

Song Exploder
Kelela - Rewind
Episode 63

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.

Hrishikesh: In November 2015, I interviewed Kelela about her song "Rewind" from her debut EP. Since that EP was released, she's gone on to collaborate on songs with Gorillaz and Solange, and she released her first full length *Take Me Apart*, which was named one of the top 10 albums of 2017 by *Vulture*, *Pitchfork*, *Cosmo*, and a bunch of others. So I wanted to go back and revisit Kelela's episode, which originally came out in January 2016. Here it is.

("Rewind" by KELELA)

Hrishikesh: Kelela is a singer and songwriter based in Los Angeles. In 2015, she released *Hallucinogen*, and landed on critics' lists in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *Pitchfork*, and more. In this episode, Kelela takes apart her song "Rewind." To make the track, she worked with five different producers, picking and choosing each for what they could best contribute to her overall vision for the song. This interview was recorded live in San Francisco at Fusion's Real Future Fair. Now, here's Kelela on Song Exploder.

("Rewind" by KELELA)

(Music fades)

Kelela: I had the intention to make a Miami bass inspired song, that gave me butterflies or that made me feel romance, but something light and fun. It's like I wanted that Ghost Town DJs feel.

("My Boo" by GHOST TOWN DJ'S)

(Music fades)

Kelela: I received a track from a producer who goes by Obey City. He sent me a whole collection of instrumentals, and this one just jumped out at me.

(Instrumental)

(Instrumental ends)

Kelela: It was actually the bassline that I couldn't get off of. I just sort of fixated on that. And so, I kept trying to sing over the track as is. Over and over and over again, and I didn't get anywhere. I left it alone. And then, one day I came back to it with my friend Nugget. He's also a writer, so I think that the advantage of working with somebody who produces and writes is that, you know, the idea doesn't have to come out disjointed. You're writing the song, and you're making the song at the same time. So I told him, "What I'm hearing is a Miami bass track. And I finally got stems for this song. So can you just pull the bassline out?"

(Bass)

Kelela: And then, he added a lead, which basically took me to Never Never Land.

(Synth)

Kelela: And then, the bassline worked against that sort of major harmony.

(Bass joins)

(Bass ends)

Kelela: So that lead is what anchors a lot of my melody, and allowing me to improvise.

(Synth ends)

Kelela: I first improvised over it, and it's just [sings improvisation]. And I'm just feeling it, you know? Like I know the emotion. I know what I'm saying. I don't know the words. As soon as I finished, I was just like, "What is that? It's, what is that feeling? Like what is, it's nostalgic?"

(Synth)

Kelela: And so, we kept saying, there's something like you missed it, or a little bit of lamenting, but not really dwelling, you know, just sort of like, "I don't know what happened just now." And then, I just had this click moment, because I had just returned from Brazil for the first time. And one of the things that happened was, I was invited to a club, and my best friend met a girl. They met earlier in the day. They clicked, and we all went to this club together, and she didn't actually make

the move. You know, they hung out all night, and then I was about to leave, and I was just like, "I'm about to go." And she was like, "I'm going to come with you." So we were walking out the door. And right when we got to the door, she was like, "I'm not going to go. I'm going to go back, and I'm going to try to find that girl, and I'm going to actually like, say, I like you, you know what I mean? I'm not going to pretend." And I was like, "Yes!" I gave her all the encouragement I could. And the next morning I woke up, and I was like, "So like what happened?" And she was like, "You know what? I never saw that girl again.

(Keyboard)

Kelela: I looked for her everywhere. I looked for her the whole night." She was like, "I had an amazing night. It was the best, you know, but I never saw that girl again." So it just, when she told me, then I was like, "Oh, that makes for such good, that's so rich." And so, we just pursued the idea, and tried to make it be the focal point of the chorus.

(Vocals: "I'm giving you eyes, but you misread the signs / And I can't rewind, baby / I'll search everywhere for you / And I can't rewind, baby / Don't blink when I'm watching you / And I can't rewind")

Kelela: There was a moment where I said, "If I weren't brown,

(Vocals: "If I weren't brown")

Kelela: I'd be blushing."

(Vocals: "I'd be blushing / This ain't a mystery, I'm tryin' to keep my cool / You standing next to me, I'm about to break my rules")

Kelela: I was nervous about it. That's the first time that I've ever done any tonky, rap-y, I don't even know what you call that. But I just, I don't know, I went for it.

(Vocals: "Watch you from afar, I just can't stop (But I can't stop staring) / Had the words but then they slipped my mind (Now I can't remember)")

Kelela: So after I created the demo with Nugget, I had a very straight ahead Miami bass track. I basically took those parts, and I gave them to Girl Unit, and I also gave them to Kingdom. And I gave Girl Unit a specific directive, "Give me Miami bass sounds.

(Beat)

Kelela: Give me the drum that it's supposed to be. Give me the most in hi-hat."

(Beat)

(Beat ends)

Kelela: And then, I asked Kingdom to do the opposite. Basically, like, "Take this completely out into the galaxy, basically." And you took it quite seriously [laughter]. So there's rubble sounds, and it sounds like a bomb is going off in the background.

(Sound effect)

Kelela: And there's this reverse sample.

(Reverse sample)

Kelela: It's a reverse vocal that's been sped up, and I was asking him, "I want it to sound a little bit scary, maybe." And he sort of gave me this motif, this thing that kept appearing in his version.

(Reverse sample with orchestra hit)

Kelela: So once I gave it to Girl Unit and Kingdom, they both give me very, like, opposite versions of the track. I just basically put them together, and tried to be as careful as possible to make them work together, so that you have enough to hold on to, but you also have enough taking it out of context, and subverting it. There were a few things I still needed. Like, it's good, I'm dancing, but when the chorus hits, I need something to make me really go off. And I'd been working with Ariel Rechtshaid, who is an amazing producer. And he was like, "Maybe clave?" And I was like, "Clave?"

(Percussion)

Kelela: And he put it in the track, and it just takes it up a little bit.

(Percussion)

Kelela: And then, the other thing that he added was these really fast claps [mimics the claps].

(Beat with percussion)

Kelela: And then, the other thing that he added was this pitched down “Can’t rewind.”

(Pitched down vocals)

Kelela: It's my vocal, just pitched down a couple of octaves, I believe.

(Pitched down vocals)

Kelela: That made a huge difference when that part came around. So he sort of just helped me elevate the things that I needed elevating. A lot of times, I am trying to create texture. I do want to be able to grab the people who are really pensive, like the dorks, you know? Who are like, “Did you hear that hi-hat?!” I've so been that girl, so it's just kind of for the diehards, or for the people who are like, “What?!”

(Audience laughter)

Kelela: You know?

(Audience applause)

Kelela: Thank you.

Hrishikesh: Now, here's “Rewind,” by Kelela, in its entirety.

(“Rewind” by KELELA)

Hrishikesh: Visit songexploder.net for more on Kelela. There, you'll find the music video for “Rewind,” and links to buy the track.
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.

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