

Song Exploder
Joy Oladokun - Look Up
Episode 225

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.

("Look Up" by JOY OLADOKUN)

Hrishikesh: Joy Oladokun is a singer and songwriter from Arizona, who's now based in Nashville. She's been releasing music since 2015, and last year, she was named an Artist to Watch by NPR, Spotify, and Amazon, and she was #1 on Vogue's list of New LGBTQ Artists To Listen To. She put out her third album, *In Defense of My Own Happiness*, in June 2021. It includes the song "Look Up." For that track, she worked with Grammy-nominated songwriter and producer Dave Bassett, and while they were working and talking, they recorded a couple of long voice memos. Joy sent me those voice memos, and in this episode, you'll hear the actual moments in late 2019 when the song was first coming together. And Joy explains how the song was inspired by the different, and maybe opposite ways that she and her partner see the world.

("Look Up" by JOY OLADOKUN)

Joy: My name is Joy Oladokun.

(Music fades)

Joy: The day I started working on this song, I was on a trip to LA to work on some songs with some people I hadn't met before. And it was December. It had been a long year. And it was one of those things where I was like, "I don't want to go to school today, you know? I wish I could sleep in, or, you know, watch a movie, or go back to Arizona and see my parents." But instead I was in LA writing music. I do get tired of writing sessions, but even if everything goes topsy-turvy and the session is awful, I still kind of feel like you learn something about yourself or about the world. And so, I try to enter into each one as fresh as possible, aside from the general feelings of, "Man I'm tired and I just want it to be Christmas [laughter], you know [laughter]?"

(Guitar)

Joy: I wrote this song with Dave Bassett. When Dave was introduced to me, my publisher gave me the sales pitch. It was like, "Dave has worked with X person," like there was some selling point. And I don't super care about those [laughter] things. I tend to, when those things come across my desk, listen to the music and see like, "Could this person help?" And I just listened to his work, and I just thought it was all, I don't know, it was all meaningful. It seems like Dave consistently asked the artists, "What do you want to write about? What do you want to say?" And so, I went from being like, "Sure, I'll write with this nice white guy" to like, "Oh, this is someone who could be a helpful conduit for something that I have trouble accessing on my own."

(Guitar ends)

Joy: When I first got to Dave's, I sat down, and I honestly picked up a guitar pretty quickly, which is not usually the case, but we were getting to know each other while playing guitar [laughter]. It was this weird soundtrack to the conversation of getting to know someone. And I think as I started to talk about some of the things that I was thinking about, and going through and processing, we were landing on some of the initial chords. And then, eventually we were humming things into our cell phones.

(Voice memo)

(Voice memo ends)

Joy: I think, at that time, the things that are happening now in my career were not happening and were not on the horizon, and I felt lost at sea a little bit. And so, a lot of the conversations Rachel and I, my girlfriend, were having were around how do you hope for a future and an outcome that you can't see or that you don't totally understand. It's very easy for your brain to convince you that everything is going to be wrong always, and that things will be hard forever or like, if things are good, don't expect them to be good for too long because they're going to just crash down. I really am a bit of a pessimist, and my girlfriend is just this incredible, optimistic person who is able to acknowledge that life can be hard, but still hopes for it to be good. So I think that it was just on my mind because it was like, "What do I need to sing to myself? How do I craft this song into an eternal lesson for myself?"

(Voice memo)

Joy: So Dave and I are having another conversation.

(Voice memo)

Joy: You know, I start thinking about what he says, and these wires cross my brain. I'm like, "Broken rollercoaster."

(Voice memo)

(Voice memo ends)

Joy: So this is the feeling, this is the emotion, this is the image. I moved from there to like hiding out in the backseat of your car, and like how, like I used to, as a sort of lonely high schooler/college student, put on Manchester Orchestra records in my car, and like avoid talking to people about what I really wanted to talk about. And then, into the "Tell yourself it's raining" because that is my M.O. like to say it's stormy, it's gross, that there's no hope.

(Vocals: "You tell yourself it's raining / The clouds are in your head / You tell yourself it's better / To jump before you fall again")

Joy: As someone who can live in my head, I can lose the forest for the trees, so to speak. I'm coming in, I'm talking about my life, and my partner, and my brain, and how it works, and Dave was able to hear it and help organize how the idea would translate top to bottom.

(Guitar)

Joy: Dave has a live room in his studio. So I went into the live room, sat down in front of a mic and with the stool and stuff, and played the guitar.

(Guitar)

Joy: I like really natural guitar recordings, like all the noise and stuff.

(Vocals join: "Sometimes your life feels like a broken rollercoaster / A thousand useless moving parts / Sometimes you spend your nights / Too scared of getting closer / Hiding out in the back seat of your car / You tell yourself it's raining / The clouds are in your head")

(Guitar with mellotron)

Joy: That's a mellotron.

(Mellotron)

Joy: It's sort of like a tape synth thing where you can choose sounds, and the sound he chose was like vibes. So it plays a little tape sample of a vibe each time you press a note. And so, he just played that little bell thing-y, and it was beautiful.

(Mellotron)

(Mellotron fades)

Joy: Sort of dances around what the guitar's already doing, and then, some of the vocal things that come in.

(Vocals, guitar, and mellotron: "So don't tell yourself it's raining / The clouds are in your head / You tell yourself it's better / To jump before you fall again / Before you lose it all again / Look up")

(Guitar)

Joy: I always like to joke when I'm recording the vocals for a song that I just wrote, that I've never heard this song before. It is true, you're sort of like performing something and connecting with something that you have never super heard in its complete version. And so, I just

(Guitar ends)

Joy: stumbled through it twice because I'm like, I've never, none of this is [laughter] familiar to me.

(Vocals: "Look up / Do you see the sunlight? / Look up / There's flowers in your hair / Hold on / 'Cause somebody loves you / You know trouble's always gonna be there / Don't let it bring you to your knees, yeah / Look up")

(Bass)

Joy: I wanted the bass to like be this marriage between like a bass sound and a little growlier guitar sound. I love 60s and 70s, dusty, low country vibes where it's music that to me sounds like it was made for driving, just music to drive to.

(Piano joins)

Joy: I really just like pianos, and for “Look Up” specifically, it gives it this emotional gravitas like sonically, that I don't think it would have if it was just sort of this Blackbird rip-off tune, you know, on the guitar.

(Guitar joins)

(Music ends)

Joy: In the lines right before the chorus, I think the goal was to sort of mimic my racing negative mind. That's the reason for sort of the cadence change, and then the jamming those two lines, like the, “Jump before you fall again / Before you lose it all again,” because that's how my brain is. Like it just sort of ramps up and ramps up and ramps up until I'm like making a weird decision, or I feel deregulated, and the hope for the pre-chorus was to sort of make it feel like that. But then you hit “Look up,” and it's like this breath of like, “Oh, take a second.”

(Vocals, piano, and mellotron: “You tell yourself it's better / To jump before you fall again / Before you lose it all again / Look up”)

Joy: In this song, in particular, I can't help but think of Rachel and Rachel's voice, simply because it really is something I've learned from her to be like, “Oh, I had an awful day at work, and people were tough. Let's go on a hike and like enjoy nature. Or like let's play with the dog because, you know, the dog's goofy.” To like find those like sweet, beautiful moments in the midst of what can be big or small chaos in your life and say like, “This is good.”

(Mellotron)

Joy: Sort of an incorruptible good, you know? I think that's why I went with sunlight and flowers in the hair, you know, and people who love you.

(Vocals and piano join: “Look up / Do you see the sunlight / Look up / There's flowers in your hair / Hold on / 'Cause somebody loves you / You know trouble's always gonna be there / Don't let it bring you to your knees, yeah / Look up”)

(Beat)

Joy: The rhythm on the track is all samples. We found a cute, soft kick that we liked doing that sort of four-on-the-floor pulsing. And then, they've added some shakers, and like clicks, and just little like percussive elements that kept the movement going without distracting from the more important parts of the track.

(Cello patch joins)

Joy: That is another Mellotron. I think that's like

(Beat ends)

Joy: the cello patch. And it's dope, because that's why it's a little like wobbly and weird feeling, because it's just tape. And it's just a recording of someone playing the cello that someone stuck inside a box, and now Dave gets to play.

(Beat with cello patch)

(Music ends)

Joy: After we finished this song and I left Dave's, I thought about it a lot because it was one of those days where it sort of like, I even started by saying, I didn't super want to go to work, and I left with something that I really treasured, which is really cool. I was maybe going to go back out to LA, and do background vocals with Dave, but because we couldn't travel, I was home. And I, during that time, had started taking really seriously trying to have sort of like a full service studio vibe upstairs, and cutting the background vocals was actually one of the first things that I did on my own for my project. And I like, I ended up producing a few songs on my project and stuff like that, but it was doing the background vocals for "Look Up," where I was like, "Oh, I think I could do this."

(Vocals: "Look up / Look up / Hold on")

(Guitar joins: "Look up")

(Guitar)

Joy: I like to play songs for Rachel on my guitar. Because sometimes the songs help me communicate my feelings or, you know, like help her understand like, "Oh, she's been trying to tell me this. And this is finally, this is finally [laughter] the

clearest way she's ever said it," you know? And it's honestly part of our language with each other.

(Guitar)

Joy: So I came back, and I played it for her, just me and my acoustic.

(Vocals join: "Monday's aren't always bright / Some days, you lose the fight / But life can be beautiful if you let it be / Tomorrow keeps taunting you / With all kinds of mystery / It's a blank page for your poetry / If you let it be")

Joy: I think that people really do teach us a lot, specifically the people that we allow to be close to us. You know, if you can have care, and if you can have fresh air, and if you can have self-compassion, I think you can get a lot done. Those are all things that I've learned from Rachel. And [laughter] so, it was one of those moments where I like played it, and like there's this sort of like emotional like thank you for helping me learn this.

(Music ends)

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Look Up" by Joy Oladokun, in its entirety.

("Look Up" by JOY OLADOKUN)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net to learn more about Joy Oladokun. You'll also find links to stream or download this track.

This episode and the show's theme music were made by me. Editing help came from Casey Deal and Craig Eley, artwork by Carlos Lerma, music clearance by Kathleen Smith, and production assistance from Chloe Parker. 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. You can follow me on Twitter and Instagram @HrishiHirway, and you can follow the show @SongExploder. You can also get a Song Exploder t-shirt at songexploder.net/shirt. I'm Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.