

**Song Exploder**  
**Khruangbin - So We Won't Forget**  
**Episode 188**

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.

*("So We Won't Forget" by KHRUANGBIN)*

Hrishikesh: Khruangbin is a band from Houston, Texas, who first formed in 2010. *NME* called them the "low key superstars" of psychedelic music. They've released three albums. The most recent is called *Mordechai*, it came out in June 2020. In the past, most of Khruangbin's songs have been instrumental, or if they did have vocals, they'd be minimal. Their new album is different. It features vocals and lyrics prominently, and in this episode, the three of them explain their philosophy on vocals, and their process of writing lyrics. I spoke to each of them to get their perspective on how they made the song "So We Won't Forget."

*("So We Won't Forget" by KHRUANGBIN)*

Laura: This is Laura Lee.

Mark: My name is Mark Speer and I play guitar.

DJ: My name is DJ and I play drums for Khruangbin.

*(Music fades out)*

Laura: We wrote everything musically, you know, in terms of guitar, bass, and drums, we wrote at the farm in Burton, Texas.

DJ: We've always recorded there since the beginning. For us it's the perfect place to write because there's minimal distractions out there. It's very quiet, no wifi on the property, wide open Texas landscapes, cows, lots of grass, trees, a really good place to center yourself.

Laura: It's where the vast majority of all of our songs were written. But I don't do my best work in a sort of like jammy situation. I like my own time. I like to be in my own head with each song.

*("Khushi" by NAZIA HASSAN)*

Laura: I was listening to this song called "Khushi" by this Pakistani singer, Nazia Hassan.

*("Khushi" by NAZIA HASSAN)*

Laura: It was really funky on the bottom but the vocals were really sweeping and pretty and like light.

*("Khushi" by NAZIA HASSAN)*

Laura: I wanted to have a song that made me feel the way that song did.

*(Music fades out)*

Laura: So the song started with bass.

*(Bass)*

Laura: And we kind of hand stuff off back and forth. And so everybody in the band has their own time with each song.

DJ: I went in just kind of like, "Okay, this is what she's doing. This is where I want to be. This is the space that I need to take up to support that bassline."

*(Drums join)*

DJ: And I'd tried this thing with ghost notes with some drags on the snare.

*(Drums)*

DJ: It kind of create a feel. Once you learn something, it sounds different than when you're trying to figure it out. You know, that searchy sound, that part of the process is actually what we capture when we record the instrumental part in the barn. You want to sound unsure, you want the raw like, "this is just me coming up with this in the moment" sound.

*(Drums and bass)*

Mark: I remember plugging the guitar in and just trying different stuff because like the bass and drums already sounded really good to me but I also had no idea melodically what I wanted to do. So I just kind of started off playing this kind of fingerstyle guitar part, directly inspired by Western Central African guitar players.

*(Electric guitar joins drums and bass)*

Mark: I love that kind of polyrhythmic, polyphonic music. I think it's some of the most beautiful in the world, I kind of wanted to do something like that.

*(Electric guitar along with drums and bass)*

Mark: So I wanted to like have that sort of melancholy guitar, melody on top of this like disco, minimal vibe. That's how it started.

*(Barn recording ends, "Very cool dudes" heard in the distance)*

Laura: There's a really nice balance between us of novice and expert. Mark and DJ are both very experienced players. They've been playing professionally for a long time and a lot of that professional time was in church. And the guys that play gospel, those guys have chops.

DJ: When the three of us first started hanging out, Laura wasn't even playing bass yet, which is so weird even when I think about it.

Laura: I used to be really insecure about not being as good as they were, technically, but I've learned that my naiveté is actually a strength.

DJ: I'm always surprised at what Laura comes up with because it's just a different approach to melody and rhythms.

*(Electric guitar, bass and drums)*

DJ: We'll go in and we'll learn a song. And then our engineer, Steve, hits record. Usually, the magic is around take two or take three.

Laura: The bass, guitar, and drums are all recorded live in the barn for this whole album because that's how you catch the feeling or the groove. There's something that you miss when you're tracking things individually. And I totally understand that if you track a guitar in an isolated place that you're going to get a cleaner, more

editable thing. But then, there's a sort of magic that's lost, and for my own creation, I just, I want as much of the magic as I can get.

DJ: Sometimes when we record the things in the barn, when we leave, it's a complete song, it doesn't need anything else. But when we finished recording, we knew that there was still something missing. It wasn't complete.

*(Music ends)*

Mark: We're like, you know, "This song needs something else on top."

Laura: So we recorded the guitar, bass, and drums in May and then didn't come back to this album until November. During the break, we tried not to listen to what we made because we all understand how important it can be to take a break from your work. So we kind of just put it on the back burner, and went about our lives.

*(Electric guitar)*

Laura: I needed a little bit of nurturing last summer before we went back into the studio. The touring lifestyle in general, it kind of caught up with me. We'd pretty much been on the road nonstop for three and a half years, and you get lost in it. You know, I missed weddings and birthdays, and babies being born. When I was a little girl, I wanted to be a writer, and at some point in my life, I realized that if I wanted to make stories, I had to go out and collect them. So, you know, I went on this hike in California with someone I had just met, who was so kind to me, who saw that I needed a friend and took me on this beautiful hike. And after that day, I sort of realized that I had a lot of stories in my back pocket to tell. I was saying, "You know what? Actually in my life, I've lived a life of adventure and I have all of these stories that I've collected and I should write them down so that I remember them. So after my hike, I came to Houston and I took a day of silence. I didn't listen to anything. I tried to not even talk to myself in my own head, just be in silence with a pen and a notebook. And I just wrote everything I could. And while I was writing, I would think about other stories that came up and I didn't want to forget any of them, so I had all of these post-its to remind me or to trigger these different stories that were coming up in my mind. And this just ended up being a story of its own, just writing about holding onto a memory.

*(Electric guitar fades out)*

DJ: When we got back, Laura had all this stuff scribbled in her journal, and she and Mark did a brilliant job of putting all that together and making beautiful lyrics out of these notes.

Laura: I would flip through my notebook and look for stories or sentiments or words that seem to fit the tone of the song. And then I'll get a separate piece of paper, write those fragments on it, you know, and hand it to Mark and DJ and see which lines or words resonate with them.

Mark: And so then I would start pulling sentences off the page, putting them onto the new page, arrange them out like a lyric.

Laura: It's important for us that the words speak true to all of us because we all sing it together.

*(Second verse vocals: "Ooh / Every minute / Every hour / So we won't forget / You / Don't have to be silent / Say to remind me / So we won't forget / Ooh")*

Mark: You know, we don't have a lead singer, you know, it's all of us or none, and that's just how it works.

DJ: I don't think anyone in the band particularly likes to sing, but we do enjoy the texture that a vocal brings to the music. But no, no one in the band will claim to be a vocalist. We much prefer the sound of us singing together.

Laura: Like we stand together, there's one mic, and we all sing behind it.

Mark: I like it because you can't have melodies that are super, super complex, because everyone has to sing them. And there's no space for like a bunch of like riffing. It's just, here's the melody, this is how you sing it.

*(Chorus vocals along with bass: "Call me what you want / Call me what you need / Words don't have to say / Keep it to myself")*

Mark: Coming up playing at the church with DJ, the choir is made up of a lot of people and not all those people are like trained singers. And there might be a few voices that are like just a little off and it's just off enough to where it's like, "I feel so good. Like I just love that sound, man." If you had, like if you had a choir for all the people that sing perfectly, then it might not actually have that rich, full sound

because everything is so perfectly in tune or so perfectly timed. But you've got to have a little bit of realness.

Laura: We're also usually trying to find words that sing pretty. That sound nice to sing. There's the lyric, "Not enough paper, not enough letters, so we won't forget."

*(First verse vocals: "Ooh / Never enough paper / Never enough letters / So we won't forget")*

Laura: There's never enough to write down everything you want to remember. And that was the sort of feeling I was trying to say, but the original statement was, "Not enough paper, not enough words, so we won't forget." And it was a real point of contention. And Mark was totally right, "not enough words" doesn't sound very pretty but "not enough letters" has a nicer cadence.

*(First verse vocals: "Ooh / Never enough paper / Never enough letters / So we won't forget")*

Laura: Because in Khruangbin history, we haven't had that many vocals. The key in which we write isn't such a big deal. But the original key that it was in, we couldn't sing along to.

*(Instrumental in the original, higher key)*

Mark: We each have different ranges. So you have to write within that Venn diagram where they all can sing and sound good.

Laura: And so in order to keep the integrity of the vocals, which we all decided was important, we had to change the key of the song, which we'd never done before.

Mark: So we moved it down.

*(Instrumental in the now, lower key)*

Mark: And once we did that, we're like, "Oh, it sounds so much better. The vocals are singing a lot better. It sounds more like us."

Laura: So in order to change it, Mark and I had to both re-record our parts in the studio.

*(Drums)*

Laura: And that was a challenge for us because it's always been a part of our thing that the guitar, bass, and drums were recorded together at the farm. You know, we kind of had to come to terms with it. And in the end, we decided to keep the drums from the farm so that the farm was still in the song, and that Mark and I would re-record our parts in a key that we could sing. I was like, "Okay, well I'll practice tonight and we'll come in the morning and I'll do it." But I tend to get insecure when everybody's watching me play a part. There's something comforting when we're all playing together because everybody's concentrating on their own thing. But if I'm playing by myself in the studio and everybody's

*(Drums end)*

Laura: listening to me play, you know, I'm nervous about messing up because I know they're going to hear it.

DJ: Steve Christensen is our engineer.

Laura: DJ and Steve were sitting right next to me and I remember Steve being like, "Don't worry dude, we can do this as many times as you need. If you got to punch something in, we can punch something in." And he pressed record.

*(Bass)*

Laura: And it was a perfect take from start to finish and I remember looking up at DJ, really wide-eyed, being like, "Oh my God."

*(Drums join)*

Laura: And DJ was like, "One take Jake, one take Jake." It was a huge moment for me as a player because that just never happens. So if I was worried I lost any magic from it not being the recording at the farm, I gained it back in a way.

*(Electric guitar joins)*

DJ: Mark did all the percussion parts and he's the sound of Khruangbin percussion.

*(Percussion)*

Mark: We would spend time to develop a part that sounds good with everything playing. You know, it can't step on the bass, can't step on the drums, can't step on the vocals.

DJ: Also his approach to playing percussion parts is totally different than the approach that I would take, which is great because I think when he and I play together, he's able to fill in spots that make sense.

*(Drums joins percussion)*

DJ: Just two different sets of timing where things land. One may tend to lean back a little bit, one may be a little bit ahead, and, you know, when they come together, it's better to sound like two people versus one person doing everything.

*(Drums along with percussion end)*

Mark: I think my favorite part is the synare.

*(Synare)*

Mark: So a synare is this like synth drum from late '70s, early '80s. It's basically, you've got a synthesizer built into a drum. It's like this sound of like, "Woo." You can do all these kind of crazy like, it's like almost like spaceship sounds.

*(Synare)*

Mark: To me, it added so much like bounce.

*(Synare along with rest of drums)*

Mark: Yeah I love that part, man. That's, that's my favorite part of the song, honestly [laughter].

*(Synare along with rest of drums end)*

DJ: We'd gotten to the end of the recording session and keyboards were the last thing that went on. And for Mark's birthday, a bunch of his friends, we all pitched in to get this huge birthday gift was a Moog Voyager.

*(Moog Voyager)*



DJ: So he was really excited to get it in and play it on this record.

*(First verse vocals along with Moog Voyager: "Ooh / One to remember / Writing it down now / So we won't forget / Ooh")*

Laura: I'm especially fond of the last lyric which I'm pretty sure was Mark's doing because he loves a twist. The lyrics kind of repeat themselves. Throughout the song and the only time they change is at the end, which is, "Say you remember, for I think I've lost it."

*(Outro vocals: "Ooh / Say you remember / For I think I've lost it")*

Laura: And that just felt like a dagger to the heart because the whole thing is about holding on, holding on, I'm holding on. It's like, "Oh no, it's gone." And it felt like a, you know, sad but beautifully sad way to end.

*(Electric guitar)*

Laura: I haven't seen it since I was a little kid, but in *The Neverending Story 2*, I don't remember which character it was, but basically every time they made a wish, they lost a memory. She only had so many wishes left, but every time she wished, she would also lose something and that was the sort of payment for getting whatever she wished for. One of the most valuable things we have is our collection of memories or things that have happened to us.

*(Bass and percussion join electric guitar)*

DJ: I'm always writing things in my notes in my phone because I'm super forgetful. During the process of making this album, we were doing a lot of touring, a year's worth of just traveling around the world, playing these shows. And night to night, a lot of times, it ends up just kind of all running together and it's really important to keep a sort of diary to remember the little moments that happen along the way that you don't want to forget. I think the best one in the band at doing that is probably Laura Lee because she's always telling us about, "Oh, this is what we were doing a year ago." And it'll be something, albeit small, it's just like, "Wow, I remember that happening. You know, I had forgotten about that, I'm glad you wrote it down." So, in a sense, this song is about that. It's about capturing all these things and writing them down before they disappear.

*(Music ends)*

Hrishikesh: And now, here is “So We Won’t Forget,” by Khruangbin, in its entirety.

*(“So We Won’t Forget” by KHRUANGBIN)*

Hrishikesh: Visit [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net) to learn more about Khruangbin. You’ll also find links to buy or stream the song and you can watch the music video for it.

Next time on Song Exploder, Waxahatchee.

*(Intro to “Fire” by Waxahatchee plays)*

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