm

is a friend of mine, who's a genius pianist and one of the sort of foremost keyboard-based instrumentalists, I think, in the world. Una Corda is a specialized custom-built piano that Nils Frahm had done. Pianos have three strings per note, and this instrument that he had built only has one string per note. And it has this incredibly soft felt-like quality to it, and then he made a sample instrument out of it.

(Piano)

Jon: I had 8 or 9 instances of this plugin running, and each one was going into a different part of the stereo field. I wanted every note to sound like it was coming from somewhere else around your head.

(Piano)

(Piano fades)

Jon: I had some amazing experiences out in the desert and different amazing areas of natural beauty. And I think that openness and warmth found its way into this track, so much so that I think I spent two weeks just in a absolute dreamy kind of daze with it.

(Synth pad)

Jon: I mean for me it really triggered this biophilia, this love and reverence for nature, which I think this album, in particular this song, is an attempt to translate that, you know. I'd been having quite a lot of trouble sleeping around then, and when I started writing this, it just went away. Everything just, I just felt completely at peace, because, you know, this may sound a bit extreme, but this just felt like the song I've ever written, you know, my favorite thing I've done. I think the early stages of a record, before you really have found your sonic identity with it and before you know where you're going with it, it can be disheartening, it can be very up and down, you know. But when I hit on this one, I was just like, I almost don't care about anything else now, because I've got this song.

(Synth, synth bass, piano, and beat)

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Luminous Beings," by Jon Hopkins, in its entirety.

(“Luminous Beings” by JON HOPKINS)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net to learn more about Jon Hopkins, and for a link to buy or stream this song. Also, if you want to try the music software that Jon discussed in this episode, Ableton Live 10, you can download the full version and try it for free for 30 days at ableton.com/trial. I’ll put that link up on the Song Exploder site too.

This episode was produced by me, along with Christian Koons, with help from intern Olivia Wood. The illustrations for Song Exploder are by Carlos Lerma. Special thanks, this episode, to Mooj Zadie. 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. Let me know your thoughts on this episode. You can find Song Exploder on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter @SongExploder. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.